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### Marketing Ploy or Mental Health Crisis? An Analysis of Fan Responses to Celebrity Narratives

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Running head: MARKETING PLOY OR MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS?

Marketing Ploy or Mental Health Crisis? An Analysis of Fan Responses to Celebrity Narratives

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APP

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### **Abstract**

Recently, celebrities have become more candid with their narratives than ever before through use of their social media accounts. While most celebrities use their social media accounts for purposes such as showing a positive or unknown side of them or to promote their work, others have posted narratives that have come under public criticism, especially Kanye ‘Ye’ West with his recent antisemitic-themed posts. In my study I examine what Kanye’s fans and the public believes to be his motivation for his recent narratives in October 2022 and December 2022, and their reasoning for assigning these motives. I collected a total of 30 comments based on levels of interactions (likes, replies, shares/retweets) from three different artifacts found on various media outlets on different social media platforms, then conducted a thematic analysis of these comments and interactions. The comments were retrieved from an article posted by CNN to Twitter, a YouTube video of a Fox 26 Houston news segment, and another YouTube video from celebrity Charlamagne Tha God for his show “Hell of a Week”. The three themes for motivation that emerged from the analysis were ‘fake news’, ‘marketing ploy’, and ‘mental health crisis.’ The findings are discussed relevant to narratives, social media use, parasocial relationships and the influence these have on construction of self-concept and identities through narratives.

### **Introduction**

2004 was the year that I was first introduced to an artist who at the time was formerly known as Kanye West thanks to BET’s music video television program *106 & Park*. He had just released the song “All Falls Down” from his first album *College Dropout* and was talking about how he recorded the song with his jaw wired shut following a car accident. I was fascinated, not only by the story but from the sound of the song itself. I realized that I had heard his production

sound in other artists such as Jay-Z, Talib Kweli, and Ludacris, as well as R&B singers Monica, Alicia Keys, and Beyonce who had recently embarked on her journey as a solo artist. His music intrigued me because it was a different sound than what I had heard at that point. He also did not fit the stereotypical idea and background of a rapper at that time, which was usually someone who had been involved in a gang and rapped about those experiences. Instead, his story was very much the opposite and even inspirational and seeing that he was an only child raised by a single mother, I felt like I could relate since my situation was the same and it gave me hope that someday I could be successful like him.

In 2005, I was surprised to find that Kanye had been in the news for something other than his music. Looking back now as a fan, I suppose this was the beginning of what has now become his normal, but worrisome, behavior. I watched in real-time as Kanye, who had been participating in a fundraiser for Hurricane Katrina victims, went off-script and criticized the media's portrayal of African Americans versus White Americans as well as the government's slow response in sending relief. The sentence that stuck out to me the most, as well as the one that was covered for days afterwards, was his passionate declaration that then-President George W. Bush "doesn't care about black people!" (de Moraes, 2005, para. 13). At the time, I had just brushed it off as him being passionate and rightfully upset about the events that were occurring, especially after his apology and continued release of new music which also eventually put the matter to rest. Yet, I was instantly reminded again of the incident when in 2009 at the MTV Music Video Awards when he interrupted Taylor Swift during her acceptance speech for Best Female Video with the now-infamous line "I'll let you finish, but Beyonce had one of the best videos of all time!" (Respers, 2009, para. 3). This time, I attributed his outburst to the fact that he had recently lost his mother unexpectedly. Knowing how close they were, thanks to interviews

and articles that I had read, I decided that he was still grieving. I also figured that this would die down quickly like the last incident. However, with the introduction of social media (and especially with celebrities using it), I found that this incident was talked about for years, especially after Kanye had been immortalized as an internet meme.

Even though Kanye's reputation took its first real negative hit thanks to this incident and both celebrity and public reactions online, the negative narratives surrounding him did not seem to hinder his growing popularity. I watched as he became more and more famous and in turn, as more of his life was covered in entertainment media such as magazines, news segments, and online articles. While his popularity and list of accomplishments as not only an artist but also as a fashion designer and philanthropist has grown, in recent years his reputation has been negatively affected thanks to his actions and statements in public, interviews, and posts made on his personal social media accounts online. As Nisbett and Dunn (2021) point out, his recent actions have garnered mixed responses and turned him into a polarizing figure – “some people love him, and some people love to hate him” (p. 35). With his controversial takes on abortion, the Black Lives Matter movement, and his recent anti-Semitism, as a fan, I am struggling to understand the narratives that he is putting out into the world because they are vastly different from the beginning of his career, or even from ten years ago. Knowing his past, I wonder if it is his grief from losing his mother or his mental health declining that is causing him to behave so erratically. Could it be the attention he is receiving, both good and bad, is spurring him on? Or are these controversial narratives his real beliefs that he's finally letting out after all this time? With all of these possibilities as motivations, my question driving this paper is: As a fan, how do I (and others like me) make sense of how Kanye's narratives have shifted over time? How do the changes in his narratives alter the ways we construct our own identities, especially as fans?

In recent years, we have seen celebrities becoming more candid than ever before on their social media accounts. Some of the narratives or stories that they are creating and/or sharing have been praised for showing they are normal people just like the rest of us or bringing awareness to a health or social issue that they are passionate about. A case in point: Beck et al.'s (2014) research highlights how celebrities' use of social media breaks the "fourth wall" by "involving non-intimate others in everyday aspects of their 'private' lives, and sometimes promoting political or other agendas," which can transform previously "passive audience members" (p.246) into active ones. Unlike traditional forms of media, social media allows fans to interact directly with celebrities and, in turn, build emotional connections and identification with their stories. Interaction with celebrities online can be anything from following their account, sharing their posts, tagging or mentioning them in posts you make, commenting under their posts, or even messaging them directly. While it seems like most celebrities use their social media accounts for purposes like showing a positive or unknown side of them, others have posted narratives that have (rightfully) come under public criticism. In the past, this criticism would have mainly come from media outlets, such as entertainment online sites. However, with more and more people using social media and following celebrities' personal accounts, these narratives are being brought to light and scrutinized first by the public (or fans). West is no exception to this rule. Fans generally believe that their favorite celebrity is unproblematic, however recently there have been narratives from not only celebrities but political figure that have been considered extremely controversial. With a lack of research on controversial celebrity narratives, especially controversial celebrity health narratives through a critical lens, we are left to wonder what the implications and impact these types of narratives can have. As new and unexpected narratives are introduced about a public figure, how do fans make sense of this

conflicting information? Moreover, how do they determine which narratives should they consider authentic? As celebrities share more of their personal stories online, it's important to remember as Harter (2013) points out that "with all narratives, readers should assume there are intentional silences, parts of the lived experience that individuals chose not to reveal, or editors choose not to publish" (p. 6). Knowing this, how and when do we as fans make the distinction of what narratives are true or curated specifically for us?

Over the almost two decades since his debut as an artist, West's fandom has grown exponentially, especially in recent years with his ventures further into fashion and the gospel genre as well, not to mention his marriage to Kim Kardashian. As a fan, I have followed not only Kanye's narratives online, but also observed the discourses circulating around him that were produced by other fans and celebrities. I have noticed in the fandom that there are many, like myself, who have followed his journey from the beginning. Collectively, we are sad to see an entertainer that we once held in high regard as a hero of sorts with so much potential and talent now become a villain of his own making. This feeling is thanks to the creation on fans' part of a parasocial relationship, which is the relationship that people may develop with celebrities, media figures, or even fictional characters (Kim & Song, 2016, p. 572). Like me, others struggle with the decision whether to continue to support him or not given. Yet, there are also others who still support and even praise his recent decisions and actions. My project has grown out of my personal experiences and interest in how fans interpret celebrity narratives, and the motivations behind them. In what follows, I review relevant literature on narrative constructions of self, social media and narrative, and parasocial relationships. Then, I conduct a thematic analysis of comments and interactions with narratives concerning West's recent behaviors. My study examines what Kanye's fans, and the public believes his motivation is for his recent behaviors

and their reasoning for assigning that motivation. These comments were retrieved from an article posted by CNN to Twitter, a YouTube video of a Fox 26 Houston news segment, and another YouTube video from celebrity Charlamagne Tha God for his show “Hell of a Week”. From these artifacts, a total of 30 comments selected based on the number of likes, replies, and shares/retweets were coded and then grouped according to theme of motivation. The three themes that emerged from the analysis were ‘fake news’, ‘marketing ploy’, and ‘mental health crisis’ which indicated fan’s distrust in the authenticity of both news and West’s narratives, as well as a lack of accountability in the event this is a mental health crisis by West and those around him. The implications from these results showed that not only is social media changing how we construct our identities through narratives from celebrities and fans alike, but also the demonstrated need for more research on controversial celebrities health narratives through a more critical lens.

### **Literature Review**

Recently when talking to a friend of mine from high school, she had mentioned some of the recent stories that she had been seen on various media outlets about West and commented how different he was now as a person compared to when we were first introduced to him our junior year of high school. We reminisced about how we knew her brother would be around the corner to pick us up thanks to him always playing “College Dropout” as loudly in his car, allowing us to hear him before we saw him. I had commented that it seemed like it was a long time ago, to which she replied it’s been almost twenty years. This comment and subsequent comments that appeared during my research on this case study helped me to organize time by reminding me that not only has it been nineteen years since West’s first album was released, but it has been also been nineteen years since I and many others have been following his life story as



fans. The comment also made me realize that nineteen years of following not only media narratives around West, but his own narratives that evolved from what was said in interviews to his own words on social media, conversations about his recent actions now felt more like talking about an old high school friend than a celebrity I've never personally met. Because of this, as a fan I'm invested and very concerned on wanting to make sense of what the motivation is behind all of this and how can we either help him or make him accountable for these narratives.

### **Narratives**

Whether we realize it or not, we engage the use of narrative everyday through various means. Abbott (2008) defines narrative as the representation of an event or a series of events, with the idea of these events being similar to what some of us would call actions (p. 13). Narrative consists of a story, which is defined as an event or a sequence of events, and narrative discourse, which is defined as those events as represented (Abbott, 2008, p. 17). Narrative serves many different purposes in our lives, but the most important purpose according to Abbott (2008) is that aside from helping us to create a mental record of who we are, it also helps us our species to understand and organize the concept of time (p. 3).

Narratives not only help up make sense of the concept of time, but also it helps to create histories, communities, industries, celebrities, politicians and nations. Moro et al., (2021) mention in their editorial on stories for celebrity counter publics, the process of storytelling partly and primarily helps to create culture seeing how "Narratives about who we are, where we have been, and where we are going are utilized to shape economic, political and cultural policies with widespread and impactful stakes" (p. 146). From this explanation, we can see that narratives through the act of storytelling helps us to make sense of not only the culture around us, but the

various cultures that we are interested in. In the case of fans of the entertainment industry, following certain celebrity or influencer accounts, or even news reports from media outlets can help give them an understanding of what celebrity culture is and all it entails from these various narratives.

Engaging in narrative or storytelling is not confined to only verbally telling a sequence of events that we have experienced to others, but it also includes when we create our own narrative to make sense of things such as the act of interpreting art. Another example of this can be creating stories to make sense events that we see captured in a photograph or an oil painting, as well as interpreting a cryptic social media post an online that a mutual friend or someone you follow may have made about an event they have experienced, or even watching a video that someone may have taken of a celebrity. For these examples, we would pull from our own past experiences (or narratives) to fill in the blanks or rather to create a background story to help make sense of the scene that we are seeing before us. In the case of the cryptic social media post, you may even look at the comments section to find more information in the form of others' replies or interactions with comments to form your interpretation of the original narrative. From this, we can see how important the role of narrative is in helping us to make sense of the world around us and our experiences in it, especially in the age of global social media use.

### **Narrative approach and construction of identities**

Not only is narrative essential for humanity to make records of our memories as well as organize our understanding of time through the telling of a sequence of events, but it is also important to help us gain an understanding of ourselves and creating our idea of selfhood. When we think of this idea of selfhood or rather as some would call it the concept of "self", the general belief is that there is something like an essential version of ourselves within us that we just need

to dig into and uncover through various experiences in life. In other words, people believe that you are born with a set version of yourself, and that you need to go through experiences or try different things to get an understanding of what your “true self” is all about. While most people think this way, there are those that believe otherwise. A case in point: Bruner (2002) stated that we “constantly construct and reconstruct ourselves to meet the needs of the situations we encounter, and we do so with the guidance of our memories of the past and our hopes and fears for the future” (p. 64). In the case of celebrities, the key to keeping their popularity and their endorsements is to monitor the marketplace and public expectations (Behr & Beeler-Norrholm, 2006, p. 10) so they can act accordingly and stay scandal-free. However, as more celebrities engage with social media, there are some that do not care to meet these expectations, and instead choose to present their “true self” online even at the risk of being considered controversial.

While construction of our selfhood or self-concept comes from inside us, Bruner (2002) also points out that narrative acts of self-making “are usually guided by unspoken, implicit cultural models of what selfhood should be [and] shouldn’t be” (p. 65). In other words, we construct our idea of selfhood according to not only our own narrative but according to society’s narrative as well. Another example of this would be through the various interactions that someone may have within the home or family environment as well as in school environments with friends, and even online interactions with strangers. Through narrative from these types of environments one would learn whether they should or should not do something (stories of themselves or others engaging in certain behavior and the outcomes of those actions), or even through positive or negative reinforcement (praise or punishment for my actions or decisions) and learn how to shape themselves to what they believe constitutes as fitting in to society’s narrative. Atkins (2004) expands on this concept further, taking the stance that “the position of

first-person narrator is tied to a much more complex structure of embodied selfhood” (p. 343). Atkins (2004) also states that as self-reflective beings, we are subject to the effects of biology, society, culture, and time and that “Our self-understandings are structured by a multi-perspectival complex that links the first-person perspective to second and third-person perspectives” (p. 343). In terms of fandom, an example of this would be how fans take celebrity narratives on political or health issues and may choose to either share or comment on them in either support if these narratives align with their own understanding of society’s expectations are, or in defense or an explanation if they don’t.

While keeping in mind that the construction of self comes from our internal narrative formed from memories and experiences as well as expectations from others and society, it is also important to remember that errors in judgement can also occur. Researchers warn that “we usually see others as guided by enduring beliefs and dispositions while seeing ourselves as more subtly steered by our circumstances” (Bruner, 2004, p. 68). In other words, it’s important to remember that the narrative that we use to help us to construct our concept of selfhood may be consistently shaped by our circumstances, but there’s also more contributing to it than just that. As Bruner (2004) puts it, self-identity narrative is somewhat of a balancing act. It must create a sense of autonomy where one has a sense of freedom of choice, but it must also “relate the self to a world of others – to friends and family, to institutions, to the past, to reference groups” (p. 78). With this in mind, we can see that not only does our circumstances and our reaction to these circumstances contribute to our construction of selfhood, but also our everyday interactions that may seem insignificant with the world around us in general as well. With all the advancements in technology over the last couple of decades, the question now becomes how much of these types of interactions, such as conversations that would normally take place face to face but are taking

place online over social media networks, influence the construction of selfhood and how we label and make sense of others' actions? Also, as in the case of this study, how do these types of influences over and through social media applications also factor into how we make sense of controversial narratives, especially ones from celebrities that we hold in high regard?

### **Narrative and Social Media: The Medium is the Message**

So far, I've covered the idea that narrative through interactions with different cultures or environments such as your family, school, or work influence the construction of your concept of self, but these concepts cover mostly "real life" or in-person interactions that one would experience. Although that is still common today, more and more of these types of interactions are happening virtually online. As McLuhan and Fiore (1967) mentioned in *The Medium is the Message: An Inventory of Effects*, "The older, traditional ideas of private, isolated thoughts and actions — the patterns of mechanistic technologies — are very seriously threatened by new methods of instantaneous electric information retrieval" (p. 12). Through the use of social media networks, those private and isolated thoughts are no longer private and isolated, but now are encouraged to be shared online for any and everybody to see and share with others. Thoughts and opinions that would normally either be shared amongst close friends and family members (such as potentially controversial political views or milestones that you've reached) are instantly accessible to anyone, which can also be influential as well. This influence is also pointed out by McLuhan and Fiore, who state that "The worldpool of information fathered by electric media... far surpasses any possible influence mom and dad can now bring to bear" (1967, p. 14). In other words, the narratives that people are interacting with and are exposed to today reach far beyond your household or immediate personal environment. Thanks to today's technological advances, you can not only talk or interact with friends and family in other states instantaneously, but also

with people on the other side of the world. Of course, this also means people are exposed to a much wider array of different narratives as they are no longer bound by those who are within physical proximity to them. In other words, our access to narratives is expanded by social media. This also extends to celebrities that you wouldn't have had access to in the past that you can not only interact with directly, but also access any information that they have shared online at any time. In the era before social media, the only access that you had to personally interact with a celebrity or a political figure was either through going to see them in concert or at a facilitated meet-and-greet, if you won a contest, attended a taping or live recording of a television program they were featured on, or simply got lucky enough to bump into them in a public place. Social media has changed these chances of interacting with celebrities immensely by giving fans access 24/7 by sending alerts to their online activity such as when they post or go 'live,' as well as allowing fans to "talk back" to them directly through direct messaging or leaving comments on their posts.

As more and more people interact with social media, it has become increasingly influential to our self-identities, and this is particularly the case for today's younger generations. As McLuhan and Fiore (1967) put it, "Electric circuitry has overthrown the regime of "time" and "space" and pours upon us instantly and continuously the concerns of all other men" (p. 16). In the case of today, the "electric circuitry" that McLuhan and Fiore are referring to would be mobile devices, such as cellphone and smart watches which can not only send and receive calls but text messages and news/social media updates as well. These devices are nearly always in our immediate vicinities or on our persons to the point that they have essentially become an extension of us.

Andy Clark (2003) talks at length about human “merging” with tools (which in this case includes electronics) to become what he calls “natural-born cyborgs” in the introduction of his book *Natural-born cyborgs: Minds, Technologies, and the future of human intelligence*, stating “Our cognitive machinery is now intrinsically geared to self-transformation, artifact-based expansion, and a snowballing/bootstrapping process of computational and representational growth” (p. 9). He goes on to talk specifically about people’s use of cellphones, referring to them as “mindware upgrades” or rather “electronic prostheses capable of extending and transforming their personal reach, thought, and vision” (Clark, 2003, p.11). This is an excellent example of what McLuhan and Fiore talked about newer technology constantly bombarding us with information; with mobile devices constantly within our reach, we find ourselves constantly consuming different narratives via social media sites which in turn is influencing how we not only perceive the world but also how we construct our concept of self. It also influences how we perceive the narratives of others, if we interpret them as negative or positive, and the reasoning we make these decisions.

### **Presenting our “true self” - online vs. real life**

Social media is not only a means of engaging with different narratives that influence us, but it is also a way for us to share our narratives and influence others. We use technology to not only define ourselves by sharing our thoughts and feelings after we’ve experienced them, but also as we’re having them in real time (Turkle, 2012, p. 4). This is an example of presenting what we consider our selfhood to others online, however, we may have more than one version of ourselves that we share with others virtually. With the development of social media applications, there are various ways and groups in which you can represent your selfhood and narratives online by either directly interacting with others or even by just “following” and keeping up with

other narratives as they are updated which is the case for most of us with celebrities. Ultimately, how do our interactions through social media which influences our narratives differ from the traditional methods mentioned earlier? In my opinion and experience, it is because the constant influence from online narratives causes us to reconstruct our selfhood more frequently than traditional in person narratives have in the past. Social media posts with content about certain clothes people wear, events they are participating in, or opinions on current or past events that get a lot of approval from others through interactions such as comments and/or likes may influence others to restructure their selfhood in align more with these types of ideas.

As mentioned earlier, Bruner (2002) talked about how we are constantly reconstructing our selfhood according to the expectations of society as well as our own, which is something that people feel is changing more frequently today but really it is because of social media. Thanks to social media, we have greater access to news, opinions, and social expectations from around the world. Because this information is shared with us instantaneously, it is no wonder a person's idea of selfhood is always changing. Turkle (2012) talks about what she calls the "Goldilocks effect" in her article *The Flight from Conversation*, which she defines as a way to control not only our amount of contact or interactions with others, but also our narratives online as well. She explains it in the way that "Texting and e-mail and posting let us present the self we want to be. This means we can edit. And if we wish to, we can delete. Or retouch: the voice, the flesh, the face, the body. Not too much, not too little — just right" (Turkle, 2012, p. 2). This is has become increasingly common as people, especially celebrities, heavily edit their narratives and therefore themselves online in order to fit various social expectations. For example, I would not post the same thoughts or things that I find funny on my LinkedIn account as I would on my Facebook, because LinkedIn is where I network with other working professionals and must maintain



workplace expectations. I would also post certain things on my Twitter account than my Facebook account because of the expectations from my family and friends who follow me there but are not on Twitter. In the case of some celebrities, they may have social media accounts that are controlled by their public relations team that only shows updates on their upcoming releases (such as studio albums, singles, or movies) as well as appearances on television or radio shows and have private accounts that they only allow access to close friends and family where they can be themselves away from the public eye. These examples show how having multiple social media accounts to maintain multiple self-identities to meet various social expectations is an example of the Goldilocks effect that many others, including celebrities, experience as well. It is also important to point out that I recognize that I am being influenced by the various narratives that I encounter on all these accounts.

Compared to the past, encounters and interactions with various narratives are vastly different from today thanks to social media. When I was younger and lived in an era where only a select few of those around me had access to the internet or even a cellphone, I found that my idea of my self-concept was steady in the way that it remained essentially unchanged from the time I was in junior high school up until my mid-twenties. This was because at this time, the main narratives that I had encountered were either from those in my immediate environment (home, work, and school) and from what I watched on television and listened to on the radio. With the social media boom that happened within the last decade, I have found that my rate of “reconstructing” my self-concept has increased significantly as I am influenced by not only different cultures around the world through their music, movies, and social norms by my own choosing (meaning intentionally following someone’s account), but through the suggested articles and videos or even people to follow that the applications give me as well. These

influences from all these different narratives cause me to almost constantly evaluate my own concept of self to ensure that I am following and meeting social expectations, at a much higher rate than when my access to narratives were much more limited, as well as judging or labeling other's actions and narratives to be good or bad based on my own narratives.

### **Celebrity narratives and parasocial relationships**

Social media can be used as a way of expressing your true self, a version of yourself that you want to present to others, or even to present fictional persona that you created. In the case of celebrities, all of that applies, however more and more celebrities use social media as a way to connect and share their narratives with their fans. Because there is no special permission required or special accessed needed for celebrities to communicate with fans on social media, this method (use of social media) has become increasingly popular with celebrities as a method to directly interact with their fanbase (Kim & Song, 2016, p. 571). This direct interaction can help boost their popularity by not only sharing information that promotes their work, but also by sharing personal narratives that helps to humanize them to their fans through showing their everyday lives or bringing awareness to topics or issues that they are passionate about. These direct interactions also help fans form parasocial relationships.

Parasocial relationships (PSR) “endure outside of media exposure; PSR explains the perceived relationships people feel with celebrities and fictional characters” (Nisbett & Schartel, 2021, p.28). These types of relationships can form when a person feels a connection with a celebrity or a fictional character due to having similar experiences as them (through their narratives) or having followed their story long enough through their careers. Some may even create these mostly one-sided relationships through a few interactions that they may have had by meeting them randomly in person or through meet-and-greet events that they attend. With the

advancement of today's technology and the increase of celebrity presence on social media, more and more people are engaging in parasocial relationships and they are not always one-sided. As Kim and Song (2016) point out, "With easy access to direct and interactive communication methods with celebrities, fans following celebrities through social media may feel like they 'know' the celebrity and experience increased intimacy and a strong parasocial relationship" (p. 570). Also with these advancements, it is easier than ever to access personal and intimate information from and about anyone anywhere around the globe. Thanks to the Internet and social media technologies, fans are now able to not only find out more information on their favorite celebrities than in previous decades, but they can also follow their daily lives thanks to accessing following their social media accounts. Because of this, fans today feel closer and more involved with celebrities than ever; they can not only tell exactly where a celebrity is vacationing or shooting a movie, they can also interact with them by sharing their posts and commenting directly their thoughts and opinions through direct messaging.

Most of the research done on celebrity narratives as endorsements has shown that these interactions are generally positive and helpful to celebrities' careers through solidifying brands, having a positive impact on the attention and exposure of consumers (Paul & Bhakar, 2018, p. 155), and increasing support and awareness for their causes and education. Moreover, such narratives have been found to "produce changes in behavioral intentions and behavior" around health-related issues (Francis et al., 2019, p. 492). Yet, there are also some negative implications as well. This has been evident recently, particularly among celebrities and politicians (who arguably could be considered celebrities in their own rights) that have shared details of their personal thoughts and stances on controversial topics:

. . . there are risks involved at the nexus of celebrity storytelling (by news outlets) and political accountability, something that is only growing in importance due to the outsized role activist entertainers can play in contributing to larger narratives on topics like vaccines, Black Lives Matter, MeToo and the Trump administration. (Moro et al., 2021, p. 149).

Public comments on such issues can have a negative impact because, as mentioned above, narratives or storytelling are directly influential on how people not only create their sense of self-concept, but how they make sense of everything around them. With this in mind, it's important to remember that celebrity narratives or stories are "not merely anecdotal reports; rather they offer useful rhetorical tools to better understand dominant ideologies" (Moro et al., 2021, p. 149), and these narratives are easily absorbed and shared amongst the general public thanks to their fans that have formed parasocial relationships with them.

Parasocial relationships can also have both positive and negative implications. The positive of course being that celebrity narratives can have positive influences on increasing awareness for certain health topics such as mental health topics or even increasing voter registrations as seen with a post Taylor Swift in 2018 (Nisbett & Schartel, 2021). However, there can be negatives when the parasocial relationship is so strong that fans defend celebrities when they have done wrong and or spread false narratives. An example of this would be the rise of "stans" which are fans that are "so obsessive their name seems to hint at both stalker and fan" (Ramanathan, 2019, para. 18). Some go to the extreme by directly attacking or harassing people that their celebrity says or has been reported in the media to be having issues with online or in person or defending them relentlessly online. The biggest negative is that depending on the severity of the issue surrounding their favorite celebrity, the strength of these parasocial

relationships can lead to fans becoming defenders on a slippery course towards willful ignorance (Ramanathan, 2019, para. 25). On the other hand, there are fans that have also established a parasocial relationship but still choose to not defend them blindly and even question their celebrity's narratives. Fans who have these parasocial relationships with celebrities also use their own personal narratives to make sense of the celebrity narratives that they encounter and to make the decision on whether to support them or hold them accountable. Making these decisions on whether to support their favorite celebrities' narratives or remain in the fandom can also help someone to make sense of their own selves through if their own personal narratives align with the controversial views or not or if they should change their personal narratives and thus their self-identities.

### **The Case: Kanye's Pro-Hitler Narratives**

Kanye's mental health struggles came into light first in November of 2016 when he was first hospitalized for a psychiatric emergency following the cancellation of his Saint Pablo tour where he ended a show after only thirty minutes following a rant on stage that about the press and "a few longtime friends and acquaintances, including Jay Z, Beyoncé and Facebook Chief Executive Mark Zuckerberg" (Winton, 2016, para. 5). During another concert during this time, he also editorialized about racism and the Black Lives Matter movement before praising President-elect Donald Trump (Winton, 2016, para. 7). After the hospitalization, West denied being diagnosed with bipolar disorder, instead stating that the neuropsychologist he was connected with told him that his concerning symptoms were caused by a lack of sleep and was considered very dangerous (Haglage, 2018, para. 4).

Many fans were split on whether or not to believe that his erratic behavior was truly caused by sleep deprivation. In 2019, West changed his story and admitted that he was in fact

diagnosed with bipolar disorder during an interview with David Letterman. In the interview, he had spoken about his experiences with bipolar, stating “When you’re in this state, you’re hyper-paranoid about everything... everyone now is an actor. Everything’s a conspiracy. You feel the government is putting chips in your head. You feel you’re being recorded. You feel all these things” (Murphy, 2019, para. 3). He also mentioned that when he did not take his medication, he has the potential to ramp up and behave erratically (Murphy, 2019, para. 8). He then at this time became an advocate for mental health awareness, especially since he felt that the tabloid coverage surrounding his diagnosis tended to explain away his controversial views and opinions as labeling him as “crazy” (Zimmerman, 2019, para. 9). At the time, this stance garnered him praise, especially within the black community since rap and hip-hop artists have a larger influence on young Black men, seeing as they see these celebrities as role models (Francis, 2021, p. 449). The stability of his mental health came under scrutiny again, however, when in 2020 during a rally for his presidential run he “shouted without a microphone, cried and offered deeply personal statements about his family, including a revelation that the couple considered terminating their first pregnancy” (Hendersen, 2021, para. 12). This behavior eventually led to his divorce from Kim Kardashian in February 2021, and some wondered if this breakup led to the increasingly worrisome behavior that followed throughout the year and into 2022.

In October of 2022, West’s erratic behavior hit an all-time high beginning with him showing up at a fashion show in Paris wearing a “White Lives Matters” shirt on October 3, a statement which has been deemed as a hate slogan by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) as it has been widely adopted by neo-Nazi and white supremacist groups as a response to the Black Lives Matter movement following the death of George Floyd in 2020 (Aniftos, 2022, para. 4). From there, West continued to promote his anti-abortion stance and his belief that abortion is

population control and genocide for the Black community (Brown & Sakoui, 2022). He stated in an interview with MIT research scientist Lex Fridman that Planned Parenthood was considered “our holocaust” and claimed that this genocide is “promoted by the music and the media that Black people make, that Jewish record labels get paid off of” (Kaufman, 2022, para. 6). This rhetoric cause companies such as Adidas and Balenciaga to cut ties with the rapper, his talent agency dropping him, production studio MRC to decide to not release their completed documentary on him, JPMorganChase ending their business relationship, and social media applications Twitter and Instagram to suspend his account (Kaufman, 2022, para. 12-14).

Towards the end of October, news began to circulate about rapper Kanye West and his admiration and, to some extent, idolization of Adolf Hitler. This news quickly spread amongst news outlets considering it came on the heels of his infamous tweet that he was going to go “death con 3 on Jewish people” (Melas, 2022, para. 15) earlier that month on top of all the anti-Semitism narrative he had been pushing the entirety of October that cost him many business relations. On December 1, 2022, Kanye appeared on conspiracy theorist Alex Jones’ show “Info Wars” for an interview in which he confirmed earlier circulating reports of his admiration of Hitler by praising him and what he had accomplished. In the interview he denied that the Holocaust happened, claimed that he did not like the word “evil” next to the word “Nazi,” complimented Hitler’s uniform, and literally declared “I’m a Nazi” (Levin, 2022, para. 5). His continued attacks against the Jewish community and pro-Nazi narratives, continued with other appearances on far-right conservative shows for more interviews and various posts he made online, resulted in the suspension of both his Twitter and Instagram accounts once again.

This study explores the public’s reaction and subsequent discourse surrounding Kanye West’s recent pro-Hitler and antisemitic narratives as a celebrity through examination of their

comments on what they believe his motivation is for his recent behaviors and their reasoning for assigning that motivation. I believe that this case is good case for analysis seeing as it may offer insight on how fandoms come to terms with the parasocial relationship they have built with their celebrity and how that celebrity's narratives have changed over time, either good or bad. I also believe this to be a good case study to give insight into how fans are constructing narratives that are either in support or against a celebrity's controversial narrative.

### **Methods**

In order to examine how people interpreted, engaged with, accepted or rejected West's recent statements, I examined various comments online from different media outlets on various social media platforms. While my focus was primarily on public comments, I did use the media content of the media posts (videos and new articles) as context to understand the content of the online comments through use of textual analysis. This approach was chosen since it provides flexibility and "a robust, systematic framework for coding qualitative data, and for then using that coding to identify patterns across the dataset in relation to the research question" (Braun & Clarke, 2014, para. 4).

### **Data Collection**

I used Google search engine to find articles and videos relating to West's recent anti-Semitic comments and chose three that were reactive in chronological order of the information being released on his idealization of Hitler and the interview in which he confirmed this information. From the search, I chose three artifacts to analyze the comments: (1) an article posted by CNN to Twitter titled "Former associates of Kanye West say the rapper has long been fascinated with Adolf Hitler and once wanted to name an album after the Nazi leader;" (2) a YouTube video of a Fox 26 Houston news segment "Isiah Factor Uncensored" titled "Kanye



West Advocates for Adolf Hitler in Viral Interview;” (3) and, another YouTube video posted by Charlamagne Tha God titled “Kanye West, Crazy or Starved for Attention?”, which is an episode of his show “Hell of a Week.” I chose these artifacts first because they all came from different types of media outlets with varying narratives on the topic; one from a well-known and established news media company, another from a local news outlet, and another with West’s own peers (as in other celebrities that he has interacted with before or had prior relationships with) commenting on his recent behavior. These artifacts were also chosen because they were released before, during, and after West’s admittance of admiring Hitler.

For each artifact, the top ten reader comments were selected based on high levels of interaction, which in this case is defined as other people commenting on/interacting with the original post, likes/dislikes/shares of other comments, and comments towards others. This resulted in a total of thirty comments. Comments under the YouTube videos were selected based on high amounts of likes, dislikes, replies, or a combination of all three. For the CNN article posted to Twitter, top comments were selected based on comments, likes, retweets or a combination of all three. The comments were then organized into a spreadsheet that included the article/video’s title, top ten comments for each listed 1 through 10, and the number of replies, likes, shares/retweets. Analyzing the content of these comments helped me understand how fans and some non-fans were interpreting narratives about West as well as his own. Some comments mentioned prior behavior from West to express their suspicion or authenticity of his motives, some mentioned his past life experiences and personal narratives to assign motive or reason behind his behavior, and other used narratives from others (such as other famous celebrities/politicians) to doubt the authenticity of the reporting media outlet.

### **Data Analysis**

To complete the analysis of the content of the comments, I used qualitative thematic analysis techniques such as coding to deduce key arguments from commentators for decisions on which motives to assign West's behavior. The approach that I took came from Braun and Clark's (2006) version of thematic analysis which consisted of familiarizing yourself with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and lastly producing the report (p. 87-93). Each comment was analyzed and went through a round of initial coding followed by a round of more focused coding. In the initial round of coding, I looked for key words such as "fake news", "mental health", and "attention". In the second and more focused round of coding, I looked for content that related to the initial list of codes, and then narrowed these two lists down and grouped them into themes. Using narrative theory, I decided on the themes based on if they fit certain types of narratives, such as related to West's own narratives or his own storytelling, if they used their own narratives and applied it West's narrative to interpret his meaning, or if they pulled on their parasocial relationship they have established to interpret his narratives.

### **Results**

After analyzing all 30 comments from the three artifacts, there were three different themes that emerged; distrust in media reports (fake news), belief that Kanye's actions are a marketing ploy, and belief that he's having a mental health crisis.

#### **Fake News**

About thirty percent of the comments expressed denial of the authenticity of the narratives being shared around West's idealization of Hitler. In particular, the authenticity that was questioned was not West's actual narrative, but rather the narrative created by the reporting news outlet, which in this example was CNN.

Some commentators expressed belief that the narrative was completely made up in an effort for CNN to push a negative narrative against West, while others believed it to be fabricated to draw in ratings, considering “disinformation is supported by the online environment because it generates traffic and thus, financial benefits” (Nedelcu & Balaban, 2021, p. 43). These comments reflect distrust in whether the narratives being shared in the media are authentic or not and, in the case of West that there may be some truth to what he’s saying:

*“‘Unnamed source’ means it was made up by the regime to push a narrative. In this case the narrative is so over the top to be unbelievable by anyone other than the most devout ideologue.”*

*“Corrected ✓ (Image of edited article title that reads "EXCLUSIVE: CNN desperate, willing to make egregious allegations about Ye after mortifying failure of CNN+)”*

*“And with this tweet, Kanye West has proven to be correct about everything he said within the last few weeks”*

Others questioned the authenticity of the narrative given the timeframe reported of West’s behavior and actions reported in the article, which allegedly happened years before CNN sharing the information in 2022, as well as the source of the information which was also reported to be anonymous.

*“Incredible how this information mysteriously stayed hidden for 4+ years, from TMZ of all people lmfao. What a shameless post this.”*

*“Unnamed source says Kanye used to study Mein Kampf. Also, unnamed source claims that Kanye never read a book.”*

Fake news, or rather disinformation, can be defined as “false information or information that lacks scientific evidence” (Monaci, & Persico, 2022, p. 5885) and have been broken down even further by social media data analysis into three prominent forms which are rumors, content stigmatizing individuals or institutions, and conspiracy theories (Monaci, & Persico, 2022, p. 5886). Since 2016, more and more information has been shared in these forms, prompting people to become suspicious especially since “Conspiracy theories, invented news, or misinformation go viral and have more chances to continue to spread due to the dissemination possibilities offered by social media” (Nedelcu & Balaban, 2021, p. 44). These comments seem to be influenced by not only West’s narratives that he has been misrepresented in the media, but also from other celebrities and politicians who have been promoting the narrative that once-revered news outlets such as NBC, CBS, and in this case, CNN, should not be trusted and that they not only share misinformation but also manipulate information to gain ratings. This also supports current research that social media “challenges source credibility by the presence of anonymous and multiple authors” (Nedelcu & Balaban, 2021, p. 47). Since the information the article mentioned came from not only an anonymous source but also from news outlet that many consider to be nothing but celebrity gossip, it is evident how these commenters would consider this news to be inauthentic.

### **Marketing Ploy**

Other comments not only alluded to a distrust in the authenticity of West’s narratives, but they also seemed to have differing perspectives in terms of who is actually in control of these

narratives. For some it is West, citing attention towards himself and as a marketing tool for his art as a motive.

*“All I want to say is Kanye West knows what he is doing and saying... I think he's addicted to attention and the reaction he gets from people. It's like the bait on a hook being used, but he uses his words as bait.”*

*“It's not a secret, Kanye market himself with controversies. While there are concerns about Mental challenges, he seems to be high functioning.”*

Others alluded to the belief it is his fandom that is in control, as their ongoing support despite the criticism West is facing provides the motivation for his increasingly controversial narratives and behavior.

*“This is what happens when you treat entertainers and celebrities like intellectuals and philosophers. You kept buying his music and financially supporting his brand while he said the most stupid sh\*t, especially about Black people. Yet it took another group who did not placate him and his words to bring him to his knees.”*

This narrative lens from fans and the public suggests that even though the narratives about West are mainly controlled by him, there is also a sense of the control being in the hands of those who consume them. If fans are continuing to support him despite the content he's driving and the media continues to report or share on it to increase the amount of attention that he is receiving, then it is easy to understand why West would continue with the behavior. Whether it is positive or negative, attention is attention and most times in the entertainment industry we have seen that attention sells. Nesbitt & Dunn (2021) point out that “some narratives are so memorable that a person can recall, relive, and be influenced by a narrative will after

consuming the message” which is generally positive (p. 35). The narratives that West has been sharing certainly are memorable and can be seen as attention grabbing considering the amount of coverage and reaction to these narratives, however they are not considered positive but rather polarizing. Research has shown that celebrities can gain attention to a campaign or cause, however these comments support Nesbitt & Dunn’s (2021) comment around lack of research concerning celebrity influence and narratives that generate controversy and shock, especially in light of West and the “continued fascination and engagement with any statement that he or is famous family put out” (p. 35) which as a fan, I am certainly guilty of doing.

### **Mental Health Crisis**

Some comments highlighted the need for others to try to gain more knowledge about how mental health can present itself in different ways other than the symptoms that are normally talked about.

*“All mental health issues are not created equally. Schizophrenia shows up a whole lot differently than anxiety or depression.”*

Others pointed out that the narratives that are being shared both online and on television about West’s mental health are professionals who can objectively comment on West’s behavior through a mental health lens without applying their own experiences (or narratives), as well as a call for accountability on West’s part regardless of mental illness.

*“What’s consistently missing from conversations in these spaces is people who truly have studied and understand mental health and who do not necessarily have to rely totally on personal experience and speculation.”*

*“Even if your are ‘crazy’ you are responsible for you actions. He is off his meds by choice. Everyone around him is enabling him because of his money and influence. He is aware of all of this and admitted to it in his rambling. He said he does it for attention and he'll keep doing it because he doesn't care. Until he stops getting the attention he craves nothing will change.”*

These narratives suggest that while we may have a better understanding these days of mental health and are more open to talking about it, there seems to be a disconnect on what the narrative should be on those that seem to be experiencing a crisis. In West’s case, the commentators pointed out that yes, they’re acknowledging that his actions may be influenced by mental health, but they are also questioning when to hold someone accountable and who that person should be. These comments also alluded to the fact that commenters felt the story of West having a mental health crisis to be more authentic considering all the narratives in the media around concern for his mental health and their own or others mental health struggles they have experienced. Also, thanks to the access social media and the internet grants people to past narratives either from the West or news outlets reporting on him, they can go back in time to follow West’s mental health journey from when it was first brought to light to what they are hearing now, just as I did for this study. With those past narratives in mind, combined with their own similar experiences in their personal lives directly with narratives surrounding mental health either in person or online, fans (myself included) apply these narratives to the ones concerning West to consider it an authentic motivation for his recent behavior.

As a fan, I grapple with which theme that I may fall under when interpreting West’s narratives. While I agree with some of the dialogue in the comments on these artifacts, I also feel

that there is not just one motive that I can assign as the reason behind West's behavior. There are a lot of different narratives out there and I (and maybe other like me) struggle to determine which ones are authentic or fabricated, both from media outlets and West himself. The resulting themes from the discourse around his narratives however have made me understand where I stand as a person and my identity. While I may have excused his behavior in the past as a fan as, over time my concept of self (particularly my morals) has changed thanks to my experiences to where I now realize that I can no longer excuse behavior such as what West is displaying. By interpreting not only his narratives but narratives from others in the fandom, I was able to understand that about myself, and I am now left with to continue to follow future narratives while I grapple with the decision to stay in the fandom or leave.

### **Theoretical Applications/Discussion**

#### **Social media changing fans' sensemaking of celebrity narratives**

As mentioned, many times throughout this study, today more and more people (the general public and celebrities alike) are starting to use social media as a means to share more about their personal lives and in a way, as a means to chronical their lives as well. This means that there are many things (both good and bad) about them online over the years that are available for anyone to access if they feel the need to dig. With the advancement of technology and the quick adaption of it, research has found that "the nature of online media allows the general public to question, challenge, and scrutinize celebrity accounts" (Bute et al., 2016, p. 1011). While people have scrutinized, questioned, and challenged celebrity accounts in the past, this was mainly done on an interpersonal level through conversations with friends and other fans in person. With the implementation of social media, these conversations can now be shared



outside of your personal circles with others around the globe, not to mention you even have the ability to confront the celebrity about their narratives themselves directly.

Fans (and the public) use narratives to make sense of the world around them. As mentioned by Nesbit and Dunn (2021), “characters and narratives help us process difficult social and political concepts... we are able to recall them later, mull them over in our minds, adapt them, and shape them to our needs” (p. 28). Some of the comments analyzed for this study showed that many people pulled from past narratives of and from West to come up with various interpretations of what his narratives meant as well as his motives behind them were. Some of these past narratives were pulled from recent years as well as decades ago, all of which have been chronicled and readily available to be shared online thanks to the internet and social media, as well as accessed to analyze once again to make sense of current narratives. This study shows that not only are fans analyzing past narratives from West to make sense of his current ones, but they are also using past narratives to make the decision question, challenge, or criticize him as well.

Fans are also not only using these narratives to make sense of the world around them as in if society is still treating the topic of mental health seriously or not, or how society reacts to someone sharing what it considers controversial stances, but they are also learning about themselves through these narratives as well. They are taking these narratives from not only the celebrity themselves but others in their fandoms and deciding if their own identities align with these views. Some may decide that they agree with these views and shift their concept of self in turn of their morals to fit in with the fandom, while others may be the opposite and learn that they don't hold these morals and shape their identity to fit that realization, which in turn can leave fans wondering if what that means for them as a fan. Do they remain a fan even though

their identities do not align with the narratives of the person they follow, and if so, what are the potential implications of doing this?

### **Critical theoretical research on celebrity health narratives**

Much of the research that has been done today focuses on the benefits or positive impact that celebrity narratives and subsequent parasocial relationships can have. Most of the research today focuses on the impact these types of relationships can have on the benefits of using celebrities for endorsements, either for brands or for political endorsements. Research has suggested that “celebrities influence a wide variety of audiences in the formation of sentiment and behavior... and higher levels of perceived credibility further increases the effectiveness of the celebrity endorsement” (Nisbett & Dunn, 2021, p. 27). There has also been a lot of the research done on these types of relationships and narratives also focuses on the benefits of raising awareness for social and health issues as well. As Francis (2021) points out in her article, three decades worth of research has shown that celebrity health narratives “have a significant public health and communications outcomes” (p. 448), which is a positive since it can be considered another method of education since it influences people to seek information either for themselves or others. This study shows that there is, however, a lack of research that focuses on celebrity narratives and parasocial relationships in relation to controversial shared by their celebrity or character of choice.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, narratives help us to not only negotiate the information that we take in daily whether through interpersonal interactions in real life or online, they also help to shape our thoughts and opinions on ourselves and others. This can also be applied to celebrity narratives and not only their fans, but the public that consume them. As Nesbit and Dunn (2021) mentioned in their research on the influence of Taylor Swift’s 2018 tweet,

regarding celebrity narratives and parasocial relationships, when people start to see celebrities as old friends they are “less likely to counterargue or reject persuasive messages” (p. 28). In other words, even though we see fans and the public becoming far more critical of celebrity and media narrative, there is still the potential that these controversial views or narratives full of misinformation can be absorbed by people as truths and shape their opinions on various topics. As we can see from this study, not all narratives are good and helpful narratives. As such, this research demonstrates a need for critical study of these types of cases.

### **Conclusion**

This study not only uncovered the need for further research on celebrity health narratives through a more critical lens, but fans’ use of a celebrity’s past narratives to make sense of questionable current narrative poses potential for research into how they apply these narratives to what it means to continue being their fan. Like Nesbit and Dunn (2021) mention in their article, I also think that it is important to further explore the distinction that people may make between engaging with a celebrity and/or engaging with the narrative that they present (p. 35-36). Can people actually separate the celebrity and their work from the controversial thought and opinions that they share and/or support? In other words, can they still support the celebrity’s art if they do not support their narrative and if so, how are they able to make that separation.

For myself as a fan, I have yet to make a decision on whether I will continue to support West in the same capacity that I once did or not, meaning I’m not sure if I can manage to separate the artist from his work and continue to support his art. I have learned that narratives play a large role in how I interpret his current behavior versus his past behavior, and after completing this study, I feel that his behavior is motivated by a combination of the themes that emerged during my research. As Harter (2013) pointed out that we should remember that with all

narratives, there are intentional silences and parts of the story that individuals chose not to reveal, or editors choose not to publish (p. 6), I feel that there are some missing or incomplete narratives out there about West and his current situation. I also feel that we are currently watching West's mental health crisis unfold in real time, however his behavior is also spurred on by the attention of fans and the media as well. There are still more narratives to come as more information is revealed, so until I've had a chance to hear them all, I will remain a hopeful fan that he will eventually become a better version of the Kanye I once knew and loved, as well as share uplifting and creative narratives once again.

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