Would you Forgive Kristen Stewart or Tiger Woods or maybe Lance Armstrong? Exploring Consumers' Forgiveness of Celebrities' Transgressions

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This research was conducted at the University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand

Disclosure statement

No financial support was sought to undertake this research.

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Abstract

Employing a qualitative approach, within the context of Generation Y consumers, this research investigates the internal justification processes used by consumers contemplating to forgive a celebrity who has transgressed society's norms of acceptable behaviour. A thematic analysis of data from in-depth interviews identified nine emergent categories, grouped into four themes or core drivers: celebrity-related drivers, consumer-related drivers, context-related drivers and time-related drivers. The findings show that although there is generally no personal relationship between consumers and celebrities, consumers tend to bond with celebrities in para-social relationships. Many consumers see these relationships as similar to how they connect with friends thus leading them to show forgiveness tendencies towards a celebrity comparable to forgiving friends. The paper presents a conceptual framework highlighting the consumer's forgiveness justification process.

Summary statement of contribution

This study builds on the 'forgiveness in personal relationships' research undertaken in social psychology (e.g., Exline et al., 2003; 2004; McCullough et al., 1997; 1998; 2003; 2010; Worthington et al., 2007) and investigates the under-researched phenomenon of consumer's forgiveness behaviour with respect to celebrities who may have transgressed socially acceptable norms. Findings suggest that the justification process consumers utilise to forgive celebrities closely resembles behaviour in their private relationships. Forgiveness occurs when the celebrity is included in the consumer's reference group. This is despite relationships

between consumers and celebrities being para-social relationships and at a much greater proximal distance compared to individuals in close relationships.

Keywords: Celebrity, forgiveness, consumers, qualitative research, grounded theory

Introduction

'I don't understand how she could do this...! (...) [cries] I can't believe she would do this [cries]. (...) And I thought it wasn't real. But it is real. And I can't believe she would do this!' exclaims a very emotional 'NuttyMadam' (2012) in her YouTube video. This video was posted shortly after actor Kristen Stewart, who starred in the 'Twilight' movie franchise, admitted publically to her 'momentary indiscretion' and apologised for cheating on her then boyfriend, actor Robert Pattinson. More than three million viewers have since watched NuttyMadam's video posted on YouTube. These types of transgressions, especially where the celebrity is seen as a role model, may appear to many fans as breaking socially acceptable norms. More important for the celebrity's brand is whether fans like NuttyMadam, who obviously revered Kristen Stewart and / or Robert Pattinson, are able to forgive such transgressions. The professional golfer, Tiger Woods (Hood, 2012) and former US professional road-racing cyclist, Lance Armstrong (Litke, 2013) are among other celebrities whose misdemeanours have garnered considerable press coverage. Apart from the spectacle of the transgressive celebrity as a seemingly newsworthy event (Kerrigan, Brownlie, Hewer, & Daza-Le Touze, 2011), the importance of a celebrity's misdemeanour lies in the negative influence this may have on the public's liking of the celebrity and their perception of the credibility and trust in the celebrity's brand. This is especially so where high profile celebrities are treated or revered as the god-like subjects of consumption (cf. Caughey, 1978; Sassenberg, 2015).

This article investigates forgiveness from the perspective of the consumer, granting forgiveness rather than the more widely researched perspective of the celebrity attempting to gain forgiveness (for example, Benoit, 1997; Hambrick, Frederick, & Sanderson, 2015; Holdener & Kauffman, 2014). This is an important distinction as the celebrity's success is dependent on the consumer's willingness to actively follow the celebrity through various media. The term 'consumers' is used as it denotes that these individuals consume the image and activities of the celebrity, i.e. the celebrity is the commodity (Littler, 2011).

Moreover, this study examines, from a marketing perspective, why consumers might forgive an admired celebrity following an act of indiscretion, even though they do not have a direct or personal relationship with that person. Our work extends research on why individuals forgive or exonerate others (see Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002; Karremans & Aarts, 2007; McCullough, 2008) by going beyond the close personal relationships dealt with in these studies. In the marketing literature, studies have analysed consumers' forgiveness following transgressions (Chung & Beverland, 2006; Sinha & Lu, 2016; Tsarenko & Tojib, 2015; Xie & Peng, 2009; Zourrig, Chebat, & Toffoli, 2009). However, these authors concentrate on the negative effects that transgressions may have on a brand when committed by the brand itself (for example, through service failure) or a brand endorser (for example, via an athlete's misdemeanour). To date, this research has not investigated consumers' forgiveness tendencies towards the celebrity themselves, yet the public persona (and earning capacity) of the celebrity is dependent on creating an image that consumers would want to be associated with (Marshall, 2006). The research question that guides this study is why, or why

not, do consumers forgive celebrities, and what implications does this have for consumers' continued support of the luminary and their personal brand?

Celebrities as human brands

McCracken (1989, see also Boorstin, 2006; Gabler, 2001; Marshall, 1997) defines a celebrity as any individual who enjoys public recognition. From a marketing perspective, this paper defines a celebrity as a personal or human brand that can be leveraged for its own benefit, for example, increasing sales of the luminary's own music or increasing attendances at sport events. Similar to company brands which have been attributed to have a brand personality (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004), human brands have a persona (cf. Kerrigan et al., 2011) used to make them distinguishable (Boorstin, 2006). Yet, because celebrity is a socially constructed concept, often established through 'mass-mediated popular culture' rather than an individual's achievements (Turner, 2014 p. 3; Franklin, 1997), it is the consumer, not the celebrity, who contextualises and interprets the publically displayed persona (Boorstin, 2006; Marshall, 2006; Wohlfeil & Whelan, 2012). Despite the interest in the celebrity being determined by the consumer, the public persona is initially constructed by the media, the celebrity's agents and the PR teams that feed it (Turner, 2014). 'Network and cable television, in particular, has demonstrated its ability to produce celebrity from nothing – without any need to establish the individual's ability, skill, or extraordinariness, as the precondition for public attention' (Turner, 2014, p. 9). If, however, the celebrity's public persona is media constructed or illusionary then what of the relationships that consumers have with them?

Relationships with Celebrities

Celebrity is, however, more than just public recognition or self-promotion. Celebrity is also a cultural phenomenon that utilises consumer's needs for aspiration, belongingness and public intimacy to create a sense of social identification that embeds the consumer within the network of the celebrity (O'Guinn, 1991; Kerrigan et al., 2011). Turner (2014) explains these needs as a result of the decline of close social relationships in today's society. In psychology, such connections are termed 'para-social relationship[s]' (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215). Unlike normal interactive (two-sided) relationships, these para-social relationships are likely to 'occur across a significant social distance – with people "we don't know"' (Rojek, 2001, p. 52). Moreover, these relationships are more often than not one-sided and based on imagined social interaction (Caughey, 1984) that is brought close to the consumer through, for example, social media (Bolton et al., 2013). Therefore, despite an often large proximal distance between the consumer and the celebrity (Zhao, 2003), the perceived psychological distance might be quite short (McCutcheon, Ashe, Houran, & Maltby, 2003). In a celebrity context Wohlfeil and Whelan (2012, p. 511) speak of 'para-social consumer–celebrity relationships' when individuals extend the relationships they have with others into the realm of celebrities (Caughey, 1978) even though it may just be a mental creation of the individual consumer projected back onto the celebrity (Wohlfeil & Whelan, 2012).

Based on the research by Escalas and Bettman (2009a;b) it is suggested that consumers form connections to human brands which are meaningful to them and their self-concept. Consumers who identify with or feel an affinity to a celebrity, might establish self—human brand connections (cf. Escalas & Bettman, 2009b), whereas consumers who do not like, or perceive themselves as being similar to, the human brand, might distance themselves from that luminary (Escalas & Bettman, 2009b). Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel (1989) suggest that

a (role) model, i.e. a celebrity who might be viewed as such (Gies, 2011) and perceived as being part of one's reference group, can influence a consumer's information processing, attitude formation and behaviour. A reference group serves as a point of influence in making comparisons or contrasts in forming judgements about one's self, one's beliefs or one's situation (Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Shibutani, 1955) and also in regard to brand usage (Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Bearden et al., 1989). This is based on the notion that social learning processes occur through observing behaviour of social models (Bandura, 1986). Celebrities can be categorised as belonging to an individual's comparative reference group (Escalas & Bettman, 2003; 2005; Kelley, 1947) even though there is no direct contact.

The celebrity comes within reach of one's extended sense perceptions (within the 'remote distance'), for example, through the celebrity's presence in the media (Zhao, 2003). This explains why consumers have the ability to feel attached to celebrities (Thomson, 2006) who they do not know personally or have no personal affiliation with (McCutcheon et al., 2003). Often, such attachment is established as a 'non-reciprocal emotional dependence' (Rojek, 2006, p. 389) on the celebrity. Because of this perceived closeness to the celebrity the consumer may view themselves as a victim of any offence or transgression by a celebrity even though they are not directly involved or affected (cf. Mullet, Girard, & Bakhshi, 2004).

Transgressions

In describing transgressions, this work follows Metts' (1994) definition as being a violation of the implicit or explicit rules which guide relationships between two parties (Aaker et al., 2004; Sassenberg, 2015). More specifically, a transgression is a 'moral and relational injustice that violates people's physical, psychological, relational, and/or spiritual boundaries'

(Worthington et al., 2014, p. 474). As Gabler (2001, p. 9) states 'the excitement of celebrity (…) is the congruence between the person and the narrative [they are] living', so when the celebrity transgresses, this congruence is diminished and the consumer's need for a match between the celebrity brand and the consumer's idea of how it should be (Grayson & Martinec, 2004) is violated.

After a celebrity has committed a transgression they often use image repair strategies to try to restore their reputation (Benoit, 1997; Hambrick et al., 2015; Holdener & Kauffman, 2014). Much of the literature that investigates the repair of a celebrity's image following a transgression is based on implementing Benoit's (1997) image repair theory. This framework is based on the premise that a celebrity's image is a valuable commodity which is likely to lose all or some of its value if it is damaged. Even if the image cannot be fully restored to the original state it can be repaired as a form of damage mitigation (Hambrick et al., 2015). Image repair focuses on goal directed actions that can be undertaken by the celebrity in order to preserve or restore the public's perception of them (Benoit, 1997; Eriksson & Eriksson, 2012). For example, the strategies suggested include denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective actions and mortification. In recent years Benoit's (1997) work has been extended by suggestions for other strategies to repair a celebrity's image such as victimisation (I couldn't defend myself) (Sanderson, 2008), stonewalling (deflecting attention to trivial issues in the hope that fans would be distracted away from the transgression) (Smithson & Venette, 2013) and shifting responsibility for the transgression away from the individual and onto the culture surrounding them (Len-Rios, 2010). Implicit in this is the idea that if these strategies are implemented either individually or in combination the consumer will dismiss or forgive the transgression. Moreover, Lee and Kwak (2016) point to a range of

strategies that might be employed by consumers in relation to public figures' transgressions. According to social psychology literature, forgiveness is one of several strategies to respond to a transgression, such as seeking justice, reconsidering the perceived transgression as less harmful, re-evaluating the motives of the transgressor as being less hurtful or accepting the transgression (Worthington et al., 2014; Worthington, van Oyen Witvliet, Pietrini, & Miller, 2007). Consumers might not be able or willing to execute some of these strategies, such as seeking justice, as the transgression was not committed against them or they are at a too large proximal distance from the luminary. Despite this literature, there appears to be little marketing research available investigating consumers' reactions to a celebrity's transgression with regard to their willingness to forgive.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness has been defined as incorporating cognitive (Flanigan, 1992), affective (Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, & Finkel, 2004; Worthington & Scherer, 2004) and motivational (McCullough, 2001) components. It involves both a victim and a perpetrator and is connected to the repair of a violation of trust (Exline et al., 2004; Finkel et al., 2002). To forgive someone can refer either to the cessation of resentful feelings toward somebody's misbehaviour (Exline et al., 2004) or to a prosocial motivation (action that is less likely to harm and more likely to benefit) toward the transgressor (McCullough, 2001). Moreover, Worthington (2005) understands forgiveness as the process of decreasing interconnected negative resentment-grounded emotions, motivations and cognition. Worthington and Scherer (2004) view forgiveness as an emotion-centred construct and coping strategy.

Baumeister Exline, and Sommer (1998) conceptualise forgiveness as a two-dimensional construct. The intrapersonal (intrapsychic) dimension occurs within the mind of the forgiver and involves the victim's emotional states, cognitive processes and motivational aspirations (Worthington & Scherer, 2004). The interpersonal dimension comprises the relational aspect between the parties. In this case, forgiveness involves social action between the parties. Hence, forgiveness can occur both on an intrapsychic and an interpersonal level (Baumeister et al., 1998). However, the current literature relating to either the celebrity's mitigation attempts or the consumer's response to transgressions seems to suggest that forgiveness can also occur despite these consumer—celebrity relationships being one-sided or non-transactional. This research project investigates why such apparent contradiction exists.

This paper defines consumer forgiveness as an intrapsychic juxtaposition, derived from positive affective, cognitive and motivational states and changes, which are used as a coping strategy against the experienced negative psychological, physical, spiritual or relational (para-social) impact on the focal consumer, who might express their forgiveness towards another party. In this context the other party is the transgressing celebrity. Forgiveness allows the consumer to 'perceive that they have "reconnected" to an important source of social support and can again take advantage of the material and emotional resources that supportive [para-]social ties can confer' (Bono, McCullough, & Root, 2008, p. 183). Yet, of course the consumer could also approve of the celebrity's act(s) of transgression (cf. Bandura 1991; Bandura et al., 1996; Tsang, 2002) or simply not forgive.

As already pointed out, extant literature on consumer forgiveness is scant and focuses on service (Tsarenko & Tojib, 2012; Zourrig, Chebat, & Toffoli, 2009) or marketer transgressions

(Chung & Beverland, 2006) as well as consumer reactions to negative celebrity publicity (Zhou & Whitla, 2013). Tsarenko and Tojib (2012) investigate consumer characteristics and their influence on forgiveness of service failures. Here, service failures are explicitly conceptualised as transgressions and consumers' personality traits appear to influence their willingness to forgive differently. Zourrig, Chebat, and Toffoli (2009) conceptually explore cultural differences in consumers' forgiveness tendencies and suggest that allocentric consumers forgive by regulating their emotional responses whereas idiocentric consumers forgive using problem-solving coping strategies. Investigating consumer—brand relationships, Chung and Beverland (2006, p. 98) suggest that 'relationships can both buffer and magnify consumer responses to transgressions'. Their exploratory findings indicate that consumers employ coping strategies, such as re-assessing the brand's trustworthiness, allotting blame, and re-translating the brand by stereotyping. Zhou and Whitla's (2013) work highlights the role of the moral reputation of the celebrity in influencing consumers' responses to a luminary's transgression. They suggest that a consumer's concerns with moral norms of a celebrity's personal behaviour (deontology) and perceived wrongness of their transgression to the general public (teleology) have detrimental effects on celebrity-related brands.

To summarise, extant literature has not examined forgiveness from the perspective of the consumer, following a celebrity's indiscretion, especially when they do not have a direct or personal relationship with that person. Moreover, a clear gap within the forgiveness and the marketing literature is that forgiveness has only been considered in two-sided or transactional relationships whereas the celebrity literature points to the relationship between the consumer and celebrity as heavily weighted to being one-sided. By investigating the context

of Generation Y consumers, this paper explains why consumers forgive celebrities given the relationship is only para-social.

Method

Context

Generation Y is the context for this study. Generation Y (also called Millennial Generation) includes people born between 1980 and 2000. That is not to say that other generations do not have an affinity with celebrities and form para-social relationships with them (Barbas, 2001; Caughey, 1984; Dyer, 1979; Horton & Wohl, 1956; Marshall, 2010; McDonnell, 2014), and so could also provide examples of para-social relationships and consumption of celebrity. However, of the contemporary generational cohorts, this cohort has been identified as having a particularly visible connection towards celebrities as 'navigational props' that help with their understanding of acceptable identity (Banister & Cocker, 2014, p. 23) and as such celebrities become part of their comparative reference groups (Bush, Martin, & Bush, 2004). The desire for identity and belonging makes this generation particularly susceptible to suggestions from celebrities (McCracken, 1989). Generation Y, more than any other generation, uses brands as an extension of themselves (Novak et al., 2006). Thus, when a celebrity transgresses, it is not only likely to affect the luminary's brand image (Till & Shrimp, 1989), but also the status of the consumer who has formed some attachment to the celebrity brand. Generation Y displays a general attentiveness towards social media (Bolton et al., 2013), where there is easy access to celebrity narrative or gossip (Gabler, 2001; Hermes, 2006; Marshall, 2006; 2010). Hence, the influence of celebrities in this medium is significant (Banister & Cocker, 2014) as the celebrity's 'public self is presented through a new layer of interpersonal conversation' (Marshall, 2010, p. 41). Moreover, the size of the Generation Y segment, and its spending

power (Wolburg & Pokrywczynski, 2001), makes it important to marketers seeking to understand the consumers' role in the acceptance or otherwise of the celebrity's brand.

Aims and sampling

With little prior knowledge about consumer's forgiveness tendencies towards celebrities, a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 2012; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used to generate an understanding of this phenomenon and to develop a conceptual framework that explains consumers' forgiveness of celebrities' transgressions. The approach captures the words and actions of those individuals under study (Goulding, 2005) and allows for theory development during the collection and analysis of data (Douglas, 2003; Locke, 1996). The sampling looked for emerging themes and patterns until thematic saturation was reached. Convenience sampling was used to recruit the initial participants (Kumar, Aaker, & Day, 2002). To avoid potential convenience sampling biases such as familiarity with the interviewing researcher, snowball sampling was then used to acquire further participants (Kumar et al., 2002; Noy, 2008).

Sample characteristics

The final sample consisted of six male and five female participants. Aged between 18 and 22 years old (mean = 21 years), all participants were representative of Generation Y (see Table 1). Each participant was interviewed in a one-on-one setting. Pseudonyms were used to anonymise the participants.

Table 1: Overview of sample characteristics

Participant	Gender	Age

Adam	Male	21
Alisha	Female	21
Amanda	Female	23
Cameron	Male	21
Cheryl	Female	22
Christine	Female	22
Douglas	Male	18
Hugh	Male	20
Mike	Male	21
Sandy	Female	21
Steven	Male	22

The sample provided sufficient data for thematic saturation to be reached (Goulding, 2005; Guest, Bruce, & Johnson, 2006) and for overall themes to be conceptualised.

Data collection and analysis

In line with the grounded theory approach, in-depth interviews (Goulding, 2005) in semi-structured and open-ended form were chosen as the most appropriate data collection method as they allowed for insight into the areas of interest outlined by the research objectives, while providing flexibility to tailor interviews to each interview participant. Interviews took place in a major New Zealand city and ranged between 30 minutes and 50 minutes in length. The interview protocol focused on gaining the participants' attitudes towards celebrities and their reactions to celebrity transgressions, in particular why (or why not) they would forgive. Examples of the key questions were: 'What does the word celebrity mean to you?'; 'Why would you forgive someone?'; 'Do you think your interest in a celebrity would make you more likely to forgive them?' Each of these questions was followed by further probing questions such as: 'Why do you feel this way?'; 'Can you expand on this?'

Adapting the process from Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), interviews were transcribed verbatim from audio recordings before being entered into NVivo 9.2. Open and axial coding was used to identify provisional explanatory concepts and core categories (Goulding, 2005) that were compared and contrasted throughout the data and later related to literature (Spiggle, 1994). Specifically, in open coding, the transcripts were analysed line-by-line (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to uncover concepts that correctly capture the participants' meanings of forgiveness. These concepts were consolidated into more abstract open categories. Axial coding was used to reassemble data to 'form more precise and complete explanations about phenomena' (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 124). It allowed the open coded categories to be aligned to form an overall picture of consumers' perspectives on forgiveness.

Findings

The identification of categories and themes are part of the theory development process using grounded theory (cf. Douglas 2003; Glaser & Strauss 2012). The nine categories identified can be grouped into interconnected themes or 'drivers': consumer-related drivers, celebrity-related drivers and context-related drivers. The fourth driver that links these three drivers is time. These categories are now presented within the respective four themes by integrating and analysing the participants' responses with the current literature.

Consumer-related drivers

Humanisation of celebrity

This work views humanisation as an act of making some being human (again). Participants attributed a status of superhuman or nonhuman to celebrities (cf. Bandura et al., 1996; Haslam, Kashima, Loughnan Shi, & Suitner, 2008; Tait, 2013) in that they saw them as being

'above humans' (Sandy) and pictured them 'in some kind of superhuman light. We don't see them as humans; we see them as something else' (Hugh). Such statements indicate that participants overlook the celebrity's humanity (Haslam et al., 2008). Some participants aspired to be like these 'uber perfect' celebrities who become infallible: '(…) he [Kobe Bryant, US basketball player] can do no wrong' (Douglas). Here, Douglas appears to have actively rationalised his morals, insomuch that his principles do not apply to the celebrity (moral exclusion) or to their situation (moral disengagement) (Bateson, Admad, & Tsang, 2002). In summary, the statements point towards consumers maintaining a relationship to the celebrity who they have elevated to having an almost god-like status (cf. Caughey, 1978).

Yet for many, a transgression committed by the celebrity 'humanised' them, i.e. brought them to the same level as their admirers and gave them ordinariness (Gies, 2011). This humanisation moves the celebrity 'closer' to the participant's in-group (Vaes, Leyens, Paladino, & Pires Miranda, 2013) or comparative reference group (Escalas & Bettman, 2003; 2005; Kelley, 1947) thus reducing the psychological distance (McCutcheon et al., 2003; Zhao 2003). Participants, like Alisha, realised that celebrities making mistakes made them human too:

> [I]f you know more about a celebrity, you know, their good and their bad, it does humanise them. (Alisha)

This process of humanisation made it easier for participants to forgive as the celebrities became fallible and are likely to make mistakes and be forgiven as normal people. Hence, two central findings can be deducted here: on the one hand, celebrities are seen as idols who stand out from the crowd like gods do (cf. Caughey, 1978). They can do no wrong and are therefore exempt from moralising. Forgiveness simply does not come into play. On the other

hand, for Generation Y participants, celebrities are like all other ordinary people (Gies, 2011) and if they 'drop' to that level due to a transgression, forgiveness becomes pertinent.

Emotional bond and para-social relationship

Another motivator for a consumer's forgiveness is based on their perceived *emotional bond* and *para-social relationship* with the celebrity. These are similar to bonds in personal relationships in that consumers appear to have a personal investment in the celebrity (Chung & Beverland 2006; Zhou & Whitla 2012), only that in the case of celebrities, the bond and relationship are usually one-sided and are not directly reciprocated. Consumers can develop a strong attachment to celebrities (Thomson, 2006). This was most noticeable when participants said that they were '"knowing" the celebrity like a personal friend' (Wohlfeil & Whelan 2012, p. 511) thus affecting the participants on an emotional and personal level:

> … I would consider them a friend [laughs]. And especially if they are on like a reality TV show, then you see them on more of a personal level than say, an untouchable star. (…) [Y]ou could see yourself having a real conversation with [them], you know? Actually being involved in their life, even though that's so unrealistic. (Amanda)

This suggests that the notion of personal attachment paves the way for similar mechanisms of forgiveness in the imagined one-sided relationship with celebrities compared to participants' real life two-sided relationships. That is, participants drew comparisons between their own personal lives and their para-social relationship with the celebrity and stressed that they would forgive celebrities in a similar way to how they would forgive a friend or family member. The findings advocate that consumers often forgive because they emotionally bond and empathise with the celebrity (Radford & Bloch, 2012) like they do with close friends. It was also visible that celebrity transgressions illicit emotions of sympathy, empathy, betrayal and frustration, that were usually only reserved for personal relationships (Finkel et al., 2002).

Furthermore, Greenwood and Long (2011) find that, amongst other factors, perceived attachment and belongingness needs predict imagined intimacy with a media person. In these pseudo-friendships, which are quite common amongst young adolescents (Giles & Maltby, 2004), the study participants were likely to react in a similar way as if a friend committed the transgression. This finding also mirrors Finkel et al.'s (2002) work which shows that when the victim is closely committed to the offender, forgiveness is more likely because commitment increases the intention to persevere and remain in the relationship. The participants outlined that, as in their private life, they were more likely to forgive one celebrity over another due to the level of their emotional connection and affinity with them (Escalas & Bettman, 2009b; Houran, Navik, & Zerrusen, 2005):

> (…) I think if I already liked the celebrity (…), like I said with [US actress] Natalie Portman, I think I would be much more likely to forgive them for something that they did wrong. Whereas [with] someone like [US actress] Lindsay Lohan [it is] probably not very likely at all to forgive her for doing something because (…) I don't have any connection to her. (Sandy)

This indicates that, contrary to a reciprocal relationship, the celebrity does not have to 'like back' for forgiveness to happen. This even goes further, as the celebrity–consumer dynamic shows tendencies that highlight an interdependence between forgiveness and commitment due to a consumer's reliance in the para-social relationship (Chung & Beverland, 2006; Xie & Peng, 2009). This is interesting insofar as, when forgiveness is provided, a relationship that is de facto inexistent or only 'alive' as an imagined one, is 're-established' or 'maintained'.

Self-interest and self-protection of the consumer

Another driver influencing consumers' forgiveness relates to *self-interest and self-protection*. The findings suggest that forgiveness of a celebrity is predicated on the benefits the consumer

stands to receive if they forgive, such as watching their favourite sports team succeed, resulting in greater self-gain. This was mentioned by several participants:

> Well, Sonny Bill Williams [NZ Rugby Player] is a good example actually. Well, with leaving the Crusaders [regional team] and things like that. Like now, I've got a much lower opinion of Sonny Bill Williams … it's definitely [me being] self-interested (…). (…) but I mean if he went to the Warriors [another regional team] I'd go straight back [to him]! (Cameron)

Yet, self-interest appears to also be connected to *self-protection* as forgiveness is linked to the health and well-being (Worthington et al., 2007) of the consumer when protecting their self-concept (Escalas & Bettman, 2009b). After a transgression, Generation Y consumers showed a hesitance to turn their back on the celebrity due to their prior investment, the threat to the para-social relationship and the impact on their own life. This can be viewed as shielding oneself from pain which, although not directly inflicted as in a real-life relationship, might be perceived as such despite the celebrity not directly or intently harming the consumer. Here, the participants' needs and wants for personal achievement and self-preservation of their own identity (cf. Escalas & Bettman, 2009b) lead to forgiveness to buffer such potential harm:

> You feel like you know them really well and (…) because [of that] you feel like maybe you should forgive them more. (…) there's a desire to maintain an imaginary relationship. (…) So if you build your life around a celebrity, by like say devoting a certain part of your life or whatever, say you run a Tiger Woods fan club, then that part of your life crumbles if you choose to hate the celebrity, so you choose not to. (Steven)

When potential allegations towards the celebrity surface, *self-protection* and *other-protection* were visible in early reactions of participants as they spoke of a benefit-of-the-doubt mentality to the celebrities (Money, Shimp, & Sakano, 2006) allowing them to remain in a 'cooperative' para-social relationship with the celebrity for the time being (van Lange, Otten, De Bruin, & Joireman, 1997). Forgiveness again helps to protect the one-sided relationship:

> So when something like this does happen [surfacing of Tiger Woods' infidelity], you haven't heard of any flaws before, and you kind of give them the benefit of the doubt as you would, a really good friend. (Adam)

Protecting the relationship to the celebrity also included protecting and supporting the luminary by showing empathy for their situation with a tendency to emotional forgiveness (Worthington et al., 2007), especially when the claims had not been proven at the time:

> That's why people are standing by Lance Armstrong, he's passed every drug test in his life. And for this to go on and on and on, you kind of feel sorry for him (…). He's fed up. And you would be too. (Hugh)

Such defence enabled the survival of the imagined relationship. This also happened even if it necessitated finding alternative explanations for what was reported on the celebrity by, for example, finding a scapegoat, such as the media. One participant stated:

> I feel that it wasn't his [Kobe Bryant's] fault, because sometimes you feel that the media is trying to portray him, find a reason for him not to be good. But I still see the light. I still see him in a good light. (Douglas)

Participants explained that their level of invested interest or liking towards the celebrity would determine that they would not only be lenient when the endorser committed a wrongdoing, but 'far more likely [to] (…) take their side' (Adam) and engage in *other's protection* by staunchly defending the celebrity in front of friends:

> (…) if you did really like them to begin with, you'd probably be sort of, you know, rallying behind them and being nice about them in front of your friends until they agree too (…). (Amanda)

This is a revealing finding as, due to the character of the relationship, the celebrity would not reciprocate such behaviour and defend the consumer when in a similar situation. This is due to the fact that for the individual consumer, such as Amanda, the celebrity's transgression poses a threat to their para-social relationship and to further 'consuming celebrity': forgiveness is a means to restoring and maintaining this relationship (Ho & Fung, 2011). As celebrities often represent aspirational reference groups (Escalas, 2004), any para-social

relationship is likely to enhance the consumer's desired self (Dwivedi, Johnson, & McDonald, 2015). Therefore, protecting the relationship also means protecting oneself, as keeping the celebrity 'idolised' supports the survival of their own sense of identity and feelings of self-worth (Banister & Coker, 2014; Boon & Lomore, 2001). As such, any transgression that damages the celebrity is also likely to damage the follower. If the individual is able to justify the transgression of their idol and convince their peer group of this, then this mitigates the damage done and the celebrity can more easily be forgiven. If the individual is not able to convincingly justify the transgression to their peers, then forgiveness is not likely to be given. In this case it might be that consumers take their public association with the celebrity out of view of their peers so that it appears that they are taken out of their reference group to avoid ridicule from their peers (Banister & Cocker, 2014).

Value system of consumer

The fourth consumer-related category is the consumer's own *value system*. In reacting to an incident, individuals automatically take into account their own personal values and ethical standards (Finkel et al., 2002) in making judgements. These values and ethical standards were evaluated by the participants to justify whether morally, forgiveness can be granted or not (Chung & Beverland, 2006; Zhou & Whitla, 2012):

> I'm anti what he [US singer Chris Brown] did obviously, and I guess it comes down to [something] like a principle (…). (Cameron)

Cameron's comment reflects the loss of respect for Chris Brown as the transgressions violated Cameron's own moral code (cf. Zhou & Whitla, 2012). It is his perception of a lack of social ethics that is likely to drive Cameron's behaviour (Beverland & Farrell, 2010) and manifest in not forgiving Chris Brown. Others, like Douglas were brought up 'with high morals (…) in a

highly Christian society (…) and part of that is to forgive'. That is, depending on the underlying moral code, consumers' propensity to forgive was influenced.

Celebrity-related drivers

Effort by the celebrity

Participants expected similar reactions from a celebrity as they do from those they share a personal history with. Hence, the perceived *effort by the celebrity* relates to the efforts made to earn consumer forgiveness. These efforts echo only some image repair strategies (cf. Benoit, 1997; Hambrick et al., 2015; Holdener & Kauffman, 2014) suggested to celebrities in order to provide consumers a reason to forgive. As this study investigates celebrity transgressions from the perspective of the consumer, the only strategies spoken of by participants relate to mortification (to confess and beg forgiveness) and corrective action. Participants suggested celebrities must acknowledge misbehaviour and explain the situation adequately (Exline et al., 2004; Morse & Metts, 2011; Mullet et al., 2004; Shapiro, 1991):

> (…) that's how I'd like to be treated, and that's how I would treat other people if I, if I was in the wrong. I like to make things better so, I like to be able to acknowledge when I'm wrong. And I think that yeah, celebrities I guess should do the same. (Sandy)

Bachman and Guerrero (2006) and Gold and Weiner (2000) propose celebrities should apologise sincerely, as Cameron states:

> You'd have to think that they'd sincerely apologise. Like (…) they knew that they'd done something wrong and they really meant it. (Cameron)

Consumers expect celebrities to demonstrate credible remorse, the wish to be forgiven and that they learned from their mistakes (Morse & Metts, 2011; Exline et al., 2004):

> Because you genuinely believe that they can redeem themselves. And if you genuinely believe that what they've done, they are genuinely remorseful and (…) you (…) believe that they deserve another opportunity. (Hugh)

In line with McCullough et al. (1997; 1998) participants looked for celebrities' display of empathy with the victim:

> You think ok apologising is not enough. [But rather him] trying to understand the people that he's [US Republican Senate candidate Todd Akin] affected (…) and if that even completely changes his argument, and he completely takes it back, then you're far more likely to forgive him (...). So, I suppose the amount of effort that you put in to rectify what's happened is the key. (Adam)

As the quote above also indicates, consumers wanted to see the luminary show intent or actions to make amends (Mullet et al., 2004; Gold & Weiner, 2000). The effort by the celebrity, i.e. the appearance of atonement can be viewed as repairing the para-social relationship by recreating the imagined connection from consumer to luminary through a pseudo-reciprocal act of penitence. Yet, it was interesting to note that other image repair strategies appeared to be too celebrity-centric to have any effects on consumer forgiveness.

Blurring of the private and public persona of the celebrity

Consumers project their feelings, emotions and expectations onto the celebrity and what they perceive the celebrity to be like (Berscheid & Ammazzalorso, 2003). This differs from a private relationship where, due to true reciprocal exchange, individuals tend to know what another person is like, i.e. they can make a better judgment in regard to the authenticity of the displayed persona. Yet, the image and reality of a celebrity's persona might not be easily distinguishable as it crosses public and private worlds (Turner, 2014). Hence, this leads to a perceived blurring of their private, often 'hidden' persona (Ichheiser, 1949; Singer, 1984) and the public image or persona of the celebrity, i.e. the constructed public identity (Marshall, Moore, & Barbour, 2015), also called the 'attributed celebrity' (Rojek, 2001, p. 18) as per exposure in the media. '(…) the blurring of the private/public distinction that occurs in celebrity media is essential for the maintenance of their star power' (Meyers, 2009, p. 892).

Yet, the more the supposedly private persona is revealed the more 'celebrification' occurs (cf. Driessens, 2012; Turner, 2014). Issues arise when mismatches occur between the luminary's portrayed public image and their 'true colours' as it decreased participants' willingness to forgive and influenced perceived connections to the celebrity, with regard to trustworthiness and commitment (Pornpitakpan, 2003; 2004; Xie & Peng, 2009). Due to that mismatch, participants deemed a misdemeanour as out of character but nonetheless refused to forgive:

> (…) you did appreciate that he [Tiger Woods] was like, perfect. (…) he's the ideal image (…). (…) that changed, the shock hit when that happened, but then you got to a point where you realised that he's a man, he made a mistake, well 30 mistakes, and you know, maybe they weren't mistakes. Maybe that's who he actually was. (…) Tiger [Woods] is a sex freak. That's the truth. I am pissed off that he's used his image, like projected image, whatever that may be, (…) to make money, right? (Hugh)

Other participants like Sandy indicated that the bigger the perceived mismatch the bigger the perceived betrayal. Yet, if the transgression 'matched' the celebrity's perceived image, participants tended to overlook the misdemeanour and were more lenient due to the congruency between person and behaviour as the celebrity was 'still in character':

> (…) Jeremy Clarkson [former UK TV show Top Gear host] was in the paper quite a bit for just offending people. (...) he was complaining about some union workers striking somewhere. And, he's a person who's given to hyperbole. (…) so someone asked what should happen there. And he was like 'I think they should all be rounded up and shot' [laughs]. And you know, it's blatantly, it's blatantly him (…) very much in line with his personality and character. (Adam)

Ability to disentangle the private and professional persona of the celebrity

In contrast to private relationships, where private and professional persona can be more closely intertwined and both be experienced in person, this differs for celebrities. Hence, another celebrity-related category is the consumers' *ability to disentangle a celebrity's private life from their professional life* after a transgression as a powerful instigator for forgiveness.

Forgiveness in this case also ties in with the consumer's ability to *morally decouple* (Bhattacharjee, Berman, & Reed, 2013) the transgression from the person:

> I lost a lot of respect for him [Tiger Woods] as a person, but not as an athlete. (…) Got to give credit where credit's due. He's done things that no one else could. (Hugh)

However, this acknowledgment of the difference between professional and private persona was dependant on the transgression not being associated with the profession as such. Here, it appears that the standing as a celebrity is closely related to the professional achievement or, as Rojek (2001, p. 18) describes it, to the 'achieved celebrity' status. Participants appear to use a process of 'moral decoupling' (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013, p. 126) by which judgments of the celebrity's performance and morality are separated, allowing for continued support of the luminary. This appears to differentiate the 'artificial' from the 'real' relationships where individuals might find it harder to decouple.

Due to the fact that celebrities are seen as exemplary and inspirational figures by consumers (Choi & Rifon, 2012), participants reflected on the initial reason why they (and others) admired celebrities which might have led to the 'celebrification' (Driessens, 2012, p. 643) of these individuals in the first place. This was often the celebrity's high standard of achievement (Choi & Rifon, 2012). Following a transgression, seeing the celebrity return to what made them famous and successful reminded consumers why they admired the celebrity in the first place (Boon & Lomore, 2001), namely their 'achieved celebrity' status (Rojek, 2001, p. 18). The celebrity's subsequent accomplishments were a strong factor in helping repair their image and generate forgiveness by 'overriding the transgression' and focusing on the 'area of celebrification' which they were revered for:

> Especially in sports, you enjoy them because they're exciting to watch and (…) you appreciate their skill level and everything they do. So, if you see that again, that's what probably drew people to Tiger [Woods] in the first place (…). If Tiger, at next year's Masters [tournament], (…) [is] 5 shots behind in the final round and just wins with a big putt on the 18th, then he's instantly going to go back up in the books. (Cameron)

Such behaviour may have led to the positive response towards Tiger Woods' first PGA tour win since his infidelity scandal in 2009 (Harig, 2012) as consumer's attention shifted back to more positive connotations in regard to the celebrity (Brazeal, 2008). Such effect was also influenced by consumers often only focusing on the most recent positive success stories rather than past transgressions. Furthermore, a celebrity's success also shortened the time until revering them again:

> (…) [US singer] Chris Brown is like the epitome of this (…). His music was (…) so popular, he had such a massive following, and then the whole thing with Rihanna [also a US singer] (…) [T]hat was pretty horrendous. (…) It turned me off him for a short time (...). And then I was like 'well I really like his music' [laughs], so I (...) don't like him as a person, but still (…). (Cheryl)

Disentangling of the personas through focusing on professional success was viewed as a substitute for the failure in other areas and justified forgiveness. This made it easier to pardon the celebrity. This was also the case compared to forgiving somebody in a personal relationship:

> Kobe [Bryant] doesn't have to do as much as a personal friend [would] to attain my forgiveness, purely because of his status. (Douglas)

Context-related drivers

Transgression severity and frequency

The connection between forgiveness and the transgression is dependent on the *severity* of the perceived betrayal (Finkel et al., 2002; Zhou & Whitla 2012; Boon & Sulsky 1997). This study also confirms that the severity of transgression committed influences Generation Y's

willingness to forgive a celebrity. Moreover, the magnitude of a transgression was amplified, impacting on the intensity of emotions perceived, when having experienced a similar event in the consumer's personal life. In comparison, a well-mannered 'good citizen' celebrity committing a minor mistake would easily be forgiven. Minor transgressions impact the consumer's life or their connection to the celebrity less profoundly and pervasively than do major transgressions (McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003).

The *frequency* of transgressions was also an influencing factor on forgiveness (Steiner, Allemand, & McCullough, 2011):

> (…) if this was the fourth time that somebody had come out and said 'sorry for cheating', would kind of be like 'well you're probably going to do it again', so I'm slightly less likely to forgive you for that (…). (Sandy)

For consumers, multiple transgressions appear to lower the celebrity's credibility and trustworthiness compared to a one-time incident which might be more easily forgiven. Both severity and frequency of the transgression influenced the consumer's tendency to forgive despite the fact that they were never the 'true target' of the celebrity's offence.

Unexpected events

Unexpected events also have the potential to influence forgiveness. Consumers may sympathise with celebrity if they believe that the celebrity was a 'victim of circumstances' (Zhou & Whitla, 2012, p. 1015). Forgiveness here was most relevant when discussing Lance Armstrong's doping scandal, before a full report from the United States Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) documenting Armstrong's drug use, was publicised. Prior to USADA's publication, participants spoke of feelings of forgiveness for Armstrong claiming that USADA was on a witch hunt to convict Armstrong:

(…) he's passed every drug test in his life. And for this to go on and on and on, you kind of feel sorry for him (…). (Hugh)

Participants stressed their sympathies towards the situation as they saw Armstrong as a victim, despite not knowing if Armstrong was guilty or not. Such behaviour relates to the consumer's prior investment in the relationship (Chung & Beverland, 2006; Finkel et al., 2002) which becomes more accentuated as the 'energy input' is unidirectional.

Time-related drivers

'(…) time is necessarily an intrinsic aspect of forgiveness' (McCullough et al., 2003, p. 540). Time is interlinked to all the other drivers. Therefore, participants alluded to the aspects of time in multiple ways. One aspect is that time as part of the forgiving process is needed for a prosocial change to occur towards the celebrity (McCullough et al., 2003). Studies have shown that with time forgiveness increases (McCullough et al., 2010), a fact that was also highlighted in the study:

> 'Oh, he's [Tiger Woods] winning this now' and that infidelity just goes further down the track. (…) they're probably going to, as time passes, forget about the infidelities and look more at the current … (Mike)

Furthermore, another aspect is that this time factor is also connected to the success of the celebrity as participants seem to focus on the most recent accomplishments or the professional side of the celebrity.

A more severe transgression, however, appears to have a bigger impact on the consumer (McCullough et al., 2010), hence more time is needed before Generation Y is willing to forgive:

> (…) depending on the severity of the initial act, the amount of time needed to forgive one would be different. (Douglas)

Moreover, the reaction time of the celebrity to the committed transgression is of importance. Participants also stated that time decreases the willingness to forgive as the grudge held becomes worse if the celebrity takes no action:

> I think people's opinions will degrade the longer it takes to try and compensate for it. (…) they should (…) try to fully compensate and make up for what they did wrong, as quickly as they can. (Adam)

A time delay can decrease the likelihood of forgiveness, due to the consumers' initial reactions to a transgression (McCullough et al., 2003; Shapiro, 1991) which can be mitigated by the celebrity's responses. Here, unlike in private relationships, the consumer might not have any direct influence on time and timing related to actions undertaken by the celebrity.

Conceptual framework

The analysis above identified nine categories that explain why or why not participants forgive celebrities that have transgressed in some way. Grouped into different interconnected themes or 'drivers', consumer-related drivers, celebrity-related drivers and context-related drivers (the latter two both based on the consumer's perception), these constitute the '3Cs' framework of consumer's forgiveness. The emerging conceptual framework, illustrated in Figure 1, highlights the internal judgment as well as the justification process which consumers experience when contemplating why (or why not) to forgive and continue the para-social relationship.

Following a celebrity's transgression any or all of the drivers (consumer-related, celebrity-related or context-related) may directly influence consumer's judgement, justification and decision to forgive. The consumer-related factors are categorised as having two different sub-factors. The humanisation and para-social/emotional bond refer directly to the consumer's

construction of the celebrity—consumer relationship and cover the more hedonic attributes of the relationship. Conversely, the self-interest, self-protection and value system factors are more rational and are judged and justified in relation to the self. That is, in line with the suggested definition of consumer forgiveness, the consumer-related factors shown in Figure 1 can be linked to the affective, cognitive and motivational, i.e. behavioural states as coping strategies against the repercussions of a transgression.

Figure 1: '3Cs' conceptual framework for consumers' forgiveness of celebrity's transgressions
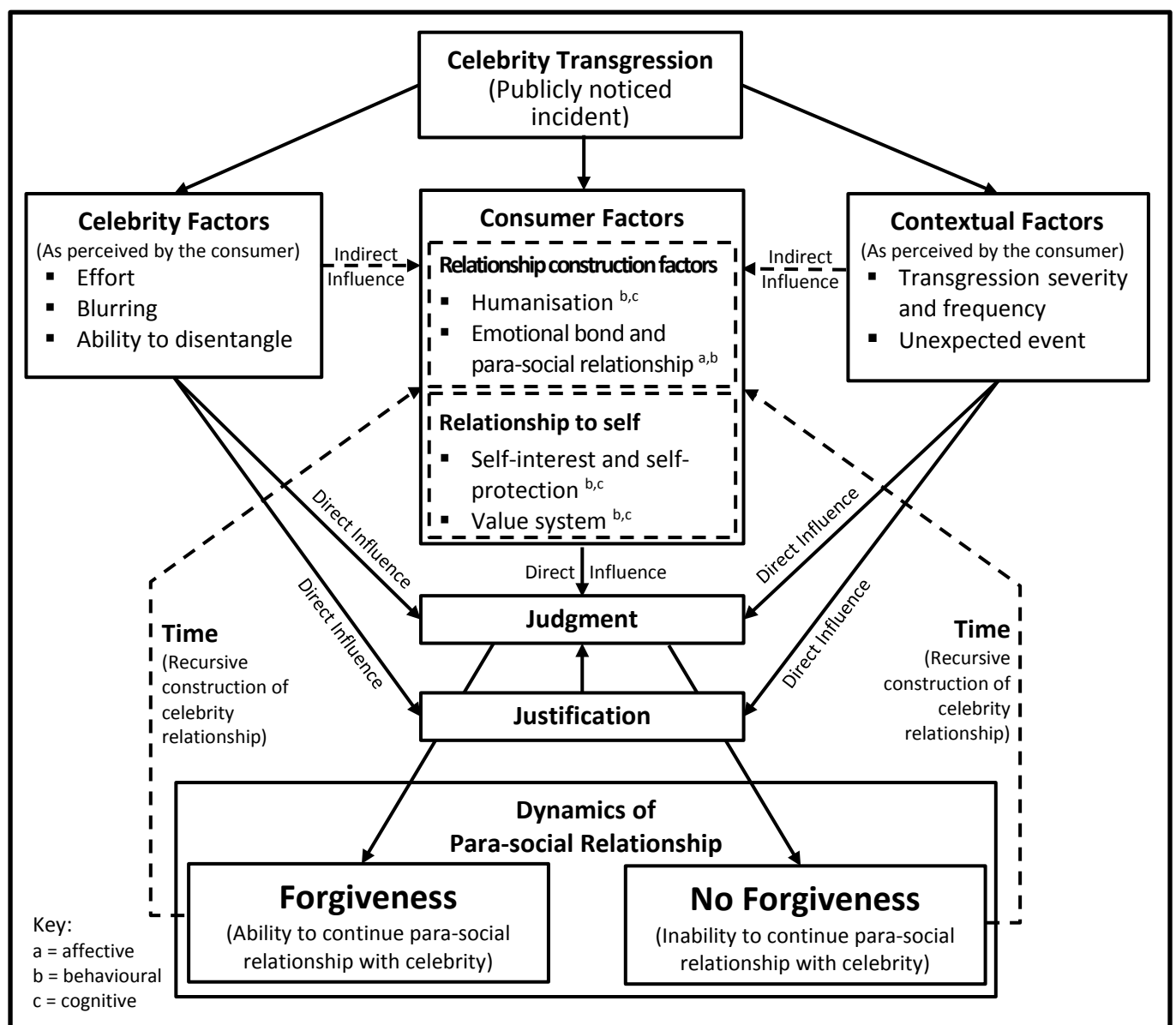
In addition to these direct influences, the celebrity and contextual factors may also have an indirect influence on the judgement and justification process of forgiveness. For example, the celebrity's poor effort in apologising, combined with the severity of the transgression will influence the consumer-related drivers and their influence on the judgement and justification process that determine forgiveness. This study has also found that consumer forgiveness is subject to time. In relation to the fluid nature of relationships (McCullough et al., 2003), the time component of the framework represents the recursive construction of the celebrity relationship. It is not uncommon for negative feelings relating to not forgiving to turn positive over time (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). Time allows for the relationship to be reconstructed in the minds of the consumer in an active attempt to 'rid themselves of unpleasant negative feelings and motivations regarding the transgressor' (McCullough et al., 2003, p. 549), such that it affects the 'self'-related consumer factors. Even where a consumer forgives a celebrity's transgression, the act of forgiveness or the transgression itself is likely to affect the way the consumer constructs their perception of the celebrity. Hence, time has been integrated into the framework as an interlinking driver.

Implications, limitations and future research

Theoretical implications

This research contributes to both forgiveness and celebrity research by providing a greater understanding about whether and why consumers forgive luminary's transgressions while 'consuming celebrity'. It extrapolates from the research findings to make visible the forgiveness mechanisms that are unique to consumers' imagined relationships with celebrities. A central contribution to theory is the development of the '3Cs' framework for

consumers' forgiveness in one-sided or para-social relationships where no actual acts of reciprocity are identifiable. Unlike previous research which provides image repair guidelines for celebrities to follow in order to gain forgiveness (see Benoit, 1997), this work considers forgiveness from the consumer's perspective taking into account the characteristics of these para-social relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956). This research shows that, while the celebrity's actions to encourage forgiveness have some effect on consumers, it is only part of the process that a consumer will go through before deciding to forgive. More important from the consumer's perspective are the internal processes related to the affective (Exline et al., 2004; Worthington & Scherer, 2004), cognitive (Flanigan, 1992) and motivational (McCullough, 2001) components of forgiveness. These internal processes occur within these one-sided relationships that differentiate the consumer's perceived status from that of the celebrity due to the revered luminary's elevated god-like position (cf. Caughey, 1978). Here, forgiveness comes into play if the luminary loses such status but gains humanness (Gies, 2011) after a transgression. The option to forgive might give the consumer power in this non-reciprocal relationship and might make the relationship appear more balanced and 'real' (again).

Forgiveness of celebrity transgressions appears to be also vital in regard to consumer's well-being, especially when a strong para-social bond has been established: '[T]oday's celebrities are (…) now our friends' (McDonnell, 2014, p. 55). This is enabled by consumers shortening the proximal distance (Zhao, 2003) 'bringing luminaries into their homes' via Information and Communication Technology, such as smartphones. To forgive the luminary might help to shield oneself from pain experienced in breaking the imaginary connection. To stand up for the celebrity or to redirect the blame elsewhere might help the consumer protect the para-

social relationship from collapse. To remove one's association with the celebrity out of view from peers and public might assist in avoiding ridicule (Banister & Cocker, 2014). These strategies can be vital to buffer oneself from harm and for the para-social relationship (Wohlfeil & Whelan, 2012) to survive. These might also be vital 'survival strategies' steered by the consumers as they do not have any direct influence on time and timing related to actions to be taken by the celebrities. Taking charge aids the consumer to protect their emotional investment knowing that, although the celebrity might make efforts to make amends for their transgression which would then help to mend the 'broken relationship' to them, the celebrity on their part would hardly ever defend the consumer for any wrongdoing like individuals would do in close reciprocal relationships. Yet, both consumer and luminary 'need one another'. The consumer wants to continue to consume celebrity, the celebrity wants to be consumed to maintain their status and worth. For the latter, the luminary's appearance of atonement signals their will to repair their standing in the public eye by employing a pseudo-reciprocal act of penitence towards the para-social relationships with the consumers they are being revered by.

Unlike forgiveness in true friendships that is provided through one's good nature (Leach & Lark, 2004) or out of concern for others (Richards, 1988), consumers might 'conveniently forget to think about their moral principles if such an omission serves their own interests' (Bateson, et al., 2002, p. 440), and benefits them personally to forgive a celebrity (Exline et al., 2003; McCullough et al., 2001). This is particularly important when the celebrity becomes part of a member of a consumer's reference group. If the celebrity transgresses, their status and ultimately the status of the consumer drops. Forgiveness restores the balance and legitimises the celebrity remaining in the reference group and the restoration of consumer's

status. Unforgiveness results in the opposite and eventuates in distancing oneself from the celebrity (Escalas & Bettman, 2009b). This self-interest factor contrasts with previous notions of forgiveness, and appears to be a motivator of the willingness to forgive, as the act of forgiveness may also increase immediate outcomes for the forgiver (Balliet, Mulder, & van Lange, 2011).

Participants appeared to either not forgive due to a clash with one's moral code (cf. Beverland & Farrell, 2010), or to morally rationalise (Bandura, 1991; Bateson et al., 2002; Tsang, 2002) the behaviour. Therefore, the immoral behaviour of the celebrity is either justified or condoned (Lee & Kwak, 2016; Worthington et al., 2014). Some consumers appear to morally decouple the judgment of performance from the judgment of morality by denouncing their transgression but continuing to support the luminary (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013). Moral disengagement (Bandura, 1991; Bandura et al., 1996) assists consumers in becoming more forgiving of transgressing celebrities.

Managerial implications

Consumers express a desire for troubled celebrities to apologise and show remorse sooner rather than later. Managers of celebrities and the celebrities themselves should understand that consumers expect the situation to be dealt with quickly, as the speed of their response signals that they are taking the situation seriously. Managers should assist the celebrity to apologise swiftly as this provides clarity about the incident. Luminaries can explain their actions before their reputation and personal brand are potentially further damaged through their silence or if the incident is taken out of context by the media. Failure to address the

incident may damage the celebrity's brand even more than the damage from the incident itself.

As consumers forgive celebrities in a similar manner to how they forgive friends, a luminary's strategies to restore the para-social relationship are crucial. For example, social media may be utilised to reach consumers just as friends reach out to other friends via social media. This might help the process of forgiveness from a consumer's perspective by attempting to restore the emotional bond.

Limitations and future research

The participants were all Generation Y consumers hence the findings may only be indicative of that cohort, yet findings can be extrapolated to deepen the understanding of consumers' para-social relationships to celebrities in the context of forgiveness of luminaries' transgressions. Determining whether forgiveness is provided in a similar way in other consumer segments necessitates future investigation.

This research revealed some insightful findings which warrant further exploration. For example, further analysis can be sought from the participants' focus on the celebrity's professional career and success after a transgression has occurred. It might also be interesting to investigate whether an invest–divest–invest coping strategy holds true. Stage one signifies the consumer's investment into the celebrity. The divestment phase is due to the transgression. Stage three includes (re)investment in the wake of the celebrity's recovery efforts either through seeking forgiveness or excelling professionally or both. Furthermore, time appears as a central aspect in consumers' forgiveness, as such the time perspective

needs analysing in more detail. Participants for this study were all interviewed at a point in time that was determined by the research process rather than the celebrities' transgressions. Hence, future participants could be interviewed as a celebrity's transgression unfolds in real-time and then at regular intervals afterwards to capture changes in consumers' forgiveness tendencies. A further avenue to extend this forgiveness research would be to investigate how the stories of transgressions are told via the media and which medium influenced the information consumers use to make judgements on why (or why not) to forgive.

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