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An Analysis of the Catalysts of Parasocial Breakups

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### Abstract

This paper aims to explore a parasocial phenomenon known as parasocial breakup. What happens when popular influencers become riddled with scandals, or a microcelebrity crush starts dating someone? Perhaps they are unfollowed, blocked, or ignored by their fans. The parasocial bond between influencer and viewer has cracked. What happens when a content creator changes their content, stops posting, or experiences a crisis? They may remove themselves from various social media platforms, post content that former viewers no longer enjoy, or shift their fan demographic drastically. This paper analyzes microcelebrities across four categories: those who have died, those who have been plagued with scandals, those who have retired from social media, and those who have changed their content. By examining each influencer's social media accounts, the catalyst for their mass parasocial breakups, and the reactions from their followers, this paper explores the various parasocial breakups that have occurred. Utilizing a multi-case study design, this paper dives deeper into a question most research on parasocial interaction has narrowly avoided: what could act as a catalyst for a mass parasocial breakup? Why do some viewers initiate parasocial breakups? Finally, how could microcelebrities avoid these mass parasocial breakups?

### An Analysis of the Catalysts of Parasocial Breakups

When I first began studying the theory of parasocial interaction, I was sure I had engaged in this type of interaction previously. With so many of us relying on social media, television, radio, and journalism for our news, our entertainment, or even our communications with loved ones, I am certain that everyone in the world has at some point engaged in parasocial interaction. I, myself, formed a parasocial relationship with a cat named Pot Roast and her owner (who has not shared her name publicly), and found my daily activities to revolve around Pot Roast. With Pot Roast's owner sharing so much of their lives together on various platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and even creating YouTube videos, I was so easily connected to both of these characters. Between the videos, posts, comments, and likes, I began a parasocial relationship with both Pot Roast and her owner.

After Pot Roast's untimely and devastating death, I experienced my first parasocial breakup, filled with grief and sorrow. And I was shocked! How could I grieve a cat I have never met, mourn the loss of a cat who I have never interacted with, or sympathize with her owner, who has never spoken to me, and may not even know I exist? I experienced such intense bouts of grief; someone would have thought my own cat suddenly passed away. After connecting Pot Roast with parasocial interactions, relationships, and breakups, I began to wonder just how parasocial relationships began, and if I had even engaged in this type of interaction, and I began my research.

In 2014, a senior in college adopted a cat on a Missouri college campus. In 2022, millions were touched by this woman and her cat. Pot Roast (the cat) was adopted in the Spring of 2014. Little detail is known about her owner, who goes by Pot Roast's Mom on social media. She has not released her name, her age, where she lives, what she does, or any other major details of her

life. Rather, for the past few years, she has been sharing Pot Roast's story on social media. After being adopted in 2014, Pot Roast became gravely ill with stomatitis, which is the painful swelling of gums inside of her mouth. She was unable to eat or drink, and her owner elected to have her teeth removed. This procedure was done between 2016 and 2018, but the exact date is unknown. In addition to stomatitis, Pot Roast had digestive issues that made it difficult to properly digest the food she was eating and made it even more difficult to retain nutrients. Around the same time that Pot Roast was getting more gravely ill, her owner was suffering from various mental health issues. With a heavy drug addiction and a bipolar disorder diagnosis, Pot Roast's owner was severely struggling. In one social media post, shared on both TikTok and Instagram, her owner describes how difficult sobriety was to achieve. When she realized Pot Roast could die, her owner was able to achieve sobriety and maintain it to the present day.

Between 2014 and 2020, Pot Roast and her owner were living a normal life. Yet, everything would change for the pair in December of 2020, when Pot Roast's owner posted a video of the cat on TikTok. To her surprise, the video reached over four million people, sparking online interest, articles, questions, and various other engagements with Pot Roast. Millions of people fell in love with Pot Roast and her owner overnight, with her owner amassing over one million followers on TikTok, and another one hundred thousand followers on Instagram. With interest in Pot Roast's stories, experiences, and the dynamic between Pot Roast and her "mom," Pot Roast's owner began posting on social media more and more. With a cult-like following (including me), Pot Roast and her owner explored various social media trends, shared stories on Instagram and TikTok, and became a beloved couple all over social media.

In February of 2022, Pot Roast's health took a turn for the worse. With her owner sharing that Pot Roast was experiencing inexplicable vomiting, inability to eat or drink, and fatigued. Pot

Roast was taken to the emergency vet on February 3, where the cat was diagnosed with feline immuno-deficiency virus (FIV). While this explained the symptoms, Pot Roast's owner shared her surprise at the diagnosis, considering Pot Roast is an indoor cat. In addition to this diagnosis, Pot Roast was able to receive medical care, and the symptoms subsided. The responses to the post sharing Pot Roast's trip to the veterinarian and diagnosis received support from millions of people, with followers exclaiming their pride and love for Pot Roast. On February 15, Pot Roast's owner shared that things for Pot Roast had taken another turn for the worse, with Pot Roast's medicine being rendered ineffective by the case of FIV. In the post, Pot Roast's owner shared that Pot Roast was sleeping a lot and seemed to be enjoying her last few moments on this physical earth. Followers were immediately filled with despair, with comments saying, "Great, now I'm going to cry for the night," "Thank you for being so committed to her & being a role model for what pet ownership should look like. Sending my love to you and pot roast," and finally, "Nothing hurts me more than to see this, you are so strong, thank you for sharing her with us."

On February 16, at 11:47AM, Pot Roast passed away. With her owner updating YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok to reflect this recent loss, followers of the pair grew inconsolable. The initial post explaining Pot Roast's death reached over ten million people, and the hashtags #potroastmom, #potroast, and #cattok were flooded with videos grieving the feline friend. With so many people upset, including myself, I began to wonder what communication phenomenon was occurring. After studying parasocial interaction and relationships, I had engaged in a parasocial breakup! Millions of people, all around the world, were experiencing a parasocial breakup at the same time.

### Literature Review

Parasocial interaction as a theory of communication was first developed in 1956 by Donald Horton and Richard Wohl. Parasocial interaction (or PSI) refers to psychological relationships that are experienced between a “performer” and an “audience member” (“Parasocial interaction,” n.d.). A performer can be anybody within the public realm, including social media influencers, celebrities, corporations, companies, actors and actresses, or even a person on the street. The audience member refers to anyone who may view these performers in any public context: followers, coworkers, and even peers. Parasocial interaction is one-sided, meaning the audience member perceives a relationship between themselves and the performer. It is imperative that parasocial interactions are completely independent from the performer, with the audience member having limited to no actual interactions or connections with this performer (“Parasocial interaction,” n.d.). These relationships can range from friendships, romantic relationships, caring for the wellbeing of the performer, and even enmity.

Although the notion of parasocial interaction was originally studied by Robert Merton in 1946, the concept of PSI was first developed by Donald Horton and Richard Wohl in 1956, a decade later. Merton’s original essay focused on “pseudorelationships” with media figures, specifically speaking about radio and Kate Smith’s interactions with the radio audience (Brown, 2015). PSI was originally a theory of one-sided communication between an audience member and a performer on radio, television, or movies. Horton and Wohl first coined the term “parasocial relationship” (Horton and Wohl, 1956). They initially described this relationship as an illusion; an illusion of a “face-to-face relationship” between the audience member and the performer (Horton and Wohl, 1956).



Horton and Wohl described PSI as an “imaginary interaction” between a television viewer and a television personality, which may develop into a parasocial relationship (Brown, 2015). In their original article, Horton and Wohl describe the performer as an actor, whether they act as themselves or in another role. In this role, the actor uses a direct address with the audience, speaking in a friendly or private way directly to the audience members. Next, the audience member forms an individual or group bond or connection with this performer, responding with more than just observation. As the performer adjusts their behavior, the audience member does as well. This connection or bond is known as parasocial interactions or relations (Horton and Wohl, 1956).

Horton and Wohl proposed that the performer should be known as the persona. This persona shares intimate details surrounding their life with crowds and audiences. This intimacy can be real or fake. The persona offers the audience members a connection, what Horton and Wohl a “continuing relationship” (Horton and Wohl, 1956). This persona can be seen as a friend, a counselor, a role model, a crush, or any other interpersonal role found in one’s life. Horton and Wohl adhere to the idea that a parasocial relationship depends on the character’s ability to remain unchanged. Audience members can come to rely on perceived parasocial interactions with their chosen persona.

Horton and Wohl also propose that the parasocial relationship revolves around the bond of intimacy shared “between” the persona and the audience member. Rather than being a real intimacy bond, this bond is one of an illusion, allowing audience members to feel close to personas they have never truly interacted with. The persona is someone that an audience member can rely on, someone that the audience member can put their trust into. This bond is deepened by sharing more and more intimate details. For example, an influencer may upload a video teaching

their audience how to curl their hair. In the comments, someone asks for a hair care routine. By providing this routine, the influencer not only initiates a parasocial interaction, but may also contribute to a parasocial relationship. Once this hair routine uploads to the Internet, fans are Tweeting that they use the same shampoo, that they have similar hair to the influencer, and even asking for more content. And so, these interactions begin a parasocial relationship, according to Horton and Wohl (1956).

After a series of parasocial interactions (PSIs), a relationship known as a parasocial relationship (PSR) can occur. Parasocial relationships develop after repeated PSIs between the audience member and a performer. These could be through concerts, television show performances, books, or any other form of media. One of the most common ways for a parasocial relationship to occur is through social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, Twitch, and YouTube. Gregg found that Twitter proved to promote parasocial interactions between a performer and an audience member (2018). With Twitter's large platform and many ways of interacting (likes, retweets, posts, shared links, etc.), Twitter users can reach their favorite stars, celebrities, and influencers with the touch of button, making Twitter a plethora of parasocial interaction (Gregg, 2018). Livestreaming is a way for many parasocial interactions to occur during a short period of time. For example, a viewer of a livestream may believe the influencer or performer is reading their comments, responding to their questions, or even engaging with them directly, when in actuality, this connection is strictly parasocial interaction (Gregg, 2018).

Parasocial interaction is a very common experience. But how does this phenomenon occur and develop into a parasocial relationship? This chart shows how an initial interaction with an influencer, in this case a musician, can lead to parasocial interaction and to a parasocial

relationship (Kurtin et al., 2019). First, there must be exposure to the character, role, media persona, musician, or object of attraction. Then, either social attraction to the musician, the authenticity of the musician, the physical attraction experienced by the audience member, or the task attraction occur (Kurtin et al., 2019). Social attraction could include wanting to know more about that person or becoming friendly with the character. Authenticity relates to the intimacy that can be shared parasocially between a persona and an audience member. Physical attraction refers to the appealing qualities of a persona that an audience member perceives as attractive. And finally, task attraction suggests that an audience member has a desire to work with their chosen persona. After experiencing one of these parasocial interactions, a parasocial relationship may occur. This parasocial relationship can eventually lead to a larger relational importance. The chart is below.

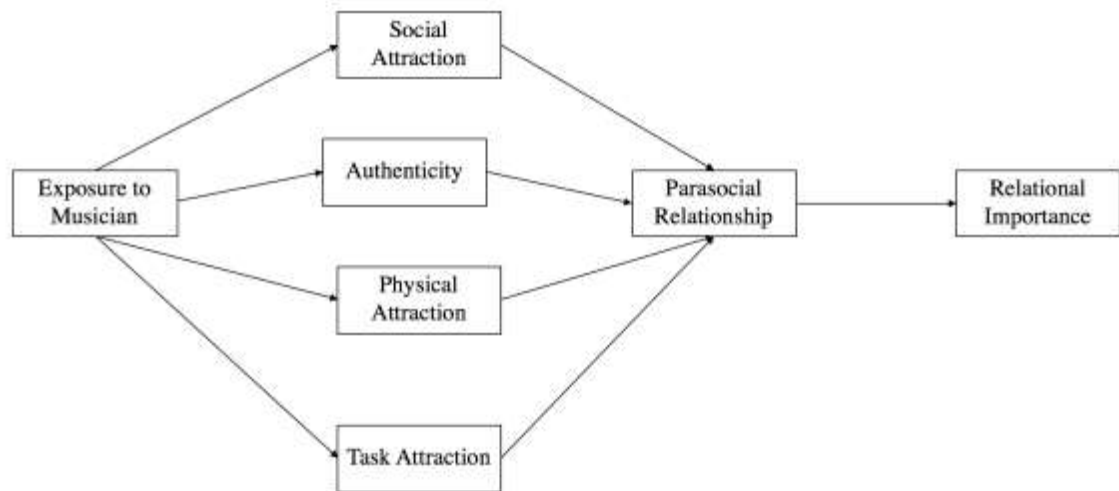


Figure 1 Kurtin, K.S., O'Brien, N.F., Roy, D., & Dam, L. (2019). Parasocial relationships with musicians. *The Journal of Social Media In Society*, 8(2), 30-50.

While parasocial interaction theory of communication is largely supported empirically and societally, there are some controversies surrounding the theory. Giles expresses that

parasocial interaction has not been theoretically developed enough to be supported by psychology (2002). He also claimed that PSI was not an alternative to social or interpersonal connections, which is supported by Swiss researchers (Giles, 2002). Giles also argues that parasocial interaction should be studied primarily in the field of social psychology rather than through the communications lens. And finally, Giles's strongest argument was about the lack of clarity between parasocial interaction and a parasocial relationship. With some scholars using the terms interchangeably, much of the previous research is difficult to interpret. A parasocial interaction is a fleeting moment, while a parasocial relationship mimics the length and intimacy of other platonic or romantic relationships (Giles, 2002).

Parasocial interactions and relationships do not just occur with liked personas. In fact, some of the strongest parasocial bonds or connections include those with disliked characters. One study conducted in 2016 examined parasocial relationships with both hated and loved characters, and researchers found that individuals who experience loneliness or social anxiety often turn to parasocial relationships with disliked characters (Rosaen and Dibble, 2016). While the strength of this relationship revolved around just how much anxiety or feelings of loneliness occurred, the parasocial bonds were strengthened with hated characters when experiencing these emotions. One theory of parasocial interaction, known as affective disposition theory, claims that audience members enjoy their entertainment and media when a liked character succeeds, and when a disliked character fails (Oliver et al., 2019). This could seemingly suggest that parasocial interaction with disliked characters relies on the failure of that character, which could imply that as the disliked character continues to fail, that parasocial interaction or relationship could grow.

Some researchers studying parasocial interactions and relationships want to stop others from defining parasocial relationships as friendships, instead stating that these relationships can

be experienced in any “traditional” interpersonal relationship setting as well. These researchers examined parasocial interaction with both liked and disliked personas and found that participants were engaging in parasocial interaction equally between the two personas, suggesting that parasocial relationships can also be made into hostile relationships (Rosaen and Dibble, 2016). Other research has prompted suggestions that parasocial interaction relies on the similarities between the audience member and the persona. One article looked into parasocial interaction with disliked soap opera characters, and the researchers found that the only factor present to determine the strength of the interaction with the disliked characters was the degree of similarity felt between the audience member and the disliked persona (Giles, 2002).

Parasocial relationships, much like interpersonal relationships, can have their ups and downs. Parasocial interaction has been shown to grow stronger when the performer shares more of their personality with their audience (Giles, 2002). This could be personal or private information, sharing small details of their lives, or even creating more private channels to communicate directly with their audience. This can be seen with Patreon profiles, where performers are able to charge a fee for information like blog posts, private uploads, or even storytelling and sharing. And, as with interpersonal relationships, parasocial relationships can also result in breakups. A parasocial breakup is known as a parasocial phenomenon. Parasocial breakups can occur when a performer or their role pass away, share information that the audience member disagrees with (such as supporting politicians or policies), or when a performer no longer holds the same role in the audience member’s life. These breakups can include grief and mourning, feelings of sadness, and even loneliness (Gregg, 2018).

Parasocial breakups tend to mirror interpersonal relationship breakdowns (Gregg, 2018). Romantic relationships are a vital element to the development of adolescents and young adults,

and breakups remain a risk in any relationship (Bravo, Connolly, and McIsaac, 2017). Occasionally, a breakup in an interpersonal relationship may end in a positive way; the individuals involved may grow, learn, and move on easily from their breakup. Yet, more often than not, interpersonal relationship breakups lead to powerful, unfavorable emotions (Bravo, Connolly, and McIsaac, 2017). Anxiety and depression may arise as a result of the breakup, often leading young adults to maladaptive coping skills.

There are many reasons that someone might initiate a relationship dissolution. While each relationship between individuals is unique, research shows similarities across young adults considering a breakup. In an interpersonal romantic relationship, one might grow unhappy with the intimacy with their partner(s), one might desire more independence, or one might even want to distance themselves from an individual acting out (Bravo, Connolly, and McIsaac, 2017). In some interpersonal relationships, infidelity may be a factor leading to making the decision to dissolve the relationship. Often times, breakups come as the result of miscommunications, uncaring behaviors or insensitivity, a lack of trust or intimacy, or a loss of independence (Bravo, Connolly, and McIsaac, 2017).

Once a breakup has happened, there are several emotional experiences that are common to go through after the dissolution of the interpersonal relationship. Depression and anxiety are two of the most common negative outcomes of relationship dissolution (Bravo, Connolly, and McIsaac, 2017). In addition, some people turn to negative coping mechanisms such as substance abuse and allowing their physical health to suffer. Some individuals may experience self-esteem and self-confidence issues, allowing the insecurities arising from their breakup to affect their mental health.

Anger and sadness are among two of the most self-reported emotions experienced after a romantic breakup (Kansky and Allen, 2017). Research indicates that being in control of or initiating the breakup may result in less of the feelings reported on, but it does not indicate that these feelings will not occur in the person conducting the breakup (Kansky and Allen, 2017). While research has shown that parasocial breakups mirror interpersonal relationship dissolution, the minor differences may lie in the uncertainty factor. Parasocial relationships largely rely on dependability, and when a parasocial breakup is initiated, fans and subscribers may feel ambiguous about their own emotions, their feelings surrounding their favorite influencer, or even uncertainty regarding the influencer's behavior (Gregg, 2018).

Parasocial interactions and relationships can be largely positive or harmless for audience members and their performer counterparts. For example, high school first-years tend to have infatuation with their senior peers. A high school boy or girl may believe that their chosen senior crush knows their name, or they may share a "special look" that only the first-year notices. The senior is completely unaware of this interaction taking place, while the first year is falling in love. While parasocial interactions and relationships can be harmless, they also pose a threat in the new era of social media and technology.

In a 2021 incident, a man who had been stalking Kendall Jenner was arrested outside of the model's home after breaking into her gated neighborhood. The stalker had uploaded pictures of Jenner, stating that if he could talk to her face to face, he knows that she would find her soulmate in him (Brown, 2021). Other issues with parasocial interactions lie within the trust and loyalty associated with the media persona. Media personas have a large influence on their audience members, and this influence can be manipulated easily. This can certainly be seen with representatives of multi-level marketing schemes like LuLaRoe or Monat. Influencers within

these communities will make their companies seem like family in order to profit off of the audience member's pockets. The persona utilizes this parasocial interaction to drive the audience member to spend more and more money. While this series of interactions was not only parasocial but also non-consensual, many parasocial relationships and interactions remain innocuous.

One positive consequence of parasocial interaction and relationships can be seen in the identity formation of children, adolescents, and adults. Studies show that while every age group benefits from PSI and PSR in connection with their identity formation, parasocial interactions and relationships are particularly appealing to adolescents. This makes sense, considering adolescence is typically a period of turmoil for everyone, with puberty, friendship drama, and blooming independence. Adolescents and young teenagers are able to parasocially interact with personas that they relate to, personas with similar identities (especially marginalized identities), and personas who may substitute platonic or romantic relationships ("Parasocial interaction," n.d.).

Another positive consequence of PSI and PSR can be found through learning. Children, particularly toddlers and elementary school students, can develop parasocial bonds with characters on their television, including Elmo, Barney, Dora, and other popular children's show stars. Learning is improved through parasocial bonds, and television networks capitalize on this by providing children with personalized characters, making the child more likely to learn ("Parasocial interaction," n.d.). In one study, parasocial interactions were manipulated to show how toddlers can learn through parasocial relationships. This study showed that toddlers who form intimate parasocial connections with television characters such as Elmo, were also able to learn from their interactions (Gola et al., 2013). And, finally, parasocial connections are shown to increase self-confidence and stronger feelings of conformity (Vinney, 2021).



While parasocial interactions and relationships have positive consequences, there are also negative possibilities associated with PSI and PSR. First, research has examined parasocial bonds in connection to self-perception and body image. Researchers have found that negative media exposure surrounding body image can also translate into negative parasocial bonds surrounding the same issue. By comparing oneself to a character on television, an adolescent or young adult sets unrealistic expectations for themselves. An actor or actress spends a lot of time in hair and makeup, and their roles may even revolve around the actor being a specific size, either big or small. A teenager in middle or high school who is parasocially bonded with this actor may believe they have to adapt their own image to fit in, contributing to body image and self-perception issues (“Parasocial interaction,” n.d.).

Another issue lies behind PSI and PSR. Should a character that a young adult parasocially bonds with act aggressive, the young adult is now more likely to act in an aggressive manner. While not parasocially interacting, Albert Bandura’s theory of observational learning supports this claim. In Bandura’s original experiment, he had adults come into a room filled with toys and perform a series of actions in front of a toddler or child. Some actions included in this experiment were aggression towards toys, not playing with toys, and playing with the toys very gently (McLeod, 2014). Children were likely to replicate which action they had seen previously, supporting the claim that parasocial bonds can also result in observational learning.

While parasocial interaction theory is supported by many fields, many scholars use this term interchangeably with other processes of audience involvement: transportation, identification, and worship (Brown, 2015). Each theory describes audience involvement with their chosen persona or character, but each are unique in themselves. Transportation is an attachment to both the story and the characters, resulting in an overall infatuation or transference

to that world. The key to understanding the difference between parasocial interaction and transportation is that transportation relies on the emergence of an audience member into the setting of the story. Transportation can eventually lead into parasocial interaction, but they are separate theories of communication.

Identification, as a communications theory, is the internalization of actions, thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors that serve to maintain a connection to the object or character one is identifying with (Brown, 2015). The important difference between identification and PSI is in the replication of actions found within identification. With identification, an audience member is seeking to replicate their object of affection's behaviors. With PSI, an audience member is independently interacting with their object of affection. Similarly, identification can also lead to parasocially interacting or forming a parasocial relationship. And finally, worship is the most concentrated procedure of involvement with media personas. Worship of a celebrity or influencer can be seen when an audience member holds their character or persona to a similar status as that of a god or religious power (Brown, 2015). There is a large difference between worship and PSI, mostly due to parasocial relationships resulting in parasocial breakups. With worship, audience members are less likely to experience feelings of discontent with their persona, as they are revering their chosen influencer. Although all four theories are similar, parasocial interactions and parasocial relationships are quite different.

While parasocial interaction is primarily a theory involved with communication, PSI and the field of psychology are closely linked. Along with parasocial interactions and relationships also comes the psychological implications of these connections. Parasocial interactions have been studied across a lifetime, starting as toddlers and carrying all the way through old age. Studies have found that parasocial interactions and relationships are pertinent to the development

of children, both mentally and emotionally (“Parasocial interaction,” n.d.). Parasocial interactions and relationships also depend on psychology’s attachment theory. Attachment theory, in summary, describes the bonds and connections that are formed between infants, toddlers, and children and their caregivers (parents, babysitters, teachers, etc.) These attachments can also be formed parasocially, which displays the connections between PSI and psychology. In addition, there are both positive and negative consequences of these parasocial connections.

In addition to this research, parasocial relationships have been found to correlate uniquely with each attachment style. In psychology’s attachment theory, there are four different ways that humans can attach or detach from one another. The first is referred to as secure attachment style, which around fifty-six percent of adults experience. Those with the secure attachment style are not afraid of intimacy, retain their independence in relationships, and can trust easily (Gonsalves and Hallett, 2021). The second attachment style is known as anxious attachment, which about nineteen percent of adults experience. Anxiously attached people will be clingy, worrying, and seeking more validation in their relationships (Gonsalves and Hallett, 2021). The third attachment style is called a few different terms. Often referred to as fearful-avoidant, psychology scholars also refer to it as the disorganized attachment style. People with this style both want affection and simultaneously want to avoid intimacy. And finally, the last style of attachment is called the avoidant attachment. Those experiencing this will feel suffocated by most relationships, craving independence, and emotional unavailability. Over twenty-five percent of adults experience the avoidant attachment style. To no one’s surprise, parasocial relationships can depend on one’s attachment style.

Rosaen and Dibble attempted to determine which attachment styles contribute to parasocial interactions, and specifically which psychological attachment style was most

associated with parasocial interactions (2016). With inconsistent research on attachment style and parasocial interaction over previous sixty years, the two endeavored to figure out the true connections between attachment styles and PSRs. By conducting a survey, Rosaen and Dibble found that people with anxious attachment styles both utilize parasocial relationships more than other attachment styles, and benefit from parasocial relationships more than other attachment styles (2016). In addition to this finding, Rosaen and Dibble also found a strong positive correlation between the anxious attachment style and parasocial relationships with disliked characters or influencers. In regard to the other three attachment styles, researchers found no correlation, positive or negative, with parasocial relationships.

Since any person, regardless of gender, political stance, age, race, or belief system, can enter into a parasocial relationships, why do some people parasocially interact with characters, roles, and influencers more than others? Researchers have been attempting to answer this since Horton and Wohl's original article in 1956. In addition to the variations of attachment styles, there are several other answers to this question. One of these answers can be found within gender and loneliness. A study conducted in 2008 wanted to examine how loneliness affected parasocial interaction and relationships and found that gender influences the strength of parasocial interaction. Evidence showed that parasocial interactions were more likely to occur when women experience situational or chronic loneliness, while men typically participate in PSI and parasocial relationships as romantic loneliness increased (Wang, Fink, and Cai, 2008). Although much research exists on parasocial interaction, research has shown that more causes of parasocial interaction need to be studied.

One major issue with parasocial interaction is the lack of a scale of measurement for this theory when applied to research. While there are several scales of measurement, including the

Experience of Parasocial Interaction Scale (EPSI-Scale) and the Parasocial Interaction Scale (PSI-Scale), there are no universally accepted measurements of parasocial interactions or relationships (Dibble, Hartmann, and Rosaen, 2016). These researchers also claim that with no universally accepted measurement of parasocial interaction, each proposed method of measurement lacks construct validity. Construct validity is used to determine whether a scale correctly measures what it claims to. With no universally accepted scales, it is difficult to interpret research and data on both parasocial interactions and relationships (Dibble, Hartmann, and Rosaen, 2016).

### **Methods**

The design of this study utilizes a multiple case study approach involving social media influencers and microcelebrities and the phenomenon of parasocial breakups. While parasocial relationships and interactions have been studied for decades, parasocial breakups have been left relatively untouched by academia, including the factors leading to mass parasocial breakups. By observing these microcelebrities across various social media platforms – including TikTok, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram – we can view the events that have led to the downfall of an influencer’s social media career. Observation will provide the most insight to the influencer’s parasocial breakup with their audience, especially since the content on each profile or social media page is provided by the influencer themselves.

I chose to use a multiple case study approach to examine parasocial breakups. Not only do I believe this will prove useful, but I believe that using multiple case studies will provide a stronger foundation for research on parasocial breakups. I have separated these case studies into four different categories: influencers who passed away, microcelebrities who quit social media, social media stars who had large scandals, and creators who change their content. Each case

study will utilize the same methodology. First, I examine social media platforms: Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Twitch, TikTok, etc. I examine each influencer's engagement with their followers, and I detail the present standing of their social media accounts. Then, I research into each specific case study, providing important background and context. Finally, I examine the event that caused the mass parasocial breakup. By analyzing comments and reactions from followers and sorting through news stories, I delve into each parasocial breakup, noting the factors that may have contributed to this phenomenon. Although each case study is organized into four separate categories, this is the basic methodology I have applied to each one.

Utilizing multiple case studies will give me the ability to look at how parasocial breakups are experienced across a variety of circumstances and relationships. In order to look into each case study, I first observed each influencer's early social media career by analyzing their Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, Vine, and TikTok accounts, paying special attention to comment sections. By doing this, I was able to first look at the day-to-day content of that creator, while also determining what their engagement looked like. Engagement with followers could include likes, comments, share, and reposts. The higher the number of interactions, the higher the engagement on social media. I then noted examples of their earlier engagement, determining what their relationship was like with their followers. After my initial observation, I looked at the catalyst – the event that prompted the mass parasocial breakup. Each influencer differs slightly here, but each scandal, death, retirement, or brand change was also caught by news outlets, providing more content to analyze in connection with the parasocial breakup.

Past research on parasocial breakups has been done in conjunction with other parasocial phenomenon, or has only one case study (Gregg, 2018). Parasocial breakups have not been explored in isolation. In addition, the only literature on parasocial breakups analyzes the breakup

from the follower's, or audience member's, perspective (Eyal & Cohen, 2006). No research has looked at the influencer's perspective on mass parasocial breakups. These case studies will be the first to examine a parasocial breakup from each side. Only recently has it become possible for a parasocial relationship to have two-way communication in this way. Previously, parasocial interaction was examined with radio listeners and TV watchers, where the artist is unable to communicate back and forth with their fans, as they can with social media (Giles, 2002). Another aim of this research is to provide those who would like to become social media influencers with ways to avoid a mass parasocial breakup.

The influencers included in this study were selected because there was some experience of mass parasocial breakup, in which either the influencer left social media, or their engagement on social media dwindled greatly. Each influencer is apart of one category of case studies. These categories are determined by the reason the parasocial breakup ensued. For example, Christian Grimmie passed away, leaving her fans in grief. Shane Dawson become enthralled in a massive, controversial scandal, which saw Dawson's followers turn their backs on the once beloved social media icon. The Dobrik Twins decided to quit social media, and their dedicated fan base suffered from withdrawals. And Nik Keswani decided to shift his YouTube to more right-leaning ideological content, prompting his party-hard fanbase to shift their following somewhere else. Each case provides a unique opportunity for examining parasocial breakups, and each case displays the emotions involved with this phenomenon.

### **Creators Who Have Died**

The following two chapters are about Christina Grimmie and Cameron Boyce, two young microcelebrities who died. Grimmie and Boyce each left behind grieving fans around the world. Grief is an experience that most will go through in their lifetime. Losing a loved one is difficult

to wrap one's head around, and grief is often a reflective and trying journey. Research indicates that grief is a shared experience between losing someone in a parasocial relationship (PSR) or an interpersonal relationship (Hoffner and Cohen, 2018). While a person involved in a PSR may not have known their lost counterpart face to face, they still experience the same levels of distress, anguish, and emotional impact as that of losing someone they knew interpersonally (Hoffner, 2020).

Research shows that the grief experienced in a parasocial loss is typically the same kind of experience when losing an interpersonal loss, such as a friend or family member. The loss of a parasocial relationship by death can have the fan feeling confused, distressed, and searching for explanations (Van den Bulck and Larsson, 2019). Fans turn to the same coping mechanisms for grief that are used by those suffering from an interpersonal loss. People may discuss their emotions, their feelings on the afterlife, or fans may even seek out others who are going through the same loss (Van den Bulck and Larsson, 2019). There is a positive correlation between the strength of the parasocial relationship and the impact of grief. The deeper the connection to the microcelebrity, the deeper that grief is felt to the person involved in the parasocial relationship (Hoffner, 2020). In addition to this research, Hoffner also found that the death of a public figure elicits a public grief response, which could include public memorials and tributes on social media (2020).

From biological reactions to death, to the personal experience of loss, and to the social aspect of losing that their loved one, grief is experienced on many levels. Bereavement is a long process, often involving all aspects of human interaction (Neimeyer, Klass, and Dennis, 2014). Grief as a psychological phenomenon is shown to be a process of adding meaning to one's life and death. People can feel comforted by adding meaning to a loss of their parents, siblings,



friends, etc. The process to establish meaning in one's memory can be seen through memorial tributes, creative projects, accomplishing long-term goals, or even starting over one's life (Neimeyer, Klass, and Dennis, 2014).

Grief has no timeline for healing in either interpersonal *or* parasocial losses. While there are seven stages of grief, there is no specific order that these stages must be experienced in (Neimeyer, Klass, and Dennis, 2014). The seven stages are shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance and hope, and processing. Some people may never leave one stage, and some people may be able to progress rapidly through each stage. Each person's process of grief will look different than any other person, as grief is a subjective course for each individual.

Research states that people experiencing grief may have a desire to share these emotional experiences with others, and it is no different with those in interpersonal relationships or parasocial relationships. This is often seen when fans make social media pages dedicated to their late idols, name their pets or children after them, or even dedicate creative projects to their lost loved ones (Hoffner, 2020). For example, after Cameron Boyce and Christina Grimmie's death, their fans created memorials, commented on their feelings of grief, and shared their emotional experiences with others online via social media. The strength of their grief for Boyce and Grimmie reflects the strength of their parasocial relationships when the stars were alive. Additional research indicates that those with stronger parasocial bonds post more frequently on social media regarding their favorite celebrities and influencers (Hoffner, 2020). This could be an explanation as to why fans post tributes and memorials to their lost loved ones. This phenomenon will be explored in the following two chapters as I explore the lives and deaths of Grimmie and Boyce, examining the experiences of fans who now grieve their losses.

**Christina Grimmie.** After being discovered as a vocal performer on *The Voice*, a young Christina Grimmie found fame, performing all over the world. With a raw and natural talent, Grimmie's initial audition on the singing competition reality television show went viral. With *The Voice* becoming more and more popular, Christina's singing abilities, raw talent, and upbeat personality brought her into the limelight. Finishing the season in third place, Grimmie began touring around the country, writing her own music, and sharing her talents via various social media platforms. It seemed to most as if she had it all – the fame and fortune, the talent, the humble attitude, an early start to a successful music career, and a knack for connecting with fans. No one could have expected that her life would end at the hands of a crazed fan.

Christina Grimmie was born on March 12, 1994, in New Jersey. She has an older brother named Marcus, and her family was affiliated with the Baptist Christian Church, which would become a central theme in Christina's life. As a child, her father noticed that Christina was musically gifted, and she began to play the piano at ten ("Christina Grimmie," n.d.). At fifteen, Christina began posting videos of her musical talents to her YouTube channel in 2009, under the username 'zeldaxlove64'. She wanted to connect with other people and their music, and a friend finally persuaded her to post her talents ("Christina Grimmie," n.d.). Her first video was a cover of a Hannah Montana song, and she began getting more views and likes in August of 2009, with her cover of Miley Cyrus's "Party in the U.S.A.". While Grimmie's voice was powerful and beautiful, fans enjoyed her ability to interpret the song for herself, with many calling her covers unique ("Christina Grimmie," n.d.).

After posting several videos, Grimmie's YouTube channel expanded, and she began homeschooling in 2010. In the same year, she collaborated on a cover of "Just a Dream" with two fellow YouTubers who were popular at the time, Sam Tsui and Kurt Hugo Schneider. This

video received over one hundred and ninety million views, with the song becoming available on Spotify and iTunes (“Christina Grimmie,” n.d.). In 2011, Christina Grimmie was discovered by Selena Gomez and her mother, Mandey Teefey, who soon became involved in Grimmie’s music career. With Selena Gomez’s mother as her new manager, things looked bright for Grimmie’s career (“Christina Grimmie,” n.d.).

In 2011, Grimmie performed at the UNICEF charity concert, performing backup vocals for Selena Gomez and the Scene. 2011 was a busy year for Grimmie, as her career took off. Performing around the world, she opened for Selena Gomez, the Jonas Brothers, and Allstar Weekend. Grimmie released her first EP, “Find Me,” on June 14, 2011. The album was released independently and debuted as number thirty-five on the Billboard 200 chart in the United States (“Christina Grimmie,” n.d.). She released a debut single, “Advice,” with Disney Radio on June 11, 2011, releasing a corresponding music video for the popular track on July 19 of the same year. Grimmie would perform on *The Ellen Show* in October, and this performance only helped her skyrocket into musical fame (“Christina Grimmie,” n.d.).

Grimmie received an American Music Award on November 20, 2011. After this award, Grimmie began receiving sponsorship deals and endorsement offers, appearing on a few various commercials, and even acting as a special guest on Disney Channel shows (“Christina Grimmie,” n.d.). In January 2012, Grimmie moved to Los Angeles to officially pursue a career in music, signing with the Creative Artists Agency and performing with various local bands. By April 2013, Grimmie’s YouTube channel had over two million subscribers and more than three hundred and seventy-five million views (“Christina Grimmie,” n.d.). A blind audition on the singing competition television show, *The Voice*, would skyrocket Grimmie’s fame to international levels. After she performed Miley Cyrus’s, “Wrecking Ball,” all four coaches,

Adam Levine, Usher, Shakira, and Blake Shelton, turned their chairs around as a signal that they wanted Grimmie on their team (“Christina Grimmie,” n.d.) Choosing Adam Levine as her coach, Grimmie finished the show in third-place, with many ‘shocked’ that she did not win the competition.

After *The Voice*, Grimmie signed with Island Records, touring around the country with previous contestants of the singing competition show. She continued writing and recording music for her next album, collaborating with various popular artists and celebrities including Dove Cameron. After being dropped by her record label in March of 2015, Grimmie continued to release music, touring around the country and opening for various musical artists. Grimmie’s last tour would be opening for Before You Exit, a semi-popular rock band from Orlando (“Christina Grimmie,” n.d.)

After Grimmie began posting her singing talents on YouTube, she quickly rose in fame. To this day, almost seven years after her untimely passing, her Instagram account sits at six hundred and eleven thousand followers, her YouTube channel has almost four million subscribers, and a Google search shows over one million results. Followers were excited for musical content, commenting on her powerhouse vocals, creative interpretations, and ability to sing across multiple genres. YouTube user Peter F commented on Grimmie’s cover of Nelly’s “Just a Dream”, “These young musicians ... magic ... thanks for your talent and for keeping a 60 year old young ... love this.” Other comments on this video included compliments on her looks and talent, with user “Runamitchie” stating “This is my jam!”

Grimmie’s initial content included original music, covers, and videos with her friends. After gaining recognition on YouTube, she began cultivating a nice following of people interested in her raw musical talents. Although she was a teenager when she started posting,

many of her fans commented on her mature take on various songs. By the time she auditioned on *The Voice* Grimmie had a following of over a million subscribers on YouTube, averaging a few million views on each video (Social Blade, n.d.) After her meteoric audition and season on *The Voice* her fame only grew.

On June 10, 2016, Christina Grimmie performed her final concert in Orlando, Florida (Stokel-Walker, 2019). After the concert, she held a meet and greet for Orlando area fans. Kevin James Loibl, a twenty-seven year old St. Petersburg native, arrived for the meet and greet, armed with two handguns, ammo, and a hunting knife (Stokel-Walker, 2019). According to a St. Petersburg police report, Loibl acquired these guns legally in the days leading up to the incident that would occur (McLaughlin, 2016).

As the meet and greet started, Loibl proceeded up to the table where Grimmie was signing autographs and taking photos with fans. Shooting her four times, Loibl next turned the gun on himself. Both were pronounced dead that same day (Stokel-Walker, 2019). During the shooting, it was reported that Grimmie's brother Marcus rushed the gunman, who was described as carrying up to four guns and wearing a hunting knife (Sederholm, et al., 2016). Reports claim that over one hundred and twenty concertgoers had witnessed the terrible events. One witness, Josh Call, told media he had heard four to five shots. Despite the presence of many fans, the incident happened very quickly. As a result, eyewitness accounts vary significantly.

Local police released the identity of Loibl to the public, sharing that he had an "unrealistic infatuation," with Grimmie. Loibl's father and brother said that Loibl only left his room to go to his job at BestBuy, and they had never heard Loibl mention Christina Grimmie, *The Voice* or a fascination with either (McLaughlin, 2016). Loibl's father and brother did tell police that he spent a large portion of his time on the computer, and it could be possible most of

his computer time was spent researching Grimmie. Later into the investigation, detectives learned that Loibl's phone was encrypted, and his computer was not working because Loibl had intentionally destroyed the hard drive (McLaughlin, 2016).

As they could find no connection between Grimmie and Loibl, and detectives stated it was likely Grimmie never knew who Loibl was. Loibl's 'only' friend, Cory Dennington, told detectives that Loibl had become fixated on Grimmie within the last year, watching anything to do with her (McLaughlin, 2016). Dennington believed that his late friend spent much of his time watching Grimmie on YouTube, constantly monitoring her movements on social media. Reports claim that Loibl did not have Facebook, Twitter, or any other social media account, and it is suspected that Loibl deleted any connection to Grimmie, including his social media profiles, before the tragic murder-suicide (McLaughlin, 2016). One coworker recalled Loibl mentioning that he had played online games with Christina Grimmie, but that statement was unable to be confirmed by law enforcement.

While Loibl's motive for murder is still unknown, Dennington described his friend's obsession with Grimmie as 'worship,' stating that Loibl had told him, "If there is a God, I have seen it in her (Grimmie)," (McLaughlin, 2016). Dennington detailed to detectives that in the months leading up to the murder, Loibl lost weight, had Lasik surgery, received hair implants, and had his teeth whitened. According to Dennington, these self-improvement measurements were taken for Grimmie (McLaughlin, 2016). Loibl referred to Grimmie as his soul mate frequently, and spoke with Dennington five days before the murder, stating he was "tired and ready to ascend." Dennington claims he had no idea what Loibl meant (McLaughlin, 2016). Dennington told police that he had no knowledge of threats against Grimmie, and he did not know about Loibl's recent firearms purchase.

According to his family, Loibl had no history of mental illness, was able to hold down a job, and seemed to operate fine within social settings (McLaughlin, 2016). Although these things were true, St. Petersburg police reported that Loibl lived like a “hermit,” covering his windows in tin foil and heavy fabric to combat his aversion to light (McLaughlin, 2016). He was reported to have no criminal record, yet police responded to his home during a dispute between Loibl and his father’s girlfriend in 2014, two years prior to the murder (McLaughlin, 2016).

Due to the public nature of her murder, news of Christina Grimmie’s death hit the Internet and media almost immediately. With her family and the city of Orlando confirming her death the day after the shooting, millions began to mourn the loss of Grimmie. Mike Tompkins, another singer who found his start on YouTube, mourned the loss of the powerhouse vocal talent, stating that Grimmie was “the kind of singer who nails it instantly,” (Mendez II, 2021). Fans began creating compilation videos dedicated to Grimmie’s life, and other musicians performed tributes to honor her lost musical talents (Mendez II, 2021). Major celebrities, including Selena Gomez, Justin Bieber, and Charlie Puth, performed tributes to Grimmie in their respective performances/tours. Grimmie’s former vocal coach, Adam Levine, released a statement detailing his remorse, and it is rumored that he paid for the funeral costs (Sundby, 2016).

Over one hundred fans who witnessed this terrible murder-suicide. While waiting outside to see Christina Grimmie, Juana Villegas, a superfan, heard popping noises and saw people running and “hysterically crying” (May, 2016). Another fan claims that he and his family prayed with Grimmie, who was Christian, a few minutes before she was shot, tweeting out that he feels comforted by this fact (May, 2016). While these fans were dealing with the trauma of the shooting, fans around the world had to begin to process Grimmie’s untimely death.

Once the news of her death hit the Internet, millions mourned. Celebrities, singers, YouTubers, and fans alike were shocked, scared, and confused. Christina Grimmie was laid to rest in a private burial with her family, and a public memorial service was held at her home church in New Jersey, where she had grown up (Thomas and Melas, 2016). Grimmie's longtime pastor, Marty Berglund, commented on the sudden loss of the twenty-two year old: "One of the most important things I've learned as a pastor ... is that being together, sharing together, crying together and laughing together, can really help the grieving process." (Thomas and Melas, 2016). Several hundred family members, close friends, and fans attended the memorial, where recordings of the late artist's music were played throughout the ceremony.

During the five-hour visitation prior to the public memorial service, mourners arrived in a "steady stream" (Comegno and Sullender, 2016). The memorial service lasted around ninety minutes, with many of her family members speaking on the sudden loss and grief they felt. Fans across the globe dedicated music to her, created tributes for her, and even formed their own memorial services (Comegno and Sullender, 2016). Thousands of fans mourned the loss of Christina Grimmie. People continue to post tributes to Christina's music and life, and her family has worked to continue her legacy. Her family continues to post old videos and unseen footage of Grimmie performing to her YouTube channel. Comments

On the most recently posted tribute to Christina Grimmie on YouTube, there are nine hundred comments. Each one is similar to the next, an expression of grief. YouTube user TanThePostman: "Such a special human being – there will never be another Christina Grimmie." YouTube user Carlos Q: "I still can't get over her murder. Honestly, I don't think I ever will." And YouTube user JA SS: "I'm glad Christina's brother and her team keep her YouTube channel alive. It feels like she's still here with us."



Although Christina Grimmie died too young, too suddenly, and too violently, none of the people that comment on her posts *know* her. They never met, or maybe exchanged a few words at a meet and greet. They did not know what her order at McDonald's was, they did not know her when she was growing up, and they did not interact with her. Yet, their grief is still felt. Almost seven years after her death, fans mourn the loss of Christina Grimmie. But why? This phenomenon can be explained as a parasocial breakup.

Parasocial breakups come in many forms. Perhaps someone's favorite heartthrob has a new partner, and they mourn the loss of the attraction felt. Or perhaps someone's favorite musical artist was murdered. After Christina Grimmie's unfortunate demise, millions experienced a mass parasocial breakup. These fans felt real grief, commenting on her posts in reference to their bereavement and despair. Followers had been able to get to know Grimmie through her performances on *The Voice*, her music, and her social media posts. They spent time with her. Maybe they had her music on during date night, maybe they watched her season on *The Voice* or maybe they followed her YouTube channel religiously.

Eventually, they began to form a parasocial relationship with her. Grimmie's content somehow filled a void: a friendship, a relationship, or even boredom. For some reason, these fans were seeking out Christina Grimmie. And Grimmie filled the void. She filled the void with beautiful music, or funny videos. This is not a rare phenomenon. Forty-seven percent of millennials surveyed felt that YouTube improved their mood or health (Stokel-Walker, 2019). Parasocial relationships are the norm in a world full of social media, content creators, and trends. These followers became connected to her. So, suddenly, when there is an absence in her content, they will feel this loss.

When Christina Grimmie was murdered by Kevin Loibl, she was brutally taken away from her friends, family, and followers. The grief that the followers have felt continues to this day, with tribute videos, comments, and posts created for Christina Grimmie's legacy. When someone in our lives passes away suddenly, it is common to feel confused, scared, sad, shocked, or even deny the death occurred entirely. These same feelings occur in a parasocial loss, such as the loss of Christina Grimmie. Fans were experiencing the same grief that we feel when we lose family members and friends (Eyal and Cohen, 2006). These emotions can be felt to an extreme extent, similar to when we grieve in interpersonal relationships. These emotions are felt relative to the extent of the parasocial relationship with Christina Grimmie, so a superfan might be mourning longer than someone who discovered her talents more recently (Eyal and Cohen, 2006).

It is important to separate fans who engaged in parasocial relationships with Christina Grimmie from Kevin Loibl. Kevin Loibl may have at one point engaged in a parasocial relationship with Grimmie, yet that changed into worship and glorification. Worship is described as an 'abnormal' type of parasocial relationship, with addictive elements that potentially has 'clinical sequelae' (Brown, 2015). Celebrity worship can be divided into three levels: low-level, which focused on the 'entertainment-social' values of celebrities; medium-level, thinking a celebrity could be a 'soulmate;' or the third level, which is described as a mildly pathological worship of the celebrity (Maltby et al., 2005). Very few parasocial relationships will turn into any level of worship, and much of the literature surrounding worship agrees that mental illness may be a contributing factor (Brown, 2015).

It is likely that Kevin Loibl was engaged with the third, most intense level of worship. His friend, Dennington, had told police that Loibl had only started mentioning Christina

Grimmie within a year of her murder. Loibl had probably stumbled across Grimmie's content, and quickly a parasocial interaction transformed into a parasocial relationship, which eventually developed into worship, leading to her murder. Maltby et al. details how the third level of celebrity worship is abnormal and harmful (2005). Dennington mentioned to police that Loibl believed he and Grimmie were "soul mates."

Although there is no known motive, and police were unsuccessful in finding Loibl's connections to Grimmie, it is likely that Loibl felt threatened by some aspect of Grimmie's life. Maybe there was an interaction with fans that threatened his "soul mate" relationship with Grimmie, but it would be impossible to determine the triggering event that led Loibl to decide to take her life (and his own). While Loibl's family expressed that he had no known mental health issues, it would be impossible to determine this without a psychiatric evaluation.

Christina Grimmie's murder sent shockwaves through the nation, sparking a discussion on the safety of content creators and YouTubers who held meet and greet events open to the public (Stokel-Walker, 2019). This terrifying ordeal changed the security standards for meet and greets throughout the country, prompted VidCon (the largest online video festival) to promote safety during their events, and served as a wakeup call to the venue where this occurred, Plaza Live. Grimmie's family eventually filed a wrongful death lawsuit against the venue, citing "negligent security" as the case of the suit (Rothman and Lantz, 2016). While the lawsuit was eventually dropped and settled privately, the venue completely upgraded their security, apologizing profusely. During the concert that Grimmie held on that fateful night, fans were not searched or sent through metal detectors. Despite claims that bags were being searched, a gunman was able to enter the building and take Grimmie's life.

After her violent murder, Grimmie's family formed the Christina Grimmie Foundation, which works closely with gun violence victims and those affected by gun violence. They have raised and distributed more than two hundred thousand dollars since the Foundation was created, and they have helped over eighty families affected to gun violence ("Christina Grimmie Foundation," n.d.). In 2021, her family held a virtual concert to raise awareness with gun violence. Fans and celebrities alike have not forgotten about Christina, either. Although she is already gone, and has been for over six years, a part of Christina Grimmie will never die. Her music will continue on for generations, and her talent has and will continue to inspire others with musical gifts.

**Cameron Boyce.** Cameron Boyce was a prominent child actor affiliated with Disney Channel. Starring in several beloved childhood shows and movies, Boyce quickly made a mark on the acting scene. As a young man growing up throughout his various projects, it was enjoyable for younger audiences to see a familiar face in new movies and shows, and it was fun for viewers to see Boyce grow up. His career was progressing rapidly, and it seemed like a bright future ahead for him. Ahead of a major movie premier, Boyce died suddenly at twenty due to complications from epilepsy.

Cameron Boyce was born in Los Angeles, California on May 28, 1999. His father, Victor, is African American, while his mother, Libby is Jewish. Cameron Boyce's paternal grandmother, Jo Ann Allen, was one of the "Clinton Twelve," the first African Americans to attend integrated high schools in the United States of America ("Cameron Boyce," n.d.) Boyce's childhood centered around dance, and he quickly excelled in breakdancing and hip-hop ("Cameron Boyce," n.d.). Boyce's career began in May of 2008, debuting in a Panic! At the Disco music video. From 2008 to 2011, he had many smaller guest roles in music videos, movies, and television shows.

Boyce was often dancing in his roles, and he quickly became known for his unique style of breakdancing (“Cameron Boyce,” n.d.). In September 2011, he got his first starring role in the Disney Channel comedy, “Jessie.” The role was initially supposed to be a child of Korean descent, but the casting directors were reportedly so impressed with Cameron’s dancing and acting talents that they manipulated the role to better suit Boyce (“Cameron Boyce,” n.d.).

“Jessie” was a successful show on the Disney Channel, running from 2011 to 2015. Boyce starred in every episode that premiered, and his character, “Luke,” became a fan favorite. “Jessie” solidified Boyce’s relationship with the Disney Channel, and Boyce quickly became a new star (*Jessie*, n.d.). While “Jessie” ended in 2015, Disney Channel created a new show called “Bunk’d,” centered around the same family that “Jessie” was about. Although Boyce had done well with *Jessie* his career had taken off, and he only reprised his role for two episodes of the new spinoff, which is still airing today (“Bunk’d,” n.d.). In 2015, Boyce scored his first starring role in a movie, playing “Carlos” in Disney Channel’s “Descendants.” This movie quickly turned into a trilogy, and Boyce reprised his role for each movie (“Cameron Boyce,” n.d.). This trilogy was immensely popular with the younger Disney audience, and Boyce’s talents as a singer and dancer were highlighted in each movie.

*Descendant* was an incredibly successful series of Disney movies. Featuring Dove Cameron and Cameron Boyce, the adventure comedy has musical numbers, fun costumes, and a connection to Disney: each character is the fictional child of a Disney villain (“Descendants, n.d.). Boyce’s character was the child of Cruella de Vil, while Dove Cameron played the daughter of Maleficent. Directed and produced by the same people who worked on “High School Musical,” many critics raved about the project. The movie became so successful that the directors changed it into a trilogy.

While Boyce was focused on his career, he also made time for philanthropy. Working for the *Thirst Project*, which secures clean water for underdeveloped countries, Boyce raised over twenty-five thousand dollars for the cause (“Cameron Boyce,” n.d.). He was passionate about providing clean resources to underdeveloped countries, and he was equally passionate about ending America’s homelessness problem, working for the United Way of America’s HomeWalk for five years (“Cameron Boyce,” n.d.). In addition to these two causes, Boyce spent time and money with the Lucstrong Foundation, which provides support for those who have sickle cell disease. He also worked closely with *It’s On Us*, a movement against sexual assault on college campuses, and he co-founded a social media campaign known as “Wielding Peace,” working to end gun violence (“Cameron Boyce,” n.d.).

Cameron Boyce’s career revolved around entertainment for younger audiences, and a majority of his work with the Disney Channel did well. While his character on “Jessie” did well, it was Boyce’s work in the *Descendants* trilogy that secured his cult-like fan base. *Descendants* scored a ninety percent on Rotten Tomatoes, with critics claiming that the first movie is a “flick the whole family can enjoy” (“Descendants,” n.d.). Starring Boyce as the son of the evil character Cruella de Vil, *Descendants* is a musical comedy centered around the children of Disney villains. One song, “Rotten to the Core,” from the first film went viral on the Internet, with over four hundred and twenty-nine million views, and Disney quickly secured a sequel for the film (“Descendants,” n.d.). Boyce’s following blew up with the release of each movie, building a large following (“The Cameron Boyce 176,” n.d.).

On July 6, 2019, paramedics were called to the Boyce residence. Cameron Boyce was found unresponsive, and he was pronounced dead at the scene. The twenty-year-old passed away as a result of seizures, with his family revealing his recent diagnosis of epilepsy (Osborne and

Hutchinson, 2019). Boyce's sudden death saw Disney Channel stars and corporate employees coming together, with directors, actors, and even the CEO commenting on his passing. Charles Esten, an actor who played Boyce's character's father on *Jessie*, tweeted out in grief, noting Boyce's talents and "joy for living" would be dearly missed (Osborne and Hutchinson, 2019). Stars around Hollywood shared in this grief, and the young dancer's sudden death sparked a discussion on epilepsy worldwide.

Cameron Boyce's death was confirmed by Disney and Boyce's family on social media. Immediately, the fans reacted, commenting on Boyce's Instagram posts and his family's social media accounts. Fans were stunned to learn that Boyce had been secretly struggling with epilepsy, and many of his followers tried to deny Boyce's death at all, claiming it to be a hoax. As fans started to realize Boyce was gone for good, messages of love, support, loss, and grief began pouring in. Boyce's last Instagram post received over thirteen million likes posthumously, and comments continue to be posted on the same photo, with almost one and a half million comments on one post alone.

User *ckc2027* commented, "Life is so unfair and predictable. I wish you were here. And yeah, we were strangers." Despite not personally knowing Boyce, many of his fans struggled with the feeling of loss. A recent comment from *thereallcecee* shows this perfectly. "I'm back last time I was on this post I was crying praying to god you weren't gone and typing my feelings like I actually knew you...I didn't know you in real life but it felt like I've known you all my life." A simple scroll on Boyce's Instagram page will show millions of similar comments.

Cameron Boyce died suddenly at a very young age. Millions around the world mourned over the loss of the talented young man, and his loss is still felt today. While so many around the world engaged in a mass parasocial breakup after Boyce's sudden passing, his loss was felt

strongly by his younger audience. A large portion of Boyce's career was spent with Disney, and most of his starring roles were geared towards young children. These children felt grief over the death of Boyce, despite never having met him.

Forty-one percent of children between two and eight will experience a parasocial relationship and a parasocial breakup (Aguilar et al., 2018). While a majority of case studies involved in research on children and parasocial relationships focused on children outgrowing their favorite characters, children can feel loss and grief when losing a favorite character. Developmentally, children younger than five have difficulty with object permanence, an ability to know that objects (and people) continue to exist even though they cannot be seen, heard, or felt (Cherry, 2021). This would make it difficult for children under five to recognize that Boyce was suddenly gone, so these children may not experience a sense of loss.

However, children above the age of five would have grown used to seeing Boyce in their favorite television shows and movies. Cameron Boyce was featured in the first three *Descendants* movies, and Disney has confirmed that there will be a fourth addition to the popular series. Children above the age of five will recognize that Boyce's character is not in this movie, and they may feel the effects of a parasocial breakup. It is not yet known if and how Disney will handle Boyce's character, but theories suggest that Disney may not address the sudden loss, or avoid the topic of death altogether (Paris, 2021).

Several of Cameron Boyce's projects have been released posthumously, including Disney Channel's "Descendants 3." Boyce's parents speak on the difficulty of watching these projects posthumously. His parents have explained that Boyce's death resulted from epilepsy, a diagnosis they had no idea could prove fatal (Buncombe, 2022). There is little know about Sudden Unexpected Death in Epilepsy (SUDEP), which was Boyce's cause of death. Boyce's parents



have worked tirelessly to educate others on SUDEP, noting that one in twenty-six people suffer from epilepsy. They founded the Cameron Boyce Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to researching epilepsy and promoting awareness about the neurological condition (“The Cameron Boyce Foundation,” 2019). The foundation holds fundraisers, education events, and works with top researchers in order to accomplish their goals.

### **Creators Who Have Retired.**

The next two chapters follow Jenna Marbles and the Dolan Twins, three content creators who retired from the Internet completely. Jenna Marbles decided to retire after a decade long successful career, while the Dolan Twins elected to leave social media after their father’s premature death. This sudden loss of their content and personality created an emotional reaction from fans, who continue to beg for their return to social media. Their retirements acted as a catalyst for a mass parasocial breakup from their respective fans; suddenly, their favorite influencer was no longer around.

Research indicates that there is an immense number of similarities between an interpersonal relationship and a parasocial relationship. Those who have experienced an interpersonal breakup with a partner, friend, or family member understand that they may experience distress, grief over their loved one’s sudden absence, sadness, and confusion. The same can be said for those who have experienced a parasocial breakup (Lather and Moyer-Guse, 2011). As one might see in an interpersonal relationship, the strength of the relationship positively correlates with the stress of the breakup; meaning, if someone perceives a closer bond with an influencer, that breakup will cause much more distress. Jenna Marbles and the Dolan Twins sudden retirement meant that their fans would no longer see their content, know what is going on their lives, or be able to interact with their favorite influencer on social media.

A beneficial aspect of parasocial relationships is the reliability. Often, interpersonal relationships are dependent on many factors, controlled by the individuals within the relationship. There is a certain power dynamic between each person, and it is up to each individual to maintain that relationship. For example, two partners must work together to ensure their relationship remains strong and consistent. This is one key difference between an interpersonal and a parasocial relationship.

In a parasocial relationship, one can come to rely on the constant and stable character of an influencer, celebrity, or even a character. Horton and Wohl's original definition of a parasocial interaction included a "regular and dependable event," which can be relied on, planned for, and incorporated into the regular routines of life (1956). Eventually, after several successful parasocial interactions, a parasocial relationship may form. Over time, a fan of Marbles or the Dolan Twins may come to rely on their content, forming a more dependent bond on this parasocial relationship. Any sort of disruption, like a sudden retirement, could cause a parasocial breakup resulting in anguish, bewilderment, or uncertainty. In an interpersonal breakup, many people turn to psychological counseling to get through this loss (Eyal and Cohen, 2006). This counseling may help with coping skills, assist with healing, or even help a couple navigate their breakup. In a similar fashion, people who go through parasocial breakups may also seek out psychological counseling for this loss (Eyal and Cohen, 2006).

Eyal and Cohen also found that people tend to expect an interpersonal breakup due to the circumstances in their relationship, while parasocial breakups may come out of nowhere for some due to the consistency and dependability on these relationships (2006). In an interpersonal relationship, there can be miscommunications, arguments, and disruptions that may damage this bond. While the same can be said for parasocial relationships, the established steadiness of this

influencer's content or posts would elicit a trust and comfort in the consistency of this parasocial relationship. Jenna Marbles's and the Dolan Twins's sudden retirements came as a shock, causing their followers to become distraught in the aftermath of this sudden withdrawal.

**Jenna Marbles.** Parasocial breakups can result from deaths, scandals, or even when microcelebrities retire from social media. One such example of this is Jenna Marbles, a content creator who retired from social media in 2020. With over twenty million YouTube subscribers, Marbles had cultivated several channels on YouTube, sharing her life with her loved ones and four dogs. Marbles had begun on YouTube in the early days of social media influencers, marking her as one of the original content creators. With funny, original content, she was on a path to worldwide success, even getting her own wax figure at Madame Tussauds! Jenna Marbles's sudden retirement from all social media came as a shock to her millions of followers, and almost three years later, subscribers continue to call for the return of Marbles.

Jenna Marbles, also known as Jenna Nicole Mourey, was born on September 15, 1986 in Rochester, New York. After spending her childhood in Rochester, she moved to Boston, earning a Bachelor of Science in psychology at Suffolk University. After graduating, she received a Master of Education in sports psychology and counseling at Boston University ("Jenna Marbles," n.d.). After graduating, Jenna worked odd jobs, including bartending, working at a tanning salon, and even go-go dancing at popular nightclubs in Boston. She began vlogging on YouTube after getting her Master's degree, as well. In the summer of 2010, Jenna began working for *Barstool Sports*, writing for a female-oriented website that the brand sponsored, known as "StoolLaLa" ("Jenna Marbles," n.d.). She would leave this job in 2011 as her YouTube channel kickstarted into success.

While Jenna had been posting on YouTube since she left school, her videos only began getting traction in 2010. Her first viral video, called “How to Avoid Talking to People You Don’t Want to Talk To,” had over five million views on YouTube within the first week of its publication. While she initially went by the name Jenna Mourey, her mother complained that it may impact Jenna’s ability to get jobs in the future. Jenna then changed to “Jenna Marbles,” named after her dog, a Chihuahua named Mr. Marbles (“Jenna Marbles,” n.d.). After her first viral video, Jenna steadily built a larger fan base, accumulating over twenty million subscribers.

During her early YouTube career, Jenna collaborated with content creators like the *Epic Rap Battles of History* channel, a very popular channel in the early 2010s. As her fame on YouTube grew, so did her opportunities for collaboration. She was featured in several movies, Pitbull’s “Fireball” music video, and in 2015, she was the first YouTuber to have a wax figure displayed at Madame Tussauds New York (“Jenna Marbles,” n.d.). In 2016, Marbles became an executive producer for *Maximum Ride*, a film based on a series of James Patterson novels. In 2016, Marbles was featured on Khloe Kardashian’s show, *Kocktails with Khloé*, which featured Tyga, Scott Disick, Khloe’s best friend Malika Haqq, and Marbles (“Bottoms Up!”, 2016). Jenna’s appearance on the show raised some eyebrows.

During the show, Kardashian played a game where she asked a series of questions to each of her co-stars. The questions ranged in seriousness, asking about sexual conquests, makeup routines, and then finally, to more thoughtful, political questions. On one of Jenna’s turns, Kardashian asked how Jenna felt about privilege. While Kardashian explained that Jenna should skip this question, and the rest of the group seemed to be eager for Jenna to answer a different question, calling this question “difficult to answer” (Travis, 2016). Rejecting the idea of taking another question, Jenna’s response shocked the Internet. Marbles explained that she viewed

everyone as having different innate privileges, citing implicit bias, racial segregation, women's suffrage, and the LGBTQ+ movement as different ways the one might not experience privilege. Marbles further explained that she felt she had white privilege, and the rest of the group appeared visibly confused by her answer. This prompted several interesting articles to be published about Jenna and the Kardashians, citing Jenna as educated, articulate, and progressive (Travis, 2016).

Jenna Marbles's YouTube content can be best described as her own style. Each video was something different, from a DIY challenge to a makeup tutorial, to creating a dog bed out of soap, to attaching balloons to her Chihuahua so he can float in the air. Her subscribers and fans watched her channel because of her personality, her partner, and their dogs, not due to a certain type of content. Marbles's most popular videos have over twenty million views, and these videos show her creativity in content creation. These videos include, "Drunk Makeup Tutorial," "I Filmed My Dog Whenever He Cried or Was Nasty for 24 Hours," "I hate being a grown up," "Just trying to blend in with my green screen," and "Giving My Boyfriend Acrylic Nails." Her content regularly featured her partner, YouTuber Julien Solomita, and her rescue dogs. Jenna's channel and videos were hailed by followers for being authentic and kind, and Marbles eventually built up a dedicated fan base over her decade long YouTube career.

In addition to various collaborations, Jenna's career also saw the release of a dog toy brand called "Kermie Worm & Mr. Marbles," named after two of her dogs, Kermit and Mr. Marbles. Jenna Marbles had four dogs with her partner, Julien Solomita (another content creator), and she consistently shared her dogs on the Internet. With three Greyhounds named Bunny, Kermit, and Peaches, and a small senior Chihuahua named Mr. Marbles, most of Jenna's content surrounded her relationships with the four animals ("Jenna Marbles," n.d.).

While Jenna had experienced getting her own wax figure, and amassing over twenty million subscribers on YouTube, these would be far from the only accolades she would receive. Jenna won a Young Hollywood Award in 2014 for “Viral Superstar,” then won a Shorty Award in 2017 with her partner, Julien Solomita. In addition to these two awards, Jenna was also nominated for “Best Comedy Series,” “Best First-Person Series,” and “Audience Choice Creator of the Year” at the Streamy Awards. She was also nominated for “Creator of the Decade” at the Shorty Awards, and many of her followers were devastated that she did not win (“Jenna Marbles,” n.d.).

Jenna Marbles was a unique content creator. While she was extraordinarily successful in terms of both followers and financial gain from social media, she was rather humble in her lifestyle choices. She continued her day-to-day life, even started a podcast with her partner Julien where they discussed their daily lives, and she continued to publish her normal weekly content. Jenna’s charm and wit continued to draw in more subscribers on her YouTube account, but unlike so many other influencers, Jenna’s subscribers noted that she was always consistently herself. At the peak of her popularity, she continued to post satirical videos, often times using herself as guinea pig for funny do-it-yourself hacks, including one video in which she tried to make her own stilts so she could be taller. Despite her large number of subscribers, she continued to poke fun at herself in her content, creating a genuine bond with her followers. While Jenna’s fame grew, she continued to have the same endearing connection with her subscribers.

Jenna’s impact on her subscribers was apparent. The comment section on any of her videos clearly displays this impact. On Jenna’s most recent video (from 2020), she is making a birthday cake for one of her dogs. The comments are filled with support, praise, and love. Persephone’s Witchery stated, “Having a really hard time right now. My mental health is

spiralling again and I'm so grateful I'm still able to come here and laugh and just feel better for a bit." A fan of Jenna's shared her experiences with a terminal cancer diagnosis and treatment on her own TikTok account, and Jenna sent the fan a gift package with handwritten notes, branded merchandise, and reportedly, her cell phone number (Sung, 2022). While the fan has since passed, this gift was extraordinarily impactful.

Other comments share how Jenna's content and personality got them through difficult times, that her content made them cry from laughter, and that her videos are seen as a comfort for each of her subscribers. Rally211m commented, "Your energy makes me so happy and always puts me in a better mood. You deserve all of the happiness. Please give all of your fur babies a hug from me." While these followers had never engaged with her interpersonally, their parasocial relationship was deep and engaging.

Jenna Marbles's social media career had been growing in success since the start. Receiving awards, collaboration opportunities, and popularity from her subscribers on YouTube, Marbles's channel was at the peak of its notoriety in 2020. To her subscribers, it seemed that there was only up to go. Shocking her fan base, Marbles released a video on June 25, 2020, announcing that she was retiring from YouTube amid a racially offensive video that sparked controversy on the Internet (Yeung, 2020). Videos from 2010 were found on Jenna's channel, and Marbles was allegedly wearing blackface while impersonating the rapper, Nicki Minaj. In addition to this mistake, Marbles had also been called out for slut-shaming women and making other racist content about Asian populations in her older videos (Yeung, 2020). Most of Marbles's videos focused on lifestyle, do it yourself (DIY) hacks and tutorials, comedy sketches, and satirical content. While her videos were initially received warmly by her audience, the

content within some of these videos would be considered offensive in more progressive times (Yeung, 2020).

In the announcement video, titled “A Message,” Marbles apologized to her twenty million followers about the racist and sexist content. She established that her actions were “unintentional, offensive, shameful, awful, and inexcusable,” further apologizing by removing her older content from the Internet so as to not continue any harm to viewers (Yeung, 2020). During her apology video, Marbles acknowledged the racist and sexist actions, and detailed her plans for accountability and reparation with the communities she offended. She announced that this video would mark a break in her content, asserting that she wanted to move on, and Marbles was not sure how long this break would last. Going further, she spoke emotionally about her regret for her mistakes and the pain she might have caused. While the video has since been taken down from Marbles’s channel, her apology and subsequent retirement sent her subscribers into a frenzy.

Racking up more than three billion views, Jenna’s video went viral, sparking a debate on “cancel culture” in America. According to the Pew Research Center, “cancel culture” references the actions that people may take to hold other accountable for their mistakes (Vogels, 2021). This phenomenon does not just happen in America, yet the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery ignited a nationwide boycott against racist corporations, entities, and individuals that might be perceived as racially insensitive. Yet, Jenna Marbles’s subscribers felt that Marbles’s retirement proved her to be a victim of “cancel culture,” claiming that Marbles should have been held accountable in other ways than removing herself from the Internet altogether (Yeung, 2020).



Although Jenna Marbles's career ended due to a racially offensive controversy, her retirement was not seen as controversial. Subscribers and fans claimed that they viewed Jenna's apology as authentic and accountable, and her prior progressive views on race, gender, and marginalized identities demonstrated that she had continued educating herself on privilege. The videos that came to light were over ten years old, and even other YouTube content creators, like Gabbie Hanna, noted that Jenna had grown within the decade. It is seen as irrelevant to "cancel" someone who has worked on themselves (Yeung, 2020). Since Jenna's retirement video, she has not posted on any social media accounts, having only been pictured at her wedding to her longtime partner, Julien Solomita. While Jenna has not returned to social media, her YouTube channel is still up, providing her subscribers the opportunity to continue commenting on her older videos.

On Jenna's last posted video, "Making a Dog a Birthday Cake," subscribers continue to comment on their grief for losing Jenna Marbles. Sophie commented, "I love that we are all still here. I can't believe next June it'll be 3 years since we last saw a new Jenna vid. God I'm really missing my weekly Jenna post." Nina Kae echoed these feelings, "Anyone else just randomly come to her page every so often in hopes she decides to upload a new video? We miss you Jenna!" And Rebecca Bullock, a longtime subscriber of Jenna's, posted a congratulatory statement on Jenna's wedding day. "Congratulations Jenna!! I just wanted to say how happy I am for both you and Julien! I also wanted to say YouTube seriously has not been the same since you left. I really miss you, I've been watching you since high school and I'm now married and doing the real adult thing but it feels incomplete every Wednesday/Thursday." Jenna Marbles had been posting weekly videos on Wednesday or Thursday, every week, for a decade.

While research on parasocial relationship breakdowns show that parasocial breakups are less painful than interpersonal breakups, they each follow similar patterns (Eyal and Cohen, 2006). People can expect to be distressed when their favorite characters, shows and movies, or social media content creators are “taken away” from them. This distress can be shown as sadness, grief, despair, confusion, or depression (Eyal and Cohen, 2006). Jenna’s retirement from social media content creation can be seen as a retirement, but it was felt as a breakup to her twenty million subscribers. Relying on a video from her each week, long term followers experienced a sudden loss of their “friend” of over a decade. The comments her followers left on her last video show they miss her, have difficulty coping with her sudden loss, and question where she went. Despite never interacting interpersonally with Jenna Marbles, her sudden retirement was felt significantly by her followers.

Although Jenna Marbles did not die, her retirement was felt as a loss from her twenty million subscribers. Used to a video posted each week, the sudden lack of Marbles’s content felt like a breakup for many of her subscribers, who still advocate for her return to social media. Julian Solomita’s comments on YouTube are filled with fans questioning when Jenna’s return will be. Yet, her retirement seems permanent, with the former content creator having not shared a single post since 2020.

**The Dolan Twins.** The Dolan Twins had a very successful social media career, when they suddenly retired from the Internet. The two young twin creators, Ethan and Grayson, emerged from the social media platform Vine in 2013, gaining millions of followers and a dedicated fanbase. The teenage content creators were known for their funny antics, tumbling skills, and collaborations with other creators. Throughout their career, they kept most of their relationships private from the world, yet they shared their family with the Internet. The sudden loss of their

father in 2019 prompted the boys to take a break from social media, which turned into a permanent withdrawal from the Internet altogether. They have not been seen or heard from by followers since 2021, although their family members and friends consistently assure worried fans of their wellbeing. Their retirement came as a shock to their followers, as their social media had been capturing the teens' lives since they were thirteen.

Ethan and Grayson Dolan were born on December 16, 1999, in New Jersey. The twins have detailed their troubled pasts on their social media channels, sharing that they were bullied significantly in middle and high school. This bullying became so bad that they withdrew from school, becoming homeschooled by their mother and sister. They turned to content creating to share their lives with the world, and sharing their story with their followers created a community where their younger fan base could come for advice, seek help from others, and even share their own experience with bullying ("The Dolan Twins," n.d.).

In 2013, the twins began posting on the popular video sharing platform known as Vine, which has since been discontinued. By the time Vine shut down, the twins had gained over six million followers on the app. In addition to their popularity on Vine, their YouTube channel had gained over eleven million followers ("The Dolan Twins," n.d.). By 2016, the Dolan Twins had been invited to go on a world tour with other social media creators, called the "4OU" tour. These tours were popular with younger creators and their often-teenage fanbase ("The Dolan Twins," n.d.). During these tours, the twins would 'perform' their social media talents like gymnastics tricks and comedy skits on a stage, offering merchandise and meet-and-greet opportunities to their fans.

Their social media career was marked with success. They won six Teen Choice Awards between 2016 and 2019, and they were nominated for four others during the same timeframe

(“The Dolan Twins,” n.d.). These awards included “Choice Web Star,” “Choice YouTuber,” “Choice Comedian,” “Choice Male Web Star,” and “Choice Comedy Web Star.” The Teen Choice Awards are a votes-based award system, with fans nominating and voting for their favorite stars (“The Teen Choice Awards,” n.d.). Ethan and Grayson Dolan each won six awards, ensuring that their fans worldwide nominated and voted for the twins over other popular influencers.

In June 2018, the Dolan Twins collaborated with James Charles and Emma Chamberlain, two other popular YouTube content creators, forming what was known as the “Sister Squad.” The four creators would upload four different videos simultaneously, and fans of each were delighted to have so much content from each of these popular influencers (“The Dolan Twins,” n.d.). In 2019, the “Sister Squad” was nominated for a Shorty Award for best YouTube ensemble. Throughout their collaborations with Charles and Chamberlain, there were rumors that Ethan Dolan and Emma Chamberlain were in a relationship, fueling rumors across the world. Their videos were ruthlessly analyzed and edited by fans to see if the pair were caught at any point, but it has never been confirmed that Dolan and Chamberlain were in a relationship. In addition, there were rumors circulating that James Charles had clear feelings for Grayson Dolan. Fans became obsessed with the “Sister Squad” videos, speculating about all four creators (“The Dolan Twins,” n.d.).

The Dolan Twins had taken several smaller breaks from social media and content creation prior to their retirement. In one instance, on March 27, 2018, they announced a hiatus from Youtube, stating that they felt they had grown up on the Internet and expressing that a small break might be beneficial for their growth (“The Dolan Twins,” n.d.). Fans were supportive of the small break but grew concerned for the wellbeing of their favorite creators. The break did not

last long, with Ethan and Grayson returning to social media a little over a month later (“The Dolan Twins,” n.d.). In another instance, they announced a pause from social media on October 8, 2019. Revealing that their father had very suddenly and unexpectedly passed away from cancer at the age of fifty, the twins expressed that the stress of grief made content creation a more difficult and time-consuming process (“The Dolan Twins,” n.d.). During their announcement, the twins revealed that they were still going to be posting content, but their channel would be more flexible, changing content and their schedule. This break was met with support from fans and their collaborators, who all hoped that the break and changes would be beneficial to the young content creators who had lost their father (“The Dolan Twins,” n.d.).

The Dolan Twins began their career in 2013 at only thirteen years old, and their funny content and good looks amassed followers by the millions. Touring around the country, the twins met their teenage girl fanbase who grew crazy over them. Comments on the twins’ posts include comments about their personalities, their looks, or even jealousy over their relationships. The twins manufactured parasocial relationships with their fanbase quickly, and before long, they enjoyed worldwide fame amongst teenage girls. Fans and followers became engrossed in their content, often fangirling over the twins.

On their most recent video, taken over two years ago and titled, “Learning Tik Tok Dances from Larray and Addison Rae”, YouTube user KammieKIDD stated, “The twins are so sweet and pure...too good for this world!” Another user, Reese Davis, commented, “Can you tell me why this was one of the FUNNIEST THINGS EVER?” YouTuber user sienna knutsen expressed her attraction for Grayson, “addison did us ALL a favor when she made grayson take his hoodie off.” And finally, user Celeste Canales: “I don’t know how many times I’ve seen this is just ICONIC.”

In a January 14, 2021, episode of ‘Deeper with the Dolan Twins,’ a podcast created by the twins, they announced their permanent retirement from YouTube. Stating that their passion for their work had decreased, Ethan and Grayson expressed their appreciation for their fans (Glaze, 2021). They added that they were going to move onto different creative outlets, hoping for a ‘challenge’ this time. They also detailed that their goals on YouTube were to create a positive community for their much younger fans, but that people were beginning to respond in a more negative light. Grayson, in particular, discussed the difficulties that the social media career had put him through. At one point during the podcast, he states that his heart “was not in social media anymore” (Glaze, 2021).

While they initially claimed that their retirement would only be from YouTube, they have not put out any additional content across the Internet, including not having updated their podcast or Instagram since their announcement. They have only been seen in the background of their friends’ and family members’ posts, and Ethan’s girlfriend has maintained that she respects her partner’s need for privacy. Since their father passed on, they created a charity in his namesake, and that seems to be keeping them busy after their retirement from content creating. In addition, the twins have sold their Los Angeles based property, instead opting to move back to New Jersey in a move to reconnect with their family members (McClain, 2021).

The Dolan Twins’ retirement acted as the catalyst for a mass parasocial breakup. Fans and followers in parasocial relationships with the two young creators suffered a loss when Grayson and Ethan retired. The dependability upon the twins continuing to create content was now gone, and fans began to share their feelings on the retirement. On one of their most recent video titled “We Need to Talk,” comments flooded in about their retirement. YouTube user Meleah Walkup expressed her yearning for the twins to return, “Watched this again a year later. I miss them. I

never realized how much they impacted my life.” Another user, anza, stated that although she was disappointed, she understood why. “Watching this video and reading the comments ... I hope they are okay and living life. I hope they know that people still love them and will always support them even if they continue not being online.”

On another video from the Dolan Twins, titled “We Tried Every Twin Product on the Internet,” there are additional comments from fans. User Shimizu stated, “I’m still wondering if they’ll ever come back on YouTube. I really miss them.” User Savannah Guenzi mentions her despair about their retirement, “I miss them so much, but I’m glad they’re doing what they want now.” And another user, rain lover, details their feelings about the twins’ retirement. “Wow. This is it. I remember coming home every Tuesday and going right into YouTube to watch their weekly post. I basically grew up with these boys. They basically raised me and were there with me when I needed them. I love these boys so much ... they have so much for the future. I wish them the best and will forever love them.” These comments show just how deep these parasocial bonds were, and how painful a parasocial breakup can be.

Anyone who has gone through an interpersonal relationship breakdown will understand the depth and intensity of the emotions that can arise. Distress, grief, anger, confusion, sadness, and more can be felt during this time, and the same can be said for parasocial breakups (Lather and Moyer-Guse, 2011). An added caveat of parasocial relationships is the reliability. One can come to rely on the stability of a character or content creator, often re-watching content to take comfort in the never-changing dynamic. Some sort of disruption, like a retirement from creating content, would cause a parasocial breakup. The Dolan Twins’ sudden retirement came as a shock to most fans who had become dependent on their weekly posts. These parasocial relationships began to break down, and the retirement acted as a facilitator for the mass parasocial breakup.

The Dolan Twins' retirement from social media and the Internet resulted in a mass parasocial breakup from their fans. The parasocial relationship formed between fans and the teenage content creators suddenly ended when they stopped producing content. The reliability and dependability manufactured by this parasocial relationship bond was left behind when the creators took a break, and their subsequent retirement left former fans in disarray.

### **Creators Who Have Shifted Their Content.**

The next two chapters analyze the social media careers of Breland Emory Kent and Nik Keswani. Each had very successful social media careers, yet they shifted their content away from its original focus, resulting in mass parasocial breakups. Kent went from do-it-yourself and beauty tutorials to X-rated content, resulting in a massive loss of engagement from her young fans. Keswani first started out uploading content that detailed his party-filled lifestyle, yet his recent content focuses on Christian teachings and right-wing conspiracy theories. Keswani has lost a majority of his following and engagement because of this content shift.

Parasocial relationships and interpersonal relationships are incredibly similar, often with parasocial relationships mimicking the emotional encounters that can result from interpersonal relationships. The same similarities overlap between parasocial breakups and interpersonal breakups. A key difference between the two is that parasocial relationships are one-sided, meaning the influencer has little to no relationship to the fan (Lather and Moyer-Guse, 2009). Another important distinction between the two relationships is the reliability that can be present in parasocial relationships. In an interpersonal relationship, there may be outside influencers disrupting the reliability of that relationship. Yet, in a parasocial relationship, these interactions are dependable and expected (Horton and Wohl, 1956). An interruption in content, like a shift from one focus to another, could interrupt this parasocial relationship.



Keswani and Kent's change in content resulted in mass parasocial breakups. While both influencers have continued publishing new videos and photos, they have not experienced the same level of engagement as they did prior to this switch. Their comment sections are filled with fans asking the influencers to return to their previous style of content, displaying the urge for its return. Former followers grew comfortable and relied on the content provided by Kent and Keswani, and the change prompted an exodus of followers.

**Nik Keswani.** Nik Keswani, known as BigNik on the Internet, is a former content creator with the Vlog Squad, a group of social media influencers and friends who collaborated to create content for David Dobrik's vlogs. With the Vlog Squad publishing a new vlog every day, it was important to Dobrik that the content was interesting and constantly changing, so that his almost twenty million followers would not grow tired with the content. The Vlog Squad was known for its inappropriate and at times offensive content, with the large group of friends constantly engaging in dangerous stunts. BigNik was known for his party-animal way of living, constantly surrounded by women and drugs. Today, however, viewers would be surprised to know that BigNik left the Vlog Squad, turning his personal channel into a Christian worship and educational channel. Although Keswani had experienced extensive personal fame, his sudden shift in content led to most followers abandoning the content creator, especially as he continued to make inflammatory comments about the pandemic and other important social issues in relation to his Christian faith.

Nik Keswani was born on September 11, 1998, in Boca Raton, Florida. His father, Anil, is a medic, while his mother, Vaishali, is an optometrist (Hris, 2022). His family is from India, and this cultural identity would play a large role in his earliest videos. Nik has two younger sisters, Sarina and Devina. One of his sisters is transgender, and Nik had often spoke out in

acceptance of this identity. He attended two different high schools, as his peak of fame happened during his time in high school. First, he went to Torrey Pines High School, until he was forced by his own fame to retire to Lauren Springs Academy, an online program. He experienced early fame on the six-second video app called Vine, posting funny skits or outlandish behavior.

Keswani was born with dwarfism, a genetic disability that cause cause difficulty growing and a host of other functional issues. Due to his dwarfism, Keswani was born blind in one eye, and he has detailed his extensive surgical treatment through his social media posts (Hris, 2022).

At one point during his social media career, Keswani's immediate family had their own reality television show, "The Keswanis: A Most Modern Family" (Emmanuele, 2015). While Nik's story line focused on his disability and social media career, the show also centered around his little sister Devina, who came out as transgender at only six years old. The majority of the low-rated show focused on Devina's storyline, how the family supports Devina, and the different relationships within the untraditional Indian family (Emmanuele, 2015).

Keswani, going by the username "BigNik" on Vine, experienced unseen levels of engagement through the app. By the time Vine was shut down, Keswani had over two million followers. He would then move his content to YouTube, where he dedicated his personal channel to funny skits, original raps about bullying, and satirical videos that poke fun at social videos. Due to his dwarfism condition, Nik had experienced a lot of bullying in his childhood and adolescence, which led him to confront bullying on his own platform. His audience members could rely on his crass and blunt language, trashy behavior, and satirical skits. After a few years in social media, Nik Keswani became a part of the Vlog Squad – a group of influencers who performed skits and showed their lives for David Dobrik's daily vlogs.

The Vlog Squad was a large group of social media influencers who appeared on David Dobrik's YouTube channel. Dobrik was known for posting new vlogs every day, and each of his vlogs featured dangerous stunts, controversial characters and stories, or massive giveaways to followers (Hris, 2022). BigNik was frequently featured, with Dobrik poking fun at his dwarfism. In almost every appearance, Keswani is under the influence of drugs and alcohol, and he is often depicted as a womanizer, constantly speaking about his voracious sex life ("Nik Keswani," 2022). Viewers of these vlogs could expect the same sort of behavior and content, and Keswani's personal channels showed similar actions. Keswani stopped appearing with the Vlog Squad in 2018, staying silent on his departure for just over three years (Tenbarga, 2021).

Nik Keswani's sudden departure from the Vlog Squad and relative silence on why he had left became the beginning of the end for the group of influencers. After the disbanding of the group, Keswani appeared in a podcast in 2021, detailing all that was wrong with the Vlog Squad. Alleging that David Dobrik's treatment of Keswani was ableist, Keswani stated that the skits surrounding Nik's disability in the vlogs was not consensual. Keswani declared that Dobrik would poke fun at his disability until Keswani reacted, then turning on the camera to catch what would happen next. Keswani felt bullied by Dobrik (Tenbarga, 2021). Although many former members of the Vlog Squad had come out against David Dobrik for one reason or another, Keswani's allegations seemed to kill Dobrik's career, who eventually stopped creating content due to the blowback (Tenbarga, 2021).

Nik Keswani's unique sense of humor saw him accumulate a large following. During the height of his career, each YouTube video Nik posted would receive millions of comments. Because of his involvement with the Vlog Squad, Nik was interacting with fans on a global level, even though Vine had ceased to exist. Nik's sense of humor and party lifestyle attracted a

younger audience, and his involvement with the Vlog Squad led him to create a large individual following as well. Nik's connections with his fans were apparent in the comment sections of his videos. YouTube user 'autumn' commented on one of Nik's videos, "I literally could not stop smiling this whole video. Nik is such a funny and genuine guy." Another YouTube user, 'Matthew Mazzone,' commented, "Nik keep your head up, I know you're putting hard work in and you are getting made because views are going down but it will eventually pay off, stay hard working, big fan!"

During Nik's early career, he was in and out of surgeries to combat ailments associated with his disability. He was open and shared much of his life, including his struggles, with his following. In one video, Nik expressed that he may need to leave social media for a little while in order to have surgery on his eyes. YouTube user 'satire' commented, "Take off as much time as you need. Your health is more important than YouTube. I cannot wait to watch more!" Another YouTube user, 'Mia Mitchell,' stated "Nik I just want to say I am praying for you. I hope the surgery goes well. And more importantly, hope you have a speedy recovery...love you bunches." Nik's social media break lasted just over a month, and fans were supportive of his break.

After Keswani's departure from the Vlog Squad and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, he took a small break from content creation. Suddenly, in 2021, Nik's content changed from his normal partying antics to a much different kind: Christian-centered videos. Nik's videos went from "Meet my new dwarf girlfriend," published in 2019, and "Who can eat the most burgers in 24 hours," published in 2020, to "Jesus Christ came to me in a dream! (explained)," published in 2021, and "Should Christians use gender pronouns?" published in August 2022. His former content included raunchy and inappropriate videos, while his newer content seemed to be geared towards politically right-leaning Christians. In addition to this change in content, Keswani

also expressed a change in rhetoric. His newer videos often include homophobic and misogynistic language, dismissing feminism and homosexual identities in the name of Jesus Christ.

Nik Keswani's sudden shift in content confused his former followers, who had gotten to know a party animal. Keswani's original content focused on the vices of life, with Keswani commonly known as someone who was always under the influence or surrounded by 'sketchy' people. With his drastic move towards Christianity-centered content, his followers quickly dispersed. Many of the Vlog Squad members, including David Dobrik, removed all traces of Nik from their various social media platforms. Keswani's personal social media pages saw a downturn in engagement, and as his content grew more conservative and controversial, Keswani experienced lower and lower views.

Part of Nik's shift of content saw a new YouTube channel emerge. In addition to his regular YouTube channel, Keswani also produces his own Christian-based rap music on another YouTube channel. This channel is over three years old, and he has a little over thirty-five thousand followers on this channel. While Keswani is a self-proclaimed Christian, his new beliefs can also be seen as rather extreme to most Christians. His music includes lyrics against vaccination, drugs, sexual activity, and negatively speaking about women being educated. His old channel sits at over one million subscribers, but posts that involve his extremist views only see about ten thousand views on average. Older videos on his channel, before his content change, saw millions of views. New videos on his original channel include "I asked God to show me why Weed is Wrong, Then Demnos Attacked me while I was high," and "Woman builds an ALTAR for her ABORTION?!" both published in 2022. He has not updated this channel since 2022.

Keswani's social media content saw a complete turnaround in content. His social media pages went from posting about parties, women, and fun, to a Christian-centered page. His new channel shows him speaking on "agendas of the left," "Satanic rituals in Hollywood," and even spouting conspiracy theories on pedophilia. His former fans are confused by the sudden shift in content, and many of them have abandoned their one beloved influencer.

In one video, he alleges that pop music star Charli XCX performs a Satanic ritual in a music video. His fans react mostly in confusion, with YouTube user 'Finlay Stead' commenting, "As someone who loves stuff like SlipKnot and Metallica, hearing someone call music by her (Charli XCX) is funny." At one point during the video, Keswani alleges that the pop star's music "reeks of feminism," which prompted several comments from former fans reacting in disgust to the misogyny. YouTube user 'wise mystical tree' commented that Charli XCX was "slaying," and YouTube user 'KawaiiGoreBomb' commenting in support of her: "You have 1 million followers and 1,000 views, get a new hobby."

In another video, Keswani alleges that all people within the LGBTQ+ community support pedophiles. The comments on this video are not kind to Keswani, who had been expecting support from his followers. YouTube user 'Matthew Forbes' commented: "Congrats Nik. You found two videos of people who are making bad jokes and you decided they were reflective of an entire community. You deserve a gold medal for those mental gymnastics." And another YouTuber user, 'Goohey,' stated, "Damn, only 305 likes? BigNik really fell off, he might have to get a big boy job soon." And YouTube user 'Ethan Bradberry,' expressed his concern for Nik's change in content. "The irony of Big Nik's turn to religion, is that it's making him a considerably terrible person. If there is a God, he's terribly disappointed in you for using his word to spread hate and negativity."

Nik Keswani's sudden change in social media content served as the catalyst for a mass parasocial breakup. A central feature of a parasocial relationship is predictability (Lather and Moyer-Guse, 2011). A parasocial relationship with Nik Keswani would see predictability in his original content. Keswani posted his friends and himself partying, enjoying their youth, and exploring Los Angeles. Very suddenly, Keswani's posts went from sharing his life to incendiary Christian-based content. Keswani's new videos show him berating creators for enjoying the life he was enjoyed, and his fans departed. The dependability on Keswani's former content was over once Keswani began posting his Christian lifestyle. With this new development, Nik's former fans turned to people who comment in outrage on his posts.

Abandoning his former content, fans of Keswani quickly dispersed. Keswani's sudden shift in content has not proved successful with any fan base. Only in the past few months has Keswani experienced any sort of viral hit, and it is only due to the controversial nature of his Christianity-based content. The viral videos seem to provoke outrage from viewers rather than support. Keswani promotes traditional gender roles, strict ideologies on sexual orientation and gender identities, and he often uses misogynistic and homophobic language to put his point across. With such a dramatic shift in the content that Nik Keswani promotes, it is no wonder that he experienced a parasocial break from his former followers.

**Breland Emory.** There are many social media creators who shift the focus of their content. Perhaps they had children and have changed from sharing their single life to their family life. Or, perhaps they shifted their content from collaborations to solo videos. There are various reasons that influencers change their content style, and it is usually a successful venture. With the world as large as it is, and social media becoming a tool for people to find their niche, most creative content will find success with the right algorithms, sponsors, and collaboration

opportunities. Yet, when Breland Emory, a popular content creator on YouTube called “GlitterForever17,” changed the narrative of her posts, many of her followers deserted their former favorite creator.

Breland Emory, formerly known as Breland Kent, was born on October 18, 1987, in Louisiana. After graduating from high school, she began working in retail at a local mall in 2011 (“Breland Emory,” n.d.). During this time, Emory became more fascinated with the beauty industry, getting into makeup and fashion. She created a YouTube channel, called “GlitterForever17,” sharing hair and makeup tricks, beauty secrets, and her favorite products to use. She became part of Seventeen Magazine’s Seventeen Social Club, a group of smaller beauty influencers collaborating to create content for *Seventeen* (“Breland Emory,” n.d.). In 2014, she would be featured as the cover of the April issue of *Seventeen* magazine. In 2012, Emory was nominated for the NYX Face Awards for her makeup talent, and she placed within the top thirty contestants around the world. After this nomination, her social media career began to progress quickly as she amassed over three million subscribers on YouTube (“Breland Emory,” n.d.). Her videos would often reach millions of viewers.

During her beauty and social media career, Breland Emory worked with several large brands, including L’Oréal, Bop & Tigerbeat Magazine, a hair dye company called Splat, and rue21, a popular boutique shop (“Breland Emory,” n.d.). Emory also signed with Amanda Marzolf of Abrams Talent Management during this time. Her YouTube channel featured mostly beauty-centered content, with Emory often sharing do-it-yourself style videos (“Breland Emory,” n.d.). She would also often feature her husband and mother in her videos. She was married to a man named David, but that relationship broke up in 2017.



Since then, she has been in another relationship with a man named Slava Avdeev, who she married in the same year (“Breland Emory,” n.d.). In addition, she would perform comedy skits, conduct makeup tutorials, and was hailed as a feminist icon at one point for a video on menstruation that she put out in 2014. This video was received well across the Internet, and Emory gently explained what periods were, how to use menstrual products, and asked her followers to be kinder to young girls. Emory’s large fanbase was made up mostly of younger girls, so this video was seen as great advice (“Breland Emory,” n.d.). She was seen as one of the first content creators to ‘break the fourth wall,’ acknowledging that she could use her platform to educate her younger fan base.

Breland Emory has three different YouTube channels. Her most popular channel is called “GlitterForever17,” which is the channel she began with and frequently posted. This channel centered around beauty and DIY content and had over three million followers. She would post trendy décor DIY hacks, satirical skits for children, and even guides to survive puberty for young girls. Emory stopped posting consistently on this channel in 2021 and began posting on another YouTube channel soon after. Another channel, called “Breland,” features mostly funny and satirical content, and also features Emory’s more personal life. This channel has just over fifty thousand subscribers (“Breland Young,” n.d.).

This channel features Emory telling true crime stories, reacting to crazy videos, and adult content. Emory began an OnlyFans account to promote her social media career, and she slowly turned her content into almost all X-rated. During Thanksgiving of 2020, a video of Kent displaying a vulgar behavior with a rubber turkey. Many of her former followers reacted in shock and disgust, as they had not known she was performing adult content. She has since cultivated a small following on the adult subscription site, OnlyFans. While her husband is featured on the

YouTube channel with her, he does not produce adult content with Kent. And finally, there is another channel called “Breland Avdeev,” a much smaller channel with less than two thousand subscribers. This channel offers a much more personal look into Kent’s life, as she often live streams for several hours. Videos featured on this channel seem to be random and disconcerting. This channel also features several videos that are hours-long and feature Emory having mental breakdowns. This is a big change from Emory’s earlier content on GlitterForever17.

Breland Emory’s most popular YouTube videos have over sixteen million views, showcasing her popularity at the peak of her career. The most popular videos are beauty-inspired, targeted towards younger female audiences. Emory’s most popular videos include “DIY Pregnant Barbie Doll Costume,” “Getting Permanent Makeup,” “20 Period Life Hacks,” “DIY Edible iPhone Cases,” and “12 DIY Boob Life Hacks.” Emory’s content revolved around do-it-yourself hacks, advice on traversing puberty as a younger girl, and satirical skits poking fun at common situations girls might find themselves in, like needing a menstrual product during school or navigating a breakup.

Returning to the first channel, GlitterForever17, Breland Emory’s content was well received in the beginning of her career. Comments on her older videos are supportive in nature, and comments on more recent videos seem confused and bewildered about her shift in focus. On a six-year-old video titled, “DIY Pregnant Barbie Doll Costume,” YouTuber user Madeleine stated, “This video is so iconic.” User Clown Princess of Fear commented, “Not bad for a Halloween video. Great job Breland!” And a comment from Probiscis Aj highlights the value they have for Breland’s work, “Just asking how long does it take to do your thumbnails!?!?! Looks like you put A LOT of effort into them!” When Breland Emory’s channels focused on

DIYs, beauty tutorials, and funny skits, she received a lot of engagement from younger audiences who subscribed to her.

Breland Emory's social media career had immense success, amassing over three million YouTube subscribers, yet she only receives a few thousand views on recent videos. Emory's early videos catered to children and a younger audience, yet her recent content seems to be for a much older audience. Children would be unable to access her adult channel on OnlyFans, and videos featured on her YouTube are very mature and graphic in both content and nature. This shift from Emory in both content and theme is unsuccessful, as her social media channels are not being engaged with in terms of likes, followers, or views ("Breland Emory," n.d.). Her former content was geared towards children, while her current narrative focuses on very graphic and adult videos. While there is absolutely nothing wrong with this shift in focus, there is a very dire problem: Breland Emory no longer sees the same sort of engagement with her videos.

On more recent videos of Emory's, former subscribers are left confused by the change in content. YouTube user Makalla Falco mentions this, "Missing old Breland ... where did she go?" Another user, himynameisangel, mentioned their discomfort, "I remember watching GlitterForever17 as a kid and I feel so bad for her now." And another comment from akaibeeyume calls her a sellout – "it's sad that you have to sell out or nearly destroy yourself to get rich and have a comfortable living." Another comment from Orangejuice explains that they are fine with the shift, but they are moving on from Emory's content. "I'm really glad that she found happiness in what she does now. Her new 'content' isn't really my taste though." And finally, YouTube user Cherryontop113, "Did she ever think to get a conventional job? I'm seriously asking. It seems sad that some of these online influencers assume that the only way to make money is through more and more scandalous, erratic online behavior. I don't like it." This

comment is the most liked on the video with over three hundred likes and eleven comments that agree with this take on Emory's content.

Breland Emory's social media career seemed dynamic and everlasting, but a sudden shift in focus from beauty to adult videos led to a devastating mass parasocial breakup. Losing relatively all of her engagement from followers, Emory's channel is now seeing lower numbers than local news stations. The stability and reliability provided in a parasocial relationship are often overlooked, yet they act as the binding force in many parasocial interactions. It is important to remain dependable as a social media creator to provide comforting and reliable content to their followers. Otherwise, that parasocial bond may fall apart completely, leaving the influencer with little to no social media career. This unfortunately happened to Breland Emory, who shifted the focus of her content and lost most of her engagement. While there was no scandal or controversy prompting followers to disengage, her new content lacked the same creativity and focus as her previous style.

### **Creators Involved With Scandals.**

The subsequent chapters look at the social media careers of Shane Dawson and James Charles, two formerly successful content creators. Dawson and Charles both engaged in some controversial acts, and as a result, they were deserted by their followers. Dawson and Charles each experienced mass parasocial breakups due to their inappropriate conduct, and their former fans were left reeling at the revelations of their behavior. Research has established that parasocial relationships and interpersonal relationships largely mirror each other in terms of experiences (Gregg, 2018).

When an interpersonal relationship ends to a conflict arising, there are often complex feelings. Perhaps an interpersonal relationship crumbled due to cheating, lying, or abuse. The

victim in this situation will be angry at the sudden change, betrayed by their ex-partner, unsure who to place the blame on, guilty for their own reactions, or even full of shame. The same feelings can arise during a parasocial breakup, especially since the dependability of the parasocial relationship has been destroyed (Lather and Moyer-Guse, 2011). When a popular influencer has a long career on social media, followers can establish a pattern of behavior and better understand the influencer's actions. Understandably, the discovery of controversial behavior would come as a shock to these followers. This unearthing could change the fan's interest in the influencer, causing a parasocial breakup. During this breakup, similar feelings would result from as that of an interpersonal relationship breakup (Gregg, 2018). Former fans and followers might feel resentment at the exposure of the influencer's conduct, confused and betrayed at the shock of finding out, guilty that they had not noticed, or even shame to have been a fan.

While these two controversial influencers have been ostracized by their fans, left out of collaboration opportunities, and demonetized by social media platforms, it is important to separate Shane Dawson and James Charles from the recent phenomenon of cancel culture. Cancel culture is a new sensation arising from social media, and it is defined as "collective strategies by activists using social pressures to achieve cultural ostracism or targets (someone or something) accused of offensive words or deeds" (Norris, 2021).

An example of cancel culture would be a group of people working together to take down an influencer's success or opportunities due to a single controversial act. On the contrary, Shane Dawson and James Charles displayed patterns of offensive and outright dangerous behavior. These two influencers harmed individuals, profited off the creativity of others, and had inappropriate relationships with minors. The consequences that Dawson and Charles faced came

as a result of their conduct, not because of so-called cancel culture. The following two chapters will analyze the social media careers of Dawson and Charles, the revelations of inappropriate conduct, and the fallout that came as a result.

**James Charles.** The beauty industry dominates the world. Makeup, hair, and fashion detail someone's creativity and influence, and these trends act as forms of self-expression. People turn to beauty influencers for advice and tutorials, and influencers can showcase their talents in the beauty realm. Makeup gurus rose to popularity in 2015, and this niche group of influencers quickly took over the Internet. Beauty influencers began collaborating with each other, promoting and working for huge beauty companies like Chanel and Morphe, and quickly became the biggest influencers on social media. One of the most-followed influencers in this category was James Charles, credited as the first male "Cover Girl." Charles became successful, and his talents, quirky personality, and funny collaborations with other influencers quickly made him a top influencer across the beauty category. No one would expect that off camera and in real life, James Charles was a predator of young boys.

James Charles, legally known as James Charles Dickerson, was born on May 23, 1999, in Bethlehem, New York. His parents, Skip and Christie, worked as contractors, and he has a younger brother named Ian Jeffrey. Ian Jeffrey is well known for his regular appearances on James's YouTube channel and for his own career as a model. James Charles worked as a hairstylist and makeup artist during high school ("James Charles," n.d.). James Charles had an early fascination with music and makeup, and he created a YouTube channel in 2015 to share his talents. His earliest videos include tutorials on trendy makeup looks and covers of popular songs at the time.

James graduated from Bethlehem Central High School in 2017, and his senior graduation pictures were the catalyst to his early fame. James was upset with the quality of his initial senior photos, so he scheduled a second session. During this second session, he brought a ring light and makeup tools as props to make the quality of the photos better. The photos from this second session quickly went viral, garnering over thirty thousand retweets on just the first day (Muller, 2016). Zendaya eventually re-tweeted the picture, calling Charles a great makeup artist. James Charles became an Internet star overnight, doing interviews with major news channels, popular magazines, and even appearing on the *Ellen* show.

While wearing makeup as a man might be considered more common now, at the time that James was becoming popular, it was rare to see a man sporting a full face of makeup. Now, the beauty industry commonly features male influencers, products have been developed for male skin types, and there are even makeup looks centered around facial hair. James Charles has been credited for being one of the first male beauty influencers, and his sudden success in the beauty industry brought in mixed reviews. After most celebrities and influencers came out in support of a male beauty influencer, the narrative within the beauty community shifted to a more open acceptance of men wearing makeup. Commenting on his full face of makeup, Charles stated that he had only worn makeup to school twice before, and that he had received mostly support and positive comments (Muller, 2016). He credited the show *RuPaul's Drag Race* as a creative inspiration for wearing makeup as a man. The makeup looks featured on the drag queens within the reality show are often unique, avant-garde, and colorful, and this style of makeup can be seen meshed with James Charles's style. His makeup looks often feature winged eyeliner, colorful eyeshadow, and even horror-inspired makeup.

While James Charles had experienced going viral before, the senior photos post set him along the edge of Internet fame. Quickly, Charles's social media pages exploded in popularity. People began turning to James for new makeup trends and hacks, affordable and quality makeup brand suggestions, and overall beauty advice. His talent at makeup and self-expression sparked a wave of acceptance of men within the beauty community. In October 2016, James Charles became the first male brand ambassador for CoverGirl, a popular drugstore cosmetics brand ("James Charles," n.d.). Charles was featured in magazines, advertisements for CoverGirl's new products, and CoverGirl even created a collaboration with Charles and Zendaya.

Reactions to James Charles spanned across the emotions of the world. Some people were angry at a boy wearing makeup, and some people could not get enough of James Charles and his beauty talents. His popularity spanned across the globe, with celebrities and fans alike amazed at his talent and personality. A simple Google search of the once-adored beauty vlogger brings up over a billion results, showing just how popular Charles is. James's seemingly good-natured personality seemed to calm down the drama between other beauty influencers, and he quickly became a fan favorite beauty influencer, collaborating with several other beauty influencers on the Internet.

Although his CoverGirl partnership was experiencing global support, James Charles still focused on his own brand. By early 2019, he had grown his YouTube channel to over ten million subscribers, posting videos weekly ("James Charles," n.d.). Each of his videos received millions of views, and he was often featured on YouTube's "Trending," page, a page that features the top ten most popular videos each week. Charles had his own clothing line, "Sisters Apparel," named after his followers. He begins every YouTube video by greeting his fans, "Hi Sisters!" Charles even collaborated with cosmetic giant Morphe, a popular makeup and beauty brand, creating a



makeup palette with the brand featuring bold and beautiful colors. The palette featured thirty-five neutral, bold, and glittery shades. James Charles published several makeup tutorials on his YouTube channel with this palette, showing the many makeup looks and combinations that he came up with. The palette sold out online within an hour of the launch, and the online retailer quickly capitalized on Charles's brand, creating several more products with him ("James Charles," n.d.)

James Charles's YouTube content and channel centered around the beauty industry. His videos received millions of views, likes, comments, and shares. Charles stayed relevant by following trendy beauty hacks and tips, collaborating with other influencers and major celebrities, and showcasing his unique makeup style and talents. Major collaborations on Charles's channel include Charli D'Amelio, Kylie Jenner, the Dolan Twins, Jojo Siwa, Jeffree Star, David Dobrik, Tati Westbrook, Addison Rae, Kim Kardashian, and many others. These collaborations included Charles performing makeovers for the celebrities, funny competitions and games, and even singing together. On many occasions, James featured makeup tutorials on his channel, testing new makeup products, sharing advice and tricks on how to achieve certain looks.

James's collaboration with Morphe took him to Birmingham for the opening of Morphe's second store. This visit caused a gridlock to the city center, with fans flocking in from all around the United Kingdom to meet, or even just see, James Charles ("James Charles," n.d.). Charles began collaborating with various celebrities, including Iggy Azalea, *RuPaul's Drag Race* star Trizxe Mattel, and even Lil Nas X. He did her makeup on his YouTube channel, and the rapper featured Charles in a music video in 2019 ("James Charles," n.d.). There was no doubt that Charles had a large following, and he announced the Sisters Tour in April 2019.

In April 2020, Charles was featured on the first season of *Instant Influencer*, a reality competition show, similar to “RuPaul’s Drag Race.” Charles appeared as a judge on the first season, and competitors on the show demonstrated various skills showing their success as influencers (“James Charles,” n.d.). After one season, Charles announced he would not be returning to the show. James Charles won a Streamy for Show of the Year for his work with “Instant Influencer.” In addition to this award, Charles has won a Teen Choice Award for Choice Fashion/Beauty Web Star, several other Streamys across categories, a Shorty Award for Breakout YouTuber, two People’s Choice Awards, and a Kids’ Choice Award for Favorite Male Social Star (“James Charles,” n.d.).

James Charles was also the first beauty influencer to be invited to the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Costume Institute Gala (Tamarra, 2019). Compared with the mega-celebrities at the Met, like Lady Gaga and Jennifer Lopez, Charles was a relative nobody. Other guests included billionaire philanthropists, musical artists known worldwide, and award-winning actors and actresses. Charles’s success on social media seemed to pale in comparison to the success of the other guests at the Met Gala. “But among beauty vloggers on YouTube whose followers number millions – many of them Gen-Z-ers fluent in the medium – Charles is a superstar” (Tamarra, 2019).

If someone was not engaged with Charles’s social media career, they may not even know who he is. Several celebrities made passive-aggressive comments about Charles’s invitation to the Gala, and Charles himself commented on how he felt “different than everyone else” at the Gala. Another comment Charles made landed him in hot water with some people, as he claimed that his invitation to the event was a “step forward in the right direction for influencer representation in the media” (Gomez, 2019). Many people thought the term “representation” was

an ill-chosen word, considering that James seemingly compared privileged influencers to more marginalized groups searching and fighting for representation in every field (Gomez, 2019).

James Charles would soon find himself familiar with the controversial spotlight. While he had experienced some minor scandals in the past, including a potentially racist tweet about Africa and the Ebola virus. Another “scandal” occurred when the makeup guru announced on Twitter that he was not a fan of the (at the time) new film “It.” The comment caused a frenzy on the Internet, and even the stars of the movie replied in response to Charles’s comment (O’Connor and Haylock, 2021). Despite these comments and minor feuds with other beauty content creators, James Charles seemed untouchable. This would all change in May 2019.

In order to properly understand the leadup to James Charles’s demise, it is important to fully understand who played a part in “Dramageddon,” a term which has been coined for this incident (O’Connor and Haylock, 2021). During his content creation career on YouTube, James Charles would feature another prominent makeup artist on his channel named Tati Westbrook. Tati is considered one of the original beauty gurus on YouTube, and she had been known for being kind, uninvolved in drama, and consistent in her content. James Charles also collaborated with Jeffree Star, another prominent content creator on YouTube. While Jeffree was famed for his unique style of makeup, he was also a large makeup manufacturer. Jeffree’s product reviews were hailed as the “gold standard” for makeup, and he was known to be blunt and cruel in his reviews (O’Connor and Haylock, 2021).

In May 2019, Tati Westbrook posted a video to her YouTube channel titled “Bye, Sister.” In this video, Westbrook details James’s alleged behaviors off camera. Much of Westbrook’s content was dedicated to her supplement brand, and she often plugged her products on her YouTube channel. Westbrook began the “Bye, Sister” video by discussing her supplement brand,

and explaining that she felt hurt by Charles's recent actions. According to Tati, she had asked James Charles to post a promotional ad on his social media accounts in support of her brand. Charles responded that it would be "inappropriate" to advertise supplements to his young audience (O'Connor and Haylock, 2021). Westbrook further explained that she had grown frustrated with Charles as he had recently promoted SugarBearHair on his Instagram account, a supplement brand. She expressed her frustration about this incident, and Westbrook went into detail explaining that this incident would mark the end of their years-long friendship.

In addition to feeling wronged by the supplement advertisement, Westbrook detailed that she felt James Charles had been sexually inappropriate with and manipulative towards several people. Westbrook claimed that she felt Charles had used his fame to manipulate men and teenage boys for sexual favors (O'Connor and Haylock, 2021). After the video hit the Internet, Jeffree Star released his own response, confirming that he had also seen the same off-camera behavior from James Charles. In addition, Star claimed that he had banned Charles from entering his home, claiming that James was "a danger to society" (O'Connor and Haylock, 2021). Star further alleged that he had personal contact with victims of Charles's sexual abuse. These claims were confirmed by Gage Gomez, a twenty-year-old male model.

Gomez came out and asserted that he did not identify as gay and that he had been pressured by Charles several sexual situations. Charles refuted this claim, alleging that he and Gomez's five month 'relationship' was fully consensual (O'Connor and Haylock, 2021). Charles attempted to rationalize his behavior with Westbrook, Star, and Gomez, but the rest of the world seemed to take these claims as the truth. While Charles continued to post content on social media, his posts were met with criticism and debate.

In February of 2021, four more victims of James Charles came forward. While Gomez had been above the age of consent during the alleged harassment, these four boys were all young teenagers (O'Connor and Haylock, 2021). More than a dozen victims would come forward between February and April of 2021 (Berg, 2021). These victims shared screenshots of the alleged manipulation from Charles with the Internet, and the text messages spoke for themselves. It became clear to the rest of the world that Charles's behavior had been predatory, inappropriate, and sexually manipulative. In response to this, James Charles posted a video confirming this behavior and attempting to explain it on April 1, 2021.

In this video, Charles details his "desperation" for sexual experience, claiming he had been relatively inexperienced prior to meeting these young boys. He apologized to two underage boys in this video, confirming that his behavior had been inappropriate (O'Connor and Haylock, 2021). Charles further claimed that he failed to recognize the imbalance of power between himself and the young boys. With the emergence of this video, makeup brands began dropping their affiliations with him, other social media creators began coming out against him, and Charles lost two million followers in a period of forty-eight hours (O'Connor and Haylock, 2021). YouTube demonetized James Charles's channel, preventing any profit off of advertisement revenue or brand deals. Forbes estimated that Charles would lose around ten million dollars annually (2021). On April 26, 2021, a former producer for Charles filed a wrongful termination lawsuit against the makeup guru, alleging that she was not fairly paid for her time (O'Connor and Haylock, 2021). At the time of this writing, the case is still pending.

As Charles lost over two million followers in a two day period, it is easy to see what former fans of the YouTube star thought of his predatory behavior. While Westbrook's original "Bye, Sister" video has been taken down by the creator, there have been several reposts of the

video. YouTube user Rina Lawrence commented, “So glad I unfollowed once the drama started. Couldn’t tolerate the clownery,” on one of the reposted videos. YouTube user pixie noted that they are glad James is being held accountable, calling him a “disgusting human being,” (“the exact moment the beauty community was destroyed,” 2022). Forbes ranks James Charles among “YouTube’s Most Disliked,” noting that the repercussions of Charles’s behavior has cost him millions (McEvoy, 2022).

Prior to the revelation of Charles’s predatory patterns of behavior, he was a very successful content creator. He seemed to foster community amongst his followers by promoting openness and diversity, he consistently evolved in his beauty talents to create new content, and his work ethic seemed unmatched. With over twenty-five million subscribers on YouTube, many fans adored him. James Charles experienced one of the largest mass parasocial breakups, losing over two million followers in the few days after his behavior was revealed. Parasocial breakups have negative psychological effects on fans, who can experience frustration and anger as a result (Gregg, 2018). In addition, the effects of parasocial breakups increased with the strength of the parasocial relationship; meaning that those who were once huge fans of Charles would now experience a feeling of devastating loss. Fans recall feeling disgusted with themselves for not seeing his predatory patterns before, and Insider revealed that only twenty percent of respondents in a poll viewed Charles positively (Mendez II, 2021). Danielle Stransky commented on Charles’s character, calling him a charismatic liar.

James Charles has attempted to return to his regular content creation, yet he is still seen as a sexual predator on the Internet. Many comments on recent posts are hateful, mocking the once adored beauty guru. Twitter user cyberclysm said, “You can block me on Twitter James Charles but I’m still going to call you out wherever I can for not being in prison you disgusting

groomer,” (Rodrigues, 2022). Comments call for Charles to be punitively punished, often calling for jail or prison time. At this point in February 2023, James Charles has not yet been tried legally for his involvement in predatory relationships.

James Charles experienced a mass parasocial breakup as a result of his predatory behavior, losing over two million YouTube subscribers in forty-eight hours. Although he is not the only influencer to be ostracized from the Internet for his patterns of behavior, James Charles seems unique. His following was largely composed of children and teenagers, and many people have worried about his young followers falling prey to manipulation tactics or vulturine conduct. Parents of his followers, other beauty influencers, and victims have called for James Charles to be arrested. With the Internet and media alike calling for his removal from social media, it seems James Charles remains a controversial subject.

**Shane Dawson.** Shane Dawson was known as one of the original YouTube content creators, gaining millions of dedicated followers throughout his decade long career. Dawson’s consistent posts, creative content, and funny personality made him popular among diverse crowds. His documentary-style videos were unique and detailed, providing his audience with a large amount of content to consume. While his new start to the makeup/beauty industry seemed promising, his career would hit a low when his scandalous behaviors emerged. Millions of followers abandoned their former favorite YouTuber, and Dawson was left with little to nothing.

Shane Dawson, also known as Shane Lee Yaw, was born on July 19, 1988 in Long Beach, California. Raised by a single mother named Teresa, Shane and his two brothers, Jacob and Jerid, grew up impoverished. During high school, Shane was bullied for his weight, and he later lost over one hundred and fifty pounds (“Shane Dawson,” n.d.). He began making videos as school projects with his friends. On March 10, 2008, Dawson launched his first YouTube

channel, called “ShaneDawsonTV.” Within four months, he posted his first video, which is still viewable on YouTube today. During the beginning of his YouTube career, Dawson worked at Jenny Craig, a popular weight loss service, with his mother and brothers (“Shane Dawson,” n.d.). He would be fired from this job in August 2008 after posting several inappropriate videos. In one of these videos, he was seen pole dancing at his office, and in another, he claimed that clients of Jenny Craig could expect to gain all their lost weight back (“Shane Dawson,” n.d.).

After losing this job, Dawson continued to post on YouTube. One of the first videos on Dawson’s channel, posted in 2008, titled “Fred is Dead!”, received over twenty-five million views. In this video, Dawson performed several characters in skits, including a “ghetto girl Shanaynay,” a nerd named Ned, a ganster-derived character, a lesbian character, and a Mexican character (“Shane Dawson,” n.d.). These characters were all extremely stereotypical, highlighting Dawson’s racial, sexist, and homophobic ideas.

In addition to “ShaneDawsonTV,” Dawson has several other channels. Each of these channels features a different type of content, including comedy and skits, vlogs and DIYs, and documentary-style films created by Dawson (“Shane Dawson,” n.d.). During the first three years of his channel, Dawson’s channels show collaborations with other YouTube stars, including Joey Graceffa, Trisha Paytas, and Miranda Sings. In addition to these early collaborations, Dawson was also featured in *Forbes* magazine as the twenty-fifth most famous web celebrity in 2010 (“Shane Dawson,” n.d.).

In 2010, Dawson’s social media career gained traction. Releasing his own pilot called *SD High* on his YouTube channel, working with several production companies and other social media stars to create his vision (“Shane Dawson,” n.d.). This would not be Dawson’s only creative project, as he went on to work on music videos, debuting a single in March 2012. This



single, “Superluv!”, charted on iTunes in the United States, Ireland, and the United Kingdom (“Shane Dawson,” n.d.). He would go on to have several more successful songs. In addition to music and producing his own work, Dawson worked as an actor on several movies and television projects (“Shane Dawson,” n.d.). He starred in a film called *Smiley*, released in October 2012. In 2013, Dawson launched his podcast, *Shane and Friends*. During this time, he was also rumored to have a talk show or develop a weight loss center (“Shane Dawson,” n.d.).

Although his projects were largely successful, Dawson’s acting and directing talents were questioned by those individuals within the industries. One project of Dawson’s, titled *Not Cool*, was so “tasteless and deeply offensive” that the producer, Zachary Quinto, pulled his name from the credits of the movie in outrage (“Shane Dawson,” n.d.). Dawson starred in and directed the project, which was created as the result of a competition. Two creators were given the same script by Starz, a popular media production company, and asked to interpret the script however they would like. Quinto claims that *Not Cool* was a horrible movie, further asserting that Dawson should not be making films at all (“Shane Dawson,” n.d.).

This would not be Dawson’s only blunder. In December 2014, Dawson released his own, parodied version of Taylor Swift’s “Blank Space.” This video was immediately removed from YouTube by Big Machine Records and Sony, who found the parody violated copyright infringement (“Shane Dawson,” n.d.). Dawson claimed the parody was removed because Taylor Swift felt threatened by him. This video was restored to Dawson’s channel in February 2015, after being reviewed by Swift’s record labels. In 2015 and 2016, Shane Dawson released two memoirs, *I Hate Myselfie: A Collection of Essays* and *It Gets Worse: A Collection of Essays*. While his subscribers enjoyed these books, they received little to no support within the publishing industry (“Shane Dawson,” n.d.). It seemed that Dawson’s career had hit a plateau.

In 2017, Dawson changed the content of his YouTube channels significantly. Previously, he had posted mainly satirical comedy, poking fun at pop culture. His content shift resulted in extended vlogs, conspiracy theory deep dives, and several documentary-style series in collaboration with other YouTubers. These documentaries focused on the inside life of these influencers, who include Dawson's husband Ryland Adams, former friend Tana Mongeau, beauty creators James Charles and Jeffree Star, and even YouTuber-turned-boxer Jake Paul ("Shane Dawson," n.d.). These documentaries received major praise, and Dawson regained his footing within the social media industry. In 2018, Dawson began focusing on the beauty industry, and he even collaborated with makeup guru Jeffree Star, on their own makeup line, named after Dawson's conspiracy series. Dawson was commended for "keeping it real" with these documentaries, often showing the difficult reality of what it takes to be a social media influencer ("Shane Dawson," n.d.).

Shane Dawson's social media career was hailed as one of the greats. With over twenty million YouTube subscribers at the peak of his fame, Dawson cultivated a large following on all social media platforms. Early fans seemed to love his quirky authenticity, his unique content, and his ability to get along with anyone on the Internet (Capon, 2020). YouTube user '4cool LPS' commented on Dawson's video, "The editing in this is PHENOMENAL!!" YouTuber user 'air' expressed, "I'll always watch him, he always makes me want to watch more, and I love listening to his thoughts and stuff about conspiracy theories." And YouTube user 'Micaela' commented on Dawson's ability to lighten the mood when discussing a triggering topic, "This series makes me feel safe ... it's so peaceful to me ... (Dawson) he is so kind and gentle, and he's always the first one to lead everyone."

Shane Dawson was one of the earliest successful YouTube stars, and during his career, he spent years touring around the world to meet his fans. A Google search for “Shane Dawson meet and greet” will bring over six hundred thousand results, with fans creating YouTube videos dedicated to their meetup with their favorite YouTuber. In addition, Dawson was able to capitalize off his bond with fans, creating merchandise for fans to buy. With a net worth estimated to be over twelve million dollars, Dawson’s brand did well.

Many of Dawson’s fans grew to have parasocial relationships with the YouTube star. Dawson seemed friendly on the Internet, sharing just enough about his life so fans were able to stay connected. With his meet and greet tours, Dawson was able to interact with fans one on one, giving them the opportunity to share their experiences with him. Many of his followers felt attached to him, sharing that his openness about his coming out story made them feel more connected to the creator (Capon, 2020). This perceived intimacy with fans, decade long social media career, and meet and greet opportunities led fans to believe they were close with the star, feeding into the parasocial relationships.

While Dawson experienced extreme success with his social media career, his past inappropriate behavior would eventually catch up with him. During the pandemic, many of his followers began re-watching his older content, and they began sharing snippets of his ‘raunchy’ older videos. In 2020, Dawson’s racially insensitive sketch characters, racist actions, sexist comments, and inappropriate behavior with animals and children would come under scrutiny (Kazi, 2021). Many of his followers felt that his older content depicted a racist, sexist Dawson. His earliest sketches revolved around “ghetto” Black characters (according to Dawson himself). He also depicted a Latinx character in a relationship with a dog, a dumb teenage girl, and a racist depiction of Wendy Williams (Shelton, 2020).

These incidents also include performing a lewd act in front of a picture of then eleven-year-old musician Willow Smith. Jada Pinkett Smith, Willow's mother, wrote a scathing response to Dawson's action, sharing her disgust with the content creator (Shelton, 2020). In addition to this, a clip resurfaced of Shane Dawson describing an "intimate experience" with his cat, Cheeto (these were his own words). While this clip was first released in 2015, it did not go viral until 2020 (Shelton, 2020). Other incidents that came to light around this time included Dawson's 2014 admission of being attracted to children, Dawson's false allegations of sociopathy against YouTuber Jake Paul, his endorsement of the flat earth conspiracy theory, his allegation that 9/11 was a United States operation, his criticisms of diverse television, and his sympathy for racist content creators (Shelton, 2020).

Additionally, Dawson was accused of manufacturing fights between three beauty influencers to create content. Tati Westbrook revealed James Charles's inappropriate behavior towards teenage boys, with Jeffree Star alleging he had seen the behavior firsthand. In one of Dawson's projects, the Jeffree Star documentary produced in 2019, Dawson alluded that he had a hand in the dramatic reveal of James Charles's pedophilic behavior (Shelton, 2020). While the revealing of Charles's behaviors was not a bad thing to do, many of Dawson's fans felt that he had shared the information inappropriately, citing that the victims had the right to choose whether that information was publicized or not. Dawson subsequently lost over twenty thousand followers because of these revelations and resurfaced videos (Shelton, 2020).

Dawson attempted to apologize for these incidents several times, first uploading a video on his YouTube channel titled, "Taking Accountability," in 2020 (Kazi, 2021). Dawson addressed his previous racist acts, noting that his apology did not take away from the impact of his actions. While he addressed his racist characters, use of the N word, and wearing blackface, Dawson also

attempted to explain his inappropriate comments towards children and animals, stating his comments were “disgusting and gross.” He further explained that he made these comments to add a ‘shock value’ to his early content, and Dawson stated several times throughout the video that these comments were not reflective of his true character (Kazi, 2020). Although he addressed his behavior, viewers of the apology video were left unsatisfied with his lackluster defense. Dawson’s audience felt that his comments did not properly address the harm caused to marginalized communities or his manufactured drama with other influencers, and many of his fans felt that his apology was not sincere (Capon, 2020).

During the storm of backlash that Dawson was experiencing, YouTuber Tati Westbrook alleged that Jeffree Star and Shane Dawson had coerced her into making a statement on James Charles’s inappropriate behavior. Westbrook felt that without Star and Dawson’s manipulation and gaslighting, she would have not published the information publicly in order to better protect Charles’s victims (Capon, 2020). Dawson chose to react to Westbrook’s allegations publicly in a livestream. This livestream has since been credited as the catalyst for Dawson’s fan base to abandon him (Capon, 2020). During the livestream, Dawson called Westbrook insane, alleged that her tears were fake, and appeared extremely angry. Over two hundred and fifty thousand people joined the livestream, and fan recordings of the livestream have received millions of views (Capon, 2020). In the last few seconds of the three-minute video, viewers could see Dawson’s fiancé attempt to shut the stream down, eventually forcing Dawson off the phone (Dodgson, 2020). Viewers of the livestream felt uncomfortable and embarrassed by Dawson’s erratic behavior, considering the topic of the livestream was incredibly serious (Capon, 2020).

Shane Dawson experienced one of the largest and most devastating mass parasocial breakups. Losing over one million followers in a twenty-four-hour period, his former followers

retreated during the aftermath of Dawson's controversial livestream (Hall, 2020). In addition to followers abandoning him, Dawson's YouTube channel became permanently demonetized by the social media platform in 2020 (Hall, 2020). His past racism, sexism, and inappropriate behaviors with children and animals were cited as the reason for this demonetization. YouTube's demonetization spread across Dawson's three channels on the platform, removing Dawson's main sources of income (Hall, 2020). In addition to his fans and YouTube, Target announced that they would stop carrying Dawson's memoir and merchandise.

Losing over a million followers in one day, Dawson experienced a very large and public mass parasocial breakup. Like an interpersonal breakup, parasocial breakups are painful, with both fans and creators experiencing feelings of grief or heartache (Cohen, 2003). One of the central features of a parasocial relationship is the predictability (Lather and Moyer-Guse, 2011). The relationship is dependable and constant. Fans of Dawson could turn on his video and expect the same character, the same relationship, and they could take comfort in the reliability of their 'friend.' If this dependability ceases, fans will feel emotional distress (Lather and Moyer-Guse, 2011). With the emergence of Dawson's past behaviors, fans suddenly saw Dawson as someone else, and this sudden change threw the reliability Dawson's channel previously provided out of the window. Former followers of Dawson experienced emotional distress when they found out about Dawson's character because they previously believed Dawson was a person who could never do those things. This sudden change led to a parasocial breakup, when millions of fans abandoned Shane Dawson.

While Dawson's popularity ended in 2020, he began posting social media content again in October 2021. His posts are sporadic, and he does not enjoy the audience he had cultivated prior to his scandalous behavior. Shane Dawson's career was marked with success, yet he was

swiftly abandoned by a majority of his former fan base. The atrocities Dawson had committed were too devastating for his subscribers to deal with, and Dawson will go down in history as one of the most controversial social media influencers. Although loved by many during his decade long social media career, Dawson is now ostracized from the Internet, only creating content with other controversial influencers like Jeffree Star.

### **Discussion**

This paper explored the phenomenon of parasocial breakup. Examining various case studies of mass parasocial breakup, this paper aimed to answer several research questions. First, what might act as a catalyst for a mass parasocial breakup? Upon a greater inspection of mass parasocial breakups, I identified four different catalysts: an influencer's death, a retirement from content creation, a shift in content from one genre to another, or an influencer's involvement in major controversy. An influencer's sudden death or retirement from content creation would leave subscribers and fans shocked. Research shows that the grief experienced in a parasocial breakup, like when an influencer passes away or stop creating content, is comparable to the feelings experienced in an interpersonal relationship breakdown (Van de Bulck and Larsson, 2019). After the loss of Cameron Boyce and Christina Grimmie, fans experienced the same sort of feelings as they would with an interpersonal grief. With Jenna Marbles and the Dolan Twins's retirement, fans mourned the loss of their personalities and content. An influencer's change in content or involvement in scandals may cause a sudden loss in engagement from subscribers. This can be seen with Nik Keswani and Breland Emory's loss in views and subscribers as a result from their content change, and it can also be seen with Shane Dawson and James's Charles's blacklist and demonetization from the Internet.

Next, what feelings are experienced in a parasocial breakup? Each of the case studies were examined to determine what might be felt by former fans and followers during and after a mass parasocial breakup. Research across parasocial breakups agrees that parasocial breakups are relatively like interpersonal relationships breakups, with the same feelings arising in breakups, losses, or deaths. These feelings can include anger, betrayal, guilt, shame, sadness, and even depression (Lather and Moyer-Guse, 2011). A comfortability can occur during a parasocial relationship, as the fan comes to rely on the content provided by the influencer. This reliability and dependability upon the influencer's content is part of the benefits of a parasocial breakup. Understandably, when the breakdown of a parasocial relationship occurs, this dependability is thrown to the wolves. Fans will come to experience resentment, confusion, and shock as a result of their parasocial breakup (Gregg, 2018). This phenomenon was seen in each case study, across each catalyst, and throughout each mass parasocial breakup.

While each catalyst was a different type of breakup that might be experienced in a parasocial relationship, they each had several overlapping qualities. First, each catalyst resulted in the breakdown of a parasocial relationship. An influencer's death or retirement, change in content style, or involvement in scandals might end in a mass parasocial breakdown, with fans experiencing grief, anger, sadness, and depression (Lather and Moyer-Guse, 2009). Next, I found that fans experiencing a parasocial breakup will turn to other fans during their time of loss. Each comment about the loss of an influencer or their content had dozens of likes and replies. They turned to each other when grieving their favorite influencer's retirement or death, sought out comfort in the community when the influencer became enthralled in scandals, or shared their disappointment with others when the influencer changed their content genre.



There are few weaknesses to this study. First, I relied largely on analysis of the YouTuber's content, engagement levels, and comment sections. I did not interact with former fans directly, and I was only able to observe how they expressed their feelings on the Internet. Some people are less likely to be vulnerable sharing their feelings publicly, and I would imagine a comprehensive interview or survey would reveal more about the lived experience of a parasocial breakup. A deeper discussion with former fans may allow for more findings on what they felt, why they broke off their connection to the influencer, and a greater understanding for the catalyst of the parasocial breakup. Another weakness with this study is the broadness in terms of approach. I was not able to dive as deep into each of the catalysts themselves, as I wanted to highlight more of the experience of the parasocial breakup. A more detailed look into each catalyst individually might provide a more comprehensive understanding of what feelings can arise from each of them. While the feelings arising from parasocial breakups may overlap, I would think the experience of each catalyst would prompt different emotions from fans. Grief and sadness may be more profound with the death of an influencer, while anger and betrayal might be felt higher with the influencer's involvement in controversy.

Parasocial breakups have not been studied in as great detail as parasocial interactions or relationships, but comprehending this phenomenon can provide a deeper understanding of PSR, providing a deeper foundation. This paper and its findings provide a detailed breakdown of the catalysts of parasocial breakups. By defining what a parasocial breakup is and providing a definition for the catalyst of a parasocial breakup, this research has further developed the foundation of parasocial interaction. Future research might look at the long-term results of parasocial breakups or develop a scale for understanding the depths of parasocial breakups.

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