Re-contextualising Consumer Escapism: Binge-watching and the Unexpected Effects of an Escape

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Abstract

The aim of this doctoral thesis is to deepen and expand the contextualisation of consumer escapism and the research recognises that personal experiences influence and impact on escapism as do more distant and remote events that take place in the wider world**.** Much of the extant work in the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) tradition of consumer research has explored escapism in terms of investigating extraordinary experiences and framing an escape as something that is different and separate to everyday life. Drawing upon the context of binge-watching, this thesis explores how escapism is integrated and woven within consumers' everyday lives, taking place in mundane contexts that we live within. This thesis sets out to interrogate the nature and character of self-electing to tune in and get lost in narratives over extended periods of time and immersion to develop new theoretical concepts to address this form of escapism.

The context for this study was a three-year (2016-2019) micro-ethnographic study of consumer's binge-watching of TV shows, particularly the Netflix political drama, *House of Cards* (2013-18). The methods used to triangulate the data include semi-structured in-depth interviews, subjective personal introspection, diary entries, telephonic communications and use of videographic and visual materials. The emergent findings show that escapism is pervasive, interacting with our thoughts, fantasies, imaginations and linked to our interests like fandom. To experience an escape is contingent on various preconditions being met. This thesis makes contributions to our understanding of how consumers seek out and experience an escape and accounts for an escape lasting beyond the point of consumption. The research theorises how an escape can deliver unexpected outcomes that consumers may not necessarily expect.

The thesis is presented in alternative format with four of its chapters being delivered as research articles. Each article presents specific research objectives which stem from the overall aim of the study.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

List of Appendices

List of Abbreviations

ACR	Association of Consumer Research
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CCT	Consumer Culture Theory
EMAC	European Marketing Academy Conference
HoC	House of Cards
ICR	Interpretive Consumer Research
JBR	Journal of Business Research
JCR	Journal of Consumer Research
JMM	Journal of Marketing Management
MT	Marketing Theory
SPI	Subjective Personal Introspection
VOD	Video-on-Demand

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Declaration

This thesis has not been submitted in support of an application for another degree at this or any other university. It is the result of my own work and includes nothing that is the outcome of work done in collaboration except where specifically indicated. A full statement of authorship for each of the multi-authored publications (articles 1, 3 and 4) and the solo-authored publication (article 2) are outlined in this section and includes signed certification by myself and my supervisors (other authors) of the proportion for which credit is due for each article.

Excerpts of this thesis have been published in the following academic publications and conference manuscripts. Article 4 (Chapter 6) is currently under review following a revise and resubmit decision.

Academic Papers:

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Jones, S. (2020). Existential Isolation… Press Play to Escape. *Marketing Theory*, 20(2), 203-210.

Jones, S., Cronin, J., and Piacentini, M.G. (2020). The interrupted world: Surrealist disruption and altered escapes from reality. *Marketing Theory*, 20(4), 459-480.

Jones, S., Cronin, J., and Piacentini, M.G. (originally submitted December 2020, re-submitted 9th June 2021). Celebrity Brand Break-up: Fan Experiences of Para-loveshock (current status: under review – revise and re-submit, *Journal of Business Research*).

Conference Papers:

Jones, S., Cronin, J., and Piacentini, M.G. (2018) Mapping the Extended Frontiers of Escapism: binge-watching and hyperdiegetic exploration. *European Marketing Academy Conference* (EMAC), Glasgow, May 2018.

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Author Contribution Statement

I initially designed the study, gathered all the data for this thesis, and conducted initial data analysis on my own. My supervisors gave me feedback on the analysed data and together, we agreed upon which themes to pursue. My supervisors are co-authors on articles 1, 3 and 4 (Chapters 3, 5 and 6) and Professor Maria Piacentini and Dr James Cronin (supervisors) were active and collaborated in substantially editing, writing, and developing the articles before they went to review at the targeted journals. My supervisors collaborated in revisions and resubmissions of all drafts of article 1 (Chapter 3), article 3 (Chapter 5) and article 4 (Chapter 6). Article 2 (Chapter 4) is a solo-authored manuscript and my supervisors offered advice on a first draft. Feedback as well as edits were provided on other chapters as they might for a monograph thesis.

The proportional breakdown of authorship contribution for each article is detailed below.

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Scott Jones: 70% Contribution

Professor Maria Piacentini: 15% Contribution

Dr James Cronin: 15% Contribution

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The total word count for this thesis is 76,886 words (including tables, figures, references and appendices) and this does not exceed the permitted maximum word count (80,000 words).

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Origins of the Research

I am writing this introduction chapter in the hinterland between Christmas and New Year (2020/2021). A time when the tree still sparkles, the fridge has leftovers to plunder, and hunkering down to feast on films and TV boxsets is a prominent feature of these days. This latter point particularly resonates as I reflect and consider how changes in TV consumption inspired this PhD and I account for and justify my approach to this thesis. As I reflect on my PhD journey and contemplate what 2021 might bring, I think back to what led me to this place. My own personal experiences and observations from 'my own life' (Hackley, 2007; Holbrook, 2002) inspired this thesis. It began in late 2014, almost a year before I began my PhD. I had separated from my girlfriend and subsequently spent a large amount of my newly acquired freedom binge-watching for the first time. It started with *Breaking Bad* (2009-2013) and I devoured all 62 episodes in just under a month. Next, was the CIA inspired drama, *Homeland* (2011-2020). I wanted to take in every intricate twist and turn and decided to savour the first four seasons, watching at a slower pace, restricting and rewarding myself to a couple of episodes every evening.

Having completed a couple of marathon binges, watching four or five episodes consecutively for up to four or five hours at a stretch, I felt like I knew the on-screen characters intimately and that I occupied their worlds. This felt different compared to when I watched something on a weekly basis where the immersion felt restricted, and clunky recaps from the previous week disrupted the continuous flow. Somewhat bizarrely, after a few hours of bingeing, my time away from these story worlds was spent thinking about them, and the characters and scenarios were haunting me in my dreams at night, when I was driving to work, or unloading the shopping at the weekend. There was something interesting about escaping into these narrative worlds for prolonged periods of time and the after-thoughts and lingering feelings warranted further exploration. Afterwards, I would go online to read *The Guardian*'s episode-by-episode *Homeland* blog. Personal experiences aside, the start of my PhD coincided with the Collins English Dictionary declaring 'binge-watch' as its 2015 Word of the Year. The term "binge-watching" had previously entered the cultural lexicon circa 2013, popularised by Netflix releasing entire seasons of their shows, most notably their big

budget remake of the 1990 BBC series, *House of Cards* (2013-18) (*HoC* hereafter). The proliferation of consumers self-scheduling their own consumption of televisual content suggested to me the emergence of deep and unusual modes of escape. Previous literature on television consumption had concentrated on traditional forms of viewing, characterised by slower viewing patterns and watching a television show in weekly instalments (see Cohen and Taylor, 1992; Katz and Foulkes, 1962; Livingstone, 1988) which meant that an escape through TV was for temporary and emancipatory short bursts of immersion.

Facilitated by digitalisation and streaming, the widespread explosion of content online seemed to mark profound changes in how we acquire, view and experience video media and I was interested in opportunities to explore how these changes impacted on the experience of becoming lost in narrative worlds for much longer than had previously been theorised and what this means for escapism. Furthermore, the dedication and commitment required from a consumer to binge a particular TV series intrigued me and I started to wonder about how relations with characters and actors on screen can develop and intensify, given that consumers are spending longer periods of time with them. Russell et al. (2004) explain that, "TV programs and their characters can become an obsession with which viewers constantly interact and around which they model their lives" (p.151). Russell and colleagues (2004) suggest the characters depicted in TV shows are reasons to connect with it. Besides the characters, I was interested in the actual actor playing a character, and how fan interest in an actor may account for why consumers connect to a particular show. In the case of the Netflix political drama, *HoC* (2013-18) the lead actor of the show, Kevin Spacey and my own fan interest and admiration for him was *the* major influence for why I binged the show. This collection of observations and personal experiences inspired my interest in binge-watching as an important context through which I could consider consumer's escapist pursuits. In the next section I will give a background to key concepts, including bingeing and binge-watching, explore connections between binge-watching and fandom, and a section on consumer escapism.

1.2 Background to key concepts

1.2.1 Bingeing

The word ‘binge’ has long been associated with the excess consumption of food (Faber at al., 1995; Hirschman and Stern, 1999), alcohol (Hackley et al., 2013; Banister and Piacentini, 2006; Piacentini and Banister, 2009) and illicit drugs (Hirschman, 1992; Goulding et al., 2009). The word binge is said to have originated from Lincolnshire dialect in 1848, meaning ‘to soak’ and was extended locally to excessive drinking, “soaking” (Collins, 2015). Wilk (2014) also dates the origins of ‘binge’ back to the early 18th century work cultures outlining how, in several European colonies, labourers participating in all-male work gangs would engage in rituals of extended binges when paid-off. At the end of a working period, the men were financially rewarded and to counteract the hard and challenging rigours of their work, a binge was a spree, a period of release and freedom. This involved indulging in overtly outrageous behaviour and consumption, including drinking, eating and acquiring the services of prostitutes. By the 19th century, binge was associated with the indulgence of alcohol in industrial settings and farming communities, and by the early 20th century the word was being used for parties at which large amounts of alcohol was consumed (Wilk, 2014). Later, the term binge and its association with overindulgence, particularly around alcohol, drunkenness, and links to an excessive drinking culture led to negative connotations of the term (Piacentini and Banister, 2009).

There are a number of theoretical aspects on bingeing and the first characteristic is the association between bingeing with impulsive behaviour (Baumeister, 2002; Hirschman and Stern, 1999; Sharma et al., 2010). Acting impulsively is a tendency to act thoughtlessly, in the spur of the moment and reveals a lack of reflective capacity (Passini, 2013). Impulsiveness can provide consumers with feelings of immediate gratification and pleasure (Hackley et al., 2013; Hirschman, 1982; Thompson and Hirschman, 1995) and offers a temporary release from reality, “letting yourself go, forgetting the frustrations of everyday life” (Szmigin et al., 2008: 365). However, Hirschman (1982) suggests feelings of gratification are likely to dissipate and post-binge evaluations manifest and this can lead to “feelings of worthlessness and lack of control” (p.157). These feelings can be particularly acute when consumers reflect on what motivated or led them to a binge in the first place, and searching for gratification can become a cycle of dissatisfaction (Passini, 2013).

A second characteristic of bingeing is associated with compulsive consumption (Faber et al., 1995; Faber and O’Guinn, 1992) and Faber et al. (1995) explain that it is

"a type of consumer behaviour which is inappropriate, typically excessive, and clearly disruptive" (p.132). It is concerned with consuming for the sake of consuming, and unlike impulsive behaviour, compulsive consumption can be pre-planned and momentarily helps mitigate stress. Compulsive consumption is drawn upon to improve feelings, particularly when an individual has a low sense of self-worth (Faber at al., 1995). Individuals who engage in compulsive behaviours such as shopping (Lee and Park, 2008), gambling (Cotte and Latour, 2009) and eating (Hirschman and Stern, 2001) for example are often already in negative mood states before they compulsively consume (Faber et al., 1995; Trautmann-Attman and Johnson, 2009). Compulsive consumption temporarily helps to overcome negative psychological states and is sought after for feelings of gratification and pleasure (Faber et al., 1995; O'Guinn and Faber, 1989). However, a consequence of compulsive consumption is a reliance on binges to provide or maintain a level of happiness, and this may become unattainable in the long-term (Fournier and Richins, 1991). Belk (2014) argues the proliferation of a never-ending supply of digital goods and online consumption practices is resulting in readily available binge experiences. Similarly, Hewer (2020: 11) suggests the on-demand availability of a binge speaks to the "spirit of liquidity" where "consumers flow inevitably towards their desire" and they are supposedly made to feel that they have choice and control. Consumers can now access 24-hour take-away services, video-on-demand (VOD from here on in) platforms, on-screen gambling or browse online retailers 24-7. A binge might therefore become a normalised pattern of behaviour, part of everyday social practice within households. For example, Netflix release the majority of their own content at once, to cater to or to create a binge culture for its audience (Yalkin, 2019). Consequently, consumers may find it difficult to resist or control their binge urges with such ease of accessibility and supply being so readily available (Feiereisen et al., 2019).

Thirdly, a binge can lead to a state of oblivion (Hirschman, 1982; Goulding et al., 2009; Pettigrew and Charters, 2010) and achieving a state of unconsciousness may be a motivator for engaging in binge practices. Pettigrew and Charters (2010) explored how binge drinking was pursued as a way to temporarily overlook one's problems and to alleviate worries, "drinking to forget and even ultimately lead to temporary oblivion" (p.212). Achieving a state of oblivion through binge consumption was further explored in the work of Goulding et al. (2009) and they describe the nightclub environment as an

"orgy of excesses" (p.767) where the pleasure of "losing it" can be achieved through a combination of alcohol, drugs and the euphoric clubbing experience. This temporarily allows consumers to reach a state of mind where they switch off and it engenders "dissolution of the individual self… a state of void" (p.767).

Fourth, engagement in a binge, and consuming excessively suggests a focus on individual performance and there is a desire to communicate to other consumers one's binge rituals (Feiereisen et al., 2019; Passini, 2013; Pettigrew, 2002). Whether this is to project and protect self-esteem, or bingeing for impression management and self-achievement purposes (Passini, 2013; Pettigrew, 2002). Pettigrew (2002) suggests bingeing is a way for male beer drinkers to "communicate their strength and masculinity" and females' participation in binge drinking rituals was to "communicate their assertiveness and desire for equality" (p.120). More recently, Feiereisen et al. (2019) suggests binge-watching may have masculine overtones, contrasting it with broadcast TV, "associated with housewives" and bingeing TV has a "progress-narrative which assumes that technological advances move us away from a feminized past and toward a masculinized future" (p.263). Indeed, males may turn to binge practices in response to anxieties surrounding threatened masculine identities (Holt and Thompson 2004). I will now provide a more specific analysis of binge-watching.

1.2.2 Binge-watching

Despite some negative suggestions and the stigma of the term, binge, streaming providers, including Netflix, Amazon and Sky have embraced and marketised the term "binge-watching". Streaming providers and TV networks have framed this new binge-worthy form of TV viewing as a "manageable, hedonistic, yet high-quality form of entertainment" (De Keere et al., 2020: 3). Contrasting it with scheduled television where networks release weekly instalments of a TV show (Jenner, 2016, 2020), binge-watching has been promoted as handing consumers control over *what* to watch and *when* to watch it (Chambers, 2019). Schweidel and Moe (2016: 1) explain that binge-watching offers viewers an opportunity "to view several episodes of a single series in immediate succession" and Oxford Dictionaries (2016) defines it as "watching multiple episodes of (a television program) in rapid succession, typically by means of DVDs or digital streaming". Perks (2014) argues that the term binge-watching has negative

connotations and it fails to convey a viewer's engagement with a story world. A more complimentary and appropriate phrase, she suggests is "media marathoning" which "connotes a conjoined experience of commitment and stamina" (p.ix).

Previous consumer research literature on binge-watching has explored how consumers plan for a binge-watch. Lu et al. (2017) explored how consumers allocate their time in readiness for a binge and consumers show a preference for watching sequential episodes. Enjoyment is derived from making progress through a TV season. Elsewhere, Nanda and Banerjee (2020) reveal the technological features including ease of navigation, access to back catalogues and past episodes, and the ability to binge consecutive episodes of a TV season on streaming platforms impacts positively on consumer gratification, and these technological qualities help distinguish the binge-watch experience from watching regular TV. The idea that binge-watching is something different to traditional ways of watching TV has been discussed and explored by Feiereisen and colleagues (2019) and they reveal how "traditional-linear TV" whereby "TV shows are selected by the broadcaster and then viewed by a mass audience at a set time on a fixed TV set" (p.253) have been challenged and changed by digital advances and practices. Consumption of TV in the digital age means "a virtually unlimited choice of TV serials can be viewed anywhere, anytime, via a plethora of technological devices and online video services… transforming the ways in which viewers consume and interact with content" (Feiereisen et al., 2019: 254). Feiereisen et al. (2019) revealed that tensions can exist around binge-watching and consumers may find it difficult to hold back on watching all episodes at their disposal. This can result in consumers watching alone and there is a loss of consumption socialisation and lively discussions about a TV show. To counteract this, Feiereisen and colleagues (2019) recommend consumers engage in "realignment strategies" (p.262) whereby they pace out viewing or agree to watch with others and this helps to restore structure and sociality to the experience. However, with advances in technology, social media and communications, there is the possibility of sharing binge experiences and a like-minded devotion to a particular series online, with friends or remote and distant others who are naturally isolated from one another.

What precisely comprises a binge, in terms of how many episodes needs to be watched in succession is not clear, and is at the consumer's discretion (Schweidel and Moe, 2016). Jenner (2016) explains, "what exactly constitutes a binge is likely to be

different for everybody and defined through highly individualised terms and practices" (p.265). This suggests the consumer has some autonomy in scheduling when and what to watch, and how many episodes to watch. Recently, Feiereisen et al. (2020: 24) used the term "devouring" to describe binge-watching episode after episode. Devouring a TV series entails "consumers accelerate pace to get to the end of the story as quickly as possible" (p.24) and this suggests consuming a television series in a relatively short period of time and this might entail a race to the finish with themselves and possibly others. For binge-watchers, it is important to devour the show before anyone can reveal plot insights and twists and devouring is characterised by the removal of breaks between episodes, rapidly clicking on the "next episode" button and fast-forwarding credits and recaps (Feiereisen et al., 2020). Consumers who use these features can skim off a few minutes of time, but moreover these features devised by the various streaming platforms can increase the immersion, and the sense of "flow" that comes with continuously watching a TV season (Jenner, 2016; Perks, 2014). Prolonged and deep immersion, without interruptions, helps to provide a "more complete escape from everyday life than a person obtains from watching one episode" (De Keere et al., 2020: 13). The opportunity to become engrossed in a story world has long been conceptualised as detachment from reality, which allows for a temporary escape (Addis and Holbrook, 2010; Batat and Wohlfeil, 2009; Green and Brock, 2000). Binge-watching affords opportunities for consumers to stay immersed for longer and the ability to become lost in narrative worlds for much greater periods than once imagined (see section 1.2.4). Being so immersed in a text, suggests the show and the characters have some kind of enduring quality, a characteristic of fandom (Hills, 2002) and there are links between bingeing and fandom (Hills, 2018; Perks, 2014; Shim and Kim, 2018). I will now turn to the literature to provide a fuller account of binge-watching and fandom.

1.2.3 Binge-watching and Fandom

Any discussions of binge-watching would appear remiss without considering how rituals of binge-consumption overlap with and are conducive to the notion of fandom. Wohlfeil (2018) suggests a fan interest in an actor starts by actually watching him or her in a certain film or TV show. It moves on from there and a consumer's

personal enjoyment and admiration for a film actor plays a vital role in a consumer forming a fan relationship with the actor. This fan relationship becomes a primary reason to endlessly watch or continue to re-engage with an actor's work (Wohlfeil, 2018). It would be logical that a consumer's personal enjoyment and admiration of an actor is a reason to binge-watch a TV show in which they appear and Shim and Kim (2018: 99) suggest "the amount of TV viewing and fandom activity are positively correlated". According to Shim and Kim (2018: 99) a desire for a fan relationship with a character and an actor "is likely to be intensified in the binge-watching context" and they suggest that this is attributable to binge-viewers immersing themselves in a narrative for longer periods of time, and they are being continuously and sometimes excessively exposed to an actor and character. Hills (2005) also suggests a continuing commitment and love for a TV programme or film is "cult fandom" and the dedication required to watch a TV season, consuming multiple episodes is an intense experience that encourages fan-like behaviour. This is reiterated by Perks (2014) and she argues that binge-watching or what she prefers to call, "media marathoning", blurs the line between fans and non-fans and the "intensity and immersiveness of marathoning can, indeed be a gateway to fandom… marathoners temporarily adopt fan practices" (p.8). Binge-watching or media marathoning can lead to discussions about the show, forming relationships with actors and characters, researching and thinking about the story worlds, the stars in the show, and binge-viewers become engaged in practices that are often associated with fandom (Perks, 2014).

A relationship formed with an actor and the character they play in a favourite show offers a compelling reason to return to a particular show (Hills, 2018; Perks, 2014). Immersing oneself in a TV show involves being primarily focused on the characters and plots of the narrative world (Kuo et al., 2016; Russell et al., 2004) and spending time in this world supports feelings of familiarity and intimacy with characters actors and parasocial relations can form (Horton and Wohl, 1956). Halfman and Reinecke (2020: 15) suggest, "longer usage time should enable intensified entertainment experiences… More specifically, binge-watching allows for continued immersion and absorption, which should facilitate experiences of presence, transportation, and parasocial interactions". Parasocial relations and bingeing might be considered mutually reinforcing. On one-hand, binge-watching encourages parasocial relations, on the other, forming parasocial relations might be a reason to continue with a

binge. There is a complex tapestry of interrelated factors that contribute to the enjoyment and reasons to binge a particular TV show and personal engagement and being a fan of an actor is of particular importance. I will now turn to the theoretical dynamics of consumer escapism in the following section.

1.2.4 Consumer Escapism

As a theoretical construct, the term escapism has been used in a rather broad sense within the marketing and consumer research literature, and there has been an attempt to introduce a more comprehensive conceptualisation of consumer escapism. Cova and colleagues (2018) distinguish between 'escaping from' and 'escaping to' to further categorise escapes as mundane, restorative, warlike and Turnerian and they suggest greater consideration needs to be given to escapes that do not occur in extraordinary experiences.

Consumer researchers argue that consumers seek to escape the realities of their lives and Hirschman (1983) suggests an escape is sought after as an avoidance behaviour and an escape, "implies that individuals use activities as a way of avoiding current unhappy events or getting away from anxieties" (p.75). Individuals participating in an escape are seeking to avoid stress, responsibilities, roles and reality (Arnould and Price, 1993; Hirschman, 1983, Kuo et al., 2016) and desire to shift from an undesirable situation or circumstance to something more pleasant. Kuo et al. (2016) investigated the phenomena of consumer escapism to explore how individuals seek an escape to alleviate stress and detachment from reality offers stress relief, as a consequence of mental absorption, "a process of mentally "getting away from it all" through the consumption of products or services" (p.498). Kuo et al., (2016) suggest an escape relies heavily on the degree to which an individual experiences mental absorption and an escape must possess some quality that draws an individual's attention away from a source of stress. This may be through passively observing a narrative unfold, such as an escape through reading or watching or a TV show, or they suggest a more active form of escape, where individuals are interactive participants in an experience, such as video game playing. Kuo et al. (2016) conclude that a mental absorption must occur for an escape to provide some kind of break from the present reality that people occupy. This

can help to explain why individuals keenly seek out an escape and Cova et al. (2018: 447) state that "escapism is akin to breaking away from mundane reality". Although exact explanations differ, several themes in the escapist literature have emerged.

Firstly, escapism is characterised by seeking relief from the burdens and banality that characterises much of everyday life (Addis and Holbrook, 2010; Goulding et al., 2009; Scott et al., 2017) and Hirschman (1983: 66) notes, "the escapist motive is to be taken away from things that are unpleasant or worrisome". The preciseness of what people want to be taken away from is broad and varied in consumer research and there is a lack of articulation around exactly why people seek an escape (Arnould and Price, 1993). Past research suggests people occupy unsatisfactory roles, contend with work and responsibilities that are wearisome, or they live in monotonous environments and endure a humdrum existence. As such, individuals seek an escape, a desire for something else. More recently, Scott and colleagues (2017) revealed how participation in an over-the-top obstacle race was sought after as the ritualization of pain experienced during a Tough Mudder course provides opportunities for self-renewal through a regained consciousness of physicality. A Tough Mudder race course is an outlet to experience something that is otherwise missing from consumers over saturated lives. The authors suggest that an escape from ourselves is becoming an important feature in modern, contemporary life, particularly as people are becoming overloaded with nagging anxieties from their roles and responsibilities and people "need something to help them forget everything" and "forgetting oneself" (p.39). The study makes a significant contribution to the escapist literature and establishes that the extraordinary escape they investigate, contrasts with the kind of other worldly escapes that past consumer research have focused on. An escape through pain is one of self-loss, beyond the notion of an escape that is portrayed as journeying into various kinds of romantic spaces (Canniford and Shankar, 2013; Kozinets et al., 2004).

As Scott and colleagues (2017) both highlight and critique, a prominent feature in the escapist literature revolves around the notion that consumers seek out experiences where they lose all connection with everyday life, and escape is frequently conceptualised as voyaging into a fantastical world (see Belk and Costa, 1998; Lanier and Arnould, 2006; Kozinets et al. 2004). Consumer research frequently affirms the prominence of fantasy and escapism as important activities in consumers' lives,

however supposed clear-cut concepts of reality and fantasy can become blurred (Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Kozinets, 2001). Seregina's (2014) study of live-action role-playing games explores how themed games allow players to enter and immerse themselves into a world of fantasy, such as Harry Potter or BattleStar Galactical. These magical worlds are orientated towards providing a pleasurable and playful escape and despite being premised on fantasy, Seregina (2014) suggests our understanding of how fantasy operates is intertwined with our everyday lives and it is not something that just emerges spontaneously, "it is conditioned by culture and individuals' everyday lives, as this is what renders it recognizable and attractive" (p.21). We might consider that fantasy is subjectively constructed (Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Kozinets, 2001; Seregina, 2014) and escapism may actually be premised upon how "real" we consider fantasies to be. Despite many of consumer culture's supposed play areas being premised on fantasy and fantastical imaginations, the separation with and from the real world becomes less apparent.

The desire to escape 'from' something logically implies that consumers are seeking to escape 'into' something (Kerrigan et al., 2014). Jafari and Maclaran (2014) explain that consumers are looking to escape into a more desirable place than what one has to contend with. Goulding et al. (2002) suggests the appeal of an escapist environment is the opportunity to "engage in experiences that are distinct and separate from routine" (p.279). Escaping into other worlds that stand in contrast to consumers lived, everyday experiences provide an opportunity for some respite away from everyday constraints (Cova et al., 2018) and these inner worlds can provide some much-needed pleasure, excitement, and arousal (Cova et al., 2018; Goulding et al., 2009). However, the idea that escaping into inner worlds is inherently pleasurable (Green et al., 2014; Kerrigan et al., 2014) presents a relatively rosy and romantic picture of consumer escapism and what if unpleasant or alternative effects exist when consumers escape into inner worlds?

Various authors have imposed dichotomies in their categorisation and understanding of escapist experiences – whether this is active versus passive escapism or mundane versus extraordinary. Passive forms of escapism are undertaken from a third-person perspective (watching, listening and reading) and are defined as, "experiences in which consumers act only as observers through comprehension or

appreciation" (Kuo et al., 2016: 499). In contrast, active forms of escape provide a "component of interactivity" (Kuo et al., 2016: 500) and this includes activities such as participating in sports. Individuals watching a television show may passively observe the narrative unfold, whereas people playing video games or sports actively shape the narrative from a first-person perspective. Active forms of escape involving interactivity and engagement have drawn the majority of attention in consumer research. Cova et al. (2018) are critical of this, particularly the heavy focus on participatory activities and the emphasis on extraordinary experiences for an escape (Belk and Costa, 1998, Canniford and Shankar, 2011; Scott et al., 2017).

Extraordinary experiences have been conceptualised as helping consumers transcend the monotony of our daily lives, as they usually stand outside the structures of everyday life to offer something memorable, magical and regenerative (Belk and Costa, 1998; Canniford and Shankar, 2013; Kozinets, 2002). Tumbat and Belk (2011) suggest that most studies around various forms of extraordinary experiences are framed in relation to Victor Turner's (1969) structure/anti-structure conceptualisation. This returns to the idea that escapism is a two-fold process; consumers escape from structure, into anti-structure domains (Kozinets et al., 2004; Tumbat and Belk, 2011). Anti-structure is characterised by liberation and a sense of release and self-transformation (Turner, 1969). However, Cova and colleagues (2018) suggest the structure/anti-structure approach to escapism is "not necessarily sufficient to encapsulate the different forms of escape lived by today's consumers" (p.457). They theorise escapes according to distance from home or the self that facilitates it and the crossing of the two types of distance helps with the positioning of new forms of escape (mundane, restorative, war-like and Turnerian).

Cova et al. (2018) identify binge-watching as a form of mundane escapism that "[comprise] the small everyday escapes facilitated by technology and especially digitalization" (p.450). They suggest the use and classification of certain types of escapes as mundane is appropriate, given these escapes are much more ordinary compared with the extraordinary experiences accounted for in consumer research and mundane escapes "are all defined by the same search for self-suspension" (p.452). At this stage of the thesis, I am cautious to apply or categorise binge-watching as mundane and whether self-loss is always the primary motive of mundane forms of escapism. This

thesis will theoretically develop and deepen our understanding of consumer escapism and I will now outline the purpose of the study.

1.3 Purpose of the Research

Much research on consumer escapism revolves around the notion that individuals and groups seek out products, services, and activities in the pursuit of experiencing something distinct and separate from everyday life. The purpose of this thesis is to deepen and expand the contextualisation of consumer escapism and this is approached differently across the four enclosed articles (Chapters 3-6). The articles show how escapism is integrated into and interactive with our everyday lives and the world we occupy, taking place intimately in the ordinary contexts that we consume within, while also being influenced by remote circumstances or events that are not necessarily felt or encountered by consumers in any local sense. Escapism is enveloping, residing in our thoughts, imaginations, linked to our fan interests; however, it also contingent on many preconditions being met and is impacted upon by circumstances in the wider world.

The first and second paper centre on expanding our understanding of the personal and local experiences of escapism while the third and fourth papers centre on the widening our recognition of the more distant events and circumstances that can impact upon and influence escapism. By exploring how the personal experience and effects of binge-watching are felt beyond the time sitting in front of a screen, the first paper theorises how forms of escapism that are typically considered "passive" may function in more complex and demanding ways for individuals than previously imagined. The second paper delves deeper into the personal experience of the binge to explore how escapism, despite its functions and appeals, can be isolating and hermetic, constituting a boundary between individual escapists. Both papers show that consumers actively fill in gaps and secure answers within the TV narrative itself, and this continues within their own life worlds, after the initial escape. The third and fourth paper depart from the first and second to consider instead how larger and often faraway events and figures we trust and rely on, can disrupt and impact upon the experience of escapism. Article 3 situates binge-watching within its wider macro-environmental ambit to

document how escape from reality can be unsettled by changes in political and social status quo. Paper four moves the focus from binge-watchers to "fans" to explore how escapism can be unsettled and even negated by changes or threats to a consumer's fandom. There is another common theme between article 3 and 4, which is how change impacts escapism. As a result of these aims, I developed this research question,

'what happens to escapism when it does not operate according to how consumers think it should?'

1.4 Methods and Contextual Foundations

The methodology for this thesis is situated within the interpretivist paradigm and the empirical work for the thesis adopted a micro-ethnographic research approach. Micro-ethnography aims to provide an understanding of small, seemingly ordinary experiences of everyday life (Silverman, 2013). Micro-ethnography was considered appropriate to approach the content of these oftentimes domestically located bouts of escapism through binge-watching television shows, which Cova et al. (2018) refers to as "small everyday escapes facilitated by technology" (p.450). The use of ethnography had previously been applied to investigations of escapism within diverse and contextualised encounters such as adventure challenges (Scott et al., 2017), salsa dancing events (Holmqvist et al., 2020), "cruises" for young car enthusiasts (Hewer et al., 2008), and historical re-enactments (Belk and Costa, 1998). Ethnography involves spending a significant amount of time in the field which allows researchers to take on the roles of participants and observers to understand how immersion in these playful environments helped consumers escape from reality. Whereas micro-ethnography typically works within a smaller scale, briefer moments of activity (Giddings, 2009), happening within a tight boundary and for this study that pertains to participants watching the show from the confines of their household, the preparation for a binge-watch, and capturing the after effects and consumer behaviour after a binge session is complete. My adoption of a micro-ethnographic approach, maintained some traditions of ethnography such as use of videographic and visual materials, interviews and I developed an intimate understanding of the phenomena, by engaging in binge-watching *HoC* and other TV shows and maintaining video and journal diaries of my binge.

The micro-ethnographic research took place over a three-year period (2016 – 2019) and included semi-structured interviews, video recordings, participant photographs and notes shared through telephonic communications, and my own Subjective Personal Introspection (SPI) of binge-watching and fandom. A full account of the philosophical and methodological considerations underpinning the study is accounted for in Chapter 2 (Research Methodology).

In interpretivist consumer research, the use of a research context represents the foundations for theory generation (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) and emphasis is placed on selecting the site of context (s) of inquiry that will be most beneficial for the researcher to understand the research problem (Hudson and Ozanne, 1998). In deciding which TV show (s) would be the main focal point for this study, I had some loose criteria; I wanted to focus on a show that was well established, enjoyable to watch, had a recognised fan base, included a lead actor (s) that fans connected to, was released in a "binge ready" format and I was familiar or watched the show myself. The Netflix political drama, *HoC* was embarking on a fourth season (March, 2016). The show was considered a pioneer of the VOD binge format (Klarer, 2014), and received acclaim and awards including, two Emmy's and three Golden Globes. Media commenters heaped praise on *HoC* and the binge-ready format of the show, Richard Lawson writing for *The Atlantic* explained his binge experience of *HoC*:

> "I sat down to watch one episode before bed, that I remained hooked as I was by the time I pressed play on the thirteenth and final episode at 4.00am speaks to the fact that, yes, the show ended up being pretty darn entertaining. House of Cards itself turned out to be a lot of fun. I loved watching it".

Lawson elaborates, revealing the details of what is seen on screen and the teasing of the existence of a bigger world, off screen, kept him gripped, "House of Cards teases at plots and background details that we'll never likely explore, but that enrich the world of the story all the same" (Lawson, 2013). Lanre Bakare of *The Guardian* singled out the lead actor, Kevin Spacey was the primary motivation for watching *HoC*, "For many Spacey was the reason to watch House of Cards, with his breaking the fourth wall and scene-chewing" (Bakare, 2018). I was a fan of the show, and the lead actor, Kevin Spacey. Previously, I had binge-watched the first three seasons (2013–15). *HoC* matched the criteria identified and was selected as the main context for studying binge-watching and escapism.

1.5 Research Contributions

This thesis consists of four research papers that comprise the findings of the thesis and the four articles together contribute to further understanding and theorisations of consumer escapism and each article makes specific contributions to marketing theory. The contributions are addressed in Chapters 3–6 and are summarised here.

- Firstly, the findings in Chapter 3 extend our understanding of the nature of consumer escapism and go beyond the imposition of a clear "active versus passive categorisation" to conceptualisations of escapism (Kuo et al., 2016: 499). I show that the lengthy and enveloping journey constituted by bingeing an ontologically secure, long-form TV series exposes audiences to "hyperdiegetic" worlds which disrupt time and catalyse use of imagination, the interaction of one's thoughts with those worlds and ongoing ideational involvement in narratives and character activities beyond the screen. The paper suggests hyperdiegesis enables consumers to prolong and extend "the frontiers" of what might have previously been considered passive escapism in ways that involve participation as *more* than an observer.

- Chapter 4 contributes to extending our understanding of consumer escapism, by considering how consumers can enter deep introspective states aligned with the act of bingeing. The introspective process resulting from long immersion and escapism into a story world can bleed back into a consumer's life as they leave the escapism experience. A return from an escape can be reflective as consumers consider the opportunity costs of committing to a binge, and emotions of sadness and emptiness are by-products of parasocial relations formed from spending so much time in a narrative world. Secondly, the research contributes to the ongoing discussions on tribal formations and behaviours and suggests that a like-minded devotion to a TV series sees the emergence of a para-social tribe. This tribe shares a desire to become lost in a story world, but unlike previous theorisations, their behaviour is largely independent of one another, geographically isolated and devoid of any collective displays.

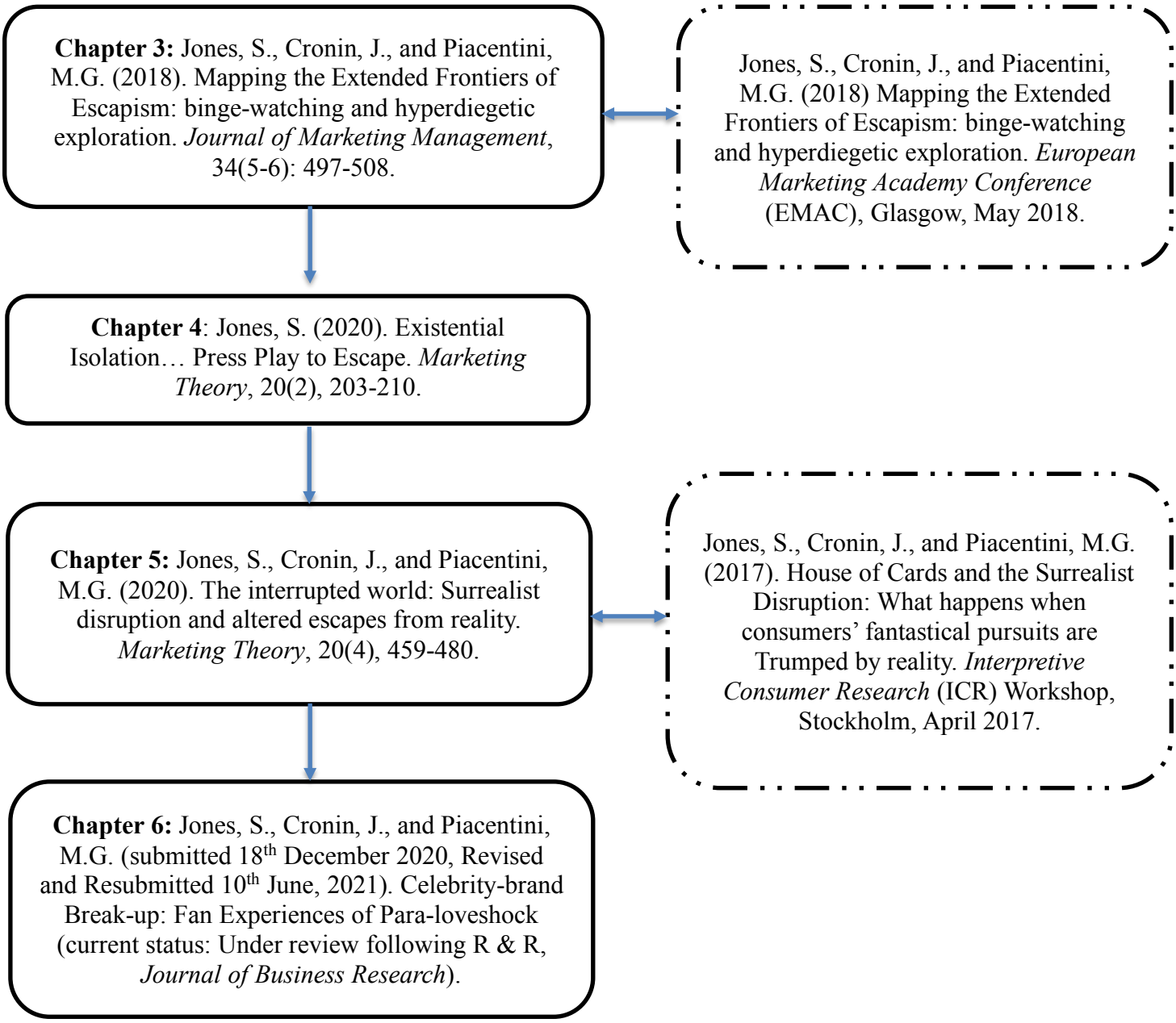
- Chapter 5 provides a more multi-valenced view of escapism than previously considered by considering the protean relationship between consumers' personal assumptive worlds and their larger, aggregate or paramount reality. The central argument proposed here is that there can be ambiguity and anxiety in the emotional make-up of escapism and that it is important to account for unintended outcomes when consumers seek to escape.

- Chapter 6 situates binge-watching within wider fan cultures to explore how devoted fans perform and manage their trauma following a transgression by a beloved celebrity-brand. Chapter 6 makes two key contributions; firstly, fans may not seek resolution or forgiveness for a transgression but accept it instead as an opportunity for self-expression and self-understanding. Secondly, the work reveals the existence of an emotional pain. This pain is further evidence or validation that the consumer-celebrity relationship was an important construct to a fans identity.

1.6 A Structural Map to the Thesis

The study follows an alternative format (PhD by publication) and is based upon four published and/or submitted articles (Chapters 3- 6) as detailed in *Figure 1*. The thesis includes a detailed methodology chapter (Chapter 2) and a concluding chapter (Chapter 7). Each article develops more specific research objectives which emerge from the central aims of the study. Each of the chapter (3–6) are bookended with an introduction to each article and a summary/reflective piece follows each of the manuscripts. The two conference papers (ICR, 2017 and EMAC, 2018) that supported the development of the published manuscripts are included in the appendices (Appendix 8 and 9).

Figure 1. Structure of the papers (Chapters 3-6)



This first chapter of this thesis has provided background and context to the research, outlined the theoretic of key concepts, significance and purpose of the study, highlighted the key contributions, and provided a structural map to the thesis.

Chapter 2

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the philosophical commitments and methodological procedures undertaken for this programme of research. A justification of the micro-ethnographic approach is provided and a detailed discussion on the methods utilised to triangulate the data (semi-structured interviews, videography, telephonic communication) and a full account of my own SPI engagement with binge-watching, and my introspections of my Kevin Spacey fandom is provided. The chapter concludes with an overview on the data collection and analysis processes**,** a discussion of the relevant ethical considerations is provided and a reflective account on the research procedures employed for this thesis.

Chapter 3

The first article (Chapter 3), entitled, '*Mapping the extended frontiers of escapism: binge-watching and hyperdiegetic exploration*' was the first published paper, appearing in a special issue of the *Journal of Marketing Management* (JMM), *Screening Marketing: Videography and the Expanding Horizons of Filmic Research* (2018). This chapter comprises of a videography and a supporting manuscript. The article problematises, what does binge-watching mean for our understanding of escapism? The research extends our understanding of the nature of escapist pursuits for consumers by complicating the division between passive and active conceptualisations of escapism (Kuo et al., 2016) and documents the ambiguous nature of sustained exposure to a particular text. The research draws on Matt Hill's (2002) concept of 'hyperdiegesis' which contends with the ability of consumers to *actively* fill in gaps and answers within the TV narrative itself but also within their own lifeworld's throughout and around the time spent binge-watching. In the paper, we classify this state of thinking about and engaging with a text over and beyond the core site of consumption (i.e. beyond the point of actual watching/observation) as the "extended frontiers" of escapism.

Chapter 4

Following a call inviting academics to write a short story based on their research for a special issue of *Marketing Theory,* this second article (Chapter 4) is a solo authored manuscript, entitled, *'Existential Isolation… Press Play to Escape'* and appeared in the

special issue of *Marketing Theory* called *Expressions of Interest*, published in June, 2020. The article largely provides an account of my own subjective introspective experience of fully immersing myself into a narrative story-world over a sustained period. Drawing on narrative transportation theory and parasocial relationships with onscreen characters and settings, the chapter explores how binge-watching alone may never serve as a sustainable replacement for human contact and company and this hermit form of escapism can catalyst thoughts about one's own life choices. The article suggests tribal formations and behaviours can exist after watching a series alone, as consumers engage in collective analysis afterwards with other like-minded fans who share the same show interest.

Chapter 5

The third article (Chapter 5) contributes to the re-conceptualisation of consumer escapism by considering the fluctuating relationship between consumers' personal assumptive worlds and their larger, aggregate or paramount reality. The article, entitled '*The Interrupted World: Surrealist disruption and altered escapes from reality*' was published in *Marketing Theory* (2020). The concept of the surrealist disruption is introduced and used to describe how ontological discontinuities can disrupt consumers' pre-existing schemas upon which perceptions of reality are based leading to changes in how their escapes from reality are felt and experienced. This article provides a more multifaceted understanding of escapism and this paper suggests the possibility of encountering negative emotions during mundane escapes that might confound one's overall pleasure. The term "multi-valenced" is used to capture the multiple valences of emotion i.e. the possibility for negative feelings beyond the usual positive feelings. This article reveals that there can be ambiguity and anxiety in the emotional make-up of altered escapes at their parameters.

Chapter 6

The fourth article (Chapter 6) entitled, '*Celebrity-brand Break-up: Fan Experiences of Para-loveshock*' was submitted to the *Journal of Business Research* in December, 2020 and was revised and resubmitted in June, 2021. The aim of the article is to explore the

emotional heartbreak that fans encounter and experience when their relationship with an admired celebrity breaks down. Informed by and extending the work of Anthony Giddens (1992) and his concept of "loveshock", described as the period of mourning necessary after the break-up of real-life relationship, the article charts the emotional fallout that fans experience when their parasocial relationship (Horton and Wohl, 1956) ends with a celebrity that has transgressed. Loveshocked fans engage with the wrongdoing of a celebrity-brand as an opportunity for self-expression, self-understanding and a re-writing of their identities.

Chapter 7

Finally, in Chapter 7, I conclude the thesis by summarising the findings of the four papers and the overall theoretical contributions of the research. I draw conclusions, consider the limitations of the study, and I make relevant suggestions for areas for future research.

Chapter 2 Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the contextual background, the research design, and the methodological procedures undertaken to fulfil the empirical portion of the doctoral research. The chapter is organised as follows. First, the contextual background is outlined, followed by the research philosophy and an explanation of the interpretivist tradition underpinning the research. Next, a discussion on ethnography and more specifically, of the adoption of micro-ethnography, is provided. The particulars of data collection, including sampling, semi-structured interviews, videography, telephonic communications, and subjective personal introspection are outlined. Discussion is then given to data analysis processes, an evaluation of the research procedures and this is followed by ethical considerations. The chapter concludes with a personal reflection on the research process.

2.1 Contextual background: House of Cards (*HoC*)

On February 1st 2013, the American VOD streaming platform, Netflix released simultaneously all 13 episodes of their new US political drama *HoC*, a Netflix remake of the 1990s BBC original series of the same name. The drama was relocated from Westminster (UK) to the American political context of Washington D.C. (US). The first season was directed by the award-winning director, David Fincher and starred the Oscar winning actor, Kevin Spacey. The drama centres on a Machiavellian plot where Spacey's character, the majority whip for the House of Representatives Francis Underwood, schemes his way to become Vice-President and, later, President of the United States. Its mode of release was considered revolutionary (Jenner, 2016), as it was the first show that offered viewers the opportunity to stream and watch the whole show in one go, enabling viewers to binge-watch the thirteen-hour-long drama. There are thirteen episodes in seasons 1-5 of *HoC* and eight episodes in the final sixth season (each episode lasting approximately one hour) and every season was released in a binge-ready format on a yearly basis from 2013 to 2018, totalling six seasons. Klarer (2014) suggests a combination of *HoC* being released in a binge-ready format and storylines spanning over thirteen episode seasons (seasons 1-5) allows for "more elaborate character development and more a complex web of character interrelations

than we might have been accustomed to in feature-length films" (p.204). The final sixth season gained notoriety due to the absence of the lead actor, Kevin Spacey, which followed Netflix's 2017 decision to dismiss Spacey, in light of the emergence of sexual abuse allegations against the actor.

HoC is an example of a "serial brand" (Parmentier and Fischer, 2015), because the show is episodic, and there is a separation between each season release and the next. Typically, when one season of *HoC* finishes there is a wait of approximately 12 months before the release of the next season. This gap creates some anticipation and invites viewers to pay renewed attention when the new season is released (Parmentier and Fischer, 2015). The show was a pioneer of binge-watching, and this was a consideration for selecting *HoC* as the primary context for this study. The data collection for this study coincided with the release of the fourth season of *HoC* in March 2016. Data was also collected to coincide with the release of the fifth season in May 2017, and continued with a third stage of data collection with the final sixth season, released in November 2018.

2.2 Research Philosophy – Interpretivism

To facilitate an analysis of audiences' binge-watching experiences of *HoC,* this research follows a qualitative research methodology and is grounded in an interpretivist tradition of social science. The assumption underpinning this research is the belief that reality is multiple and relative (Ozanne and Hudson, 1989) and people's consumption of a TV show, such as *HoC*, is itself an interpretation of the social construction of fictional power and politics. *HoC* is watched by people who each bring their own perceptions and perspectives to bear when experiencing and making sense of the show, its characters, and those actors who personify them. All of this heterogeneity can shape and influence what the show means to each individual consumer and how it might or might not offer them an escape from their own realities. In trying to understand the variety and complexity of interpretations and relationships between them, I chose to adopt an interpretivist approach to the research. According to Tadajewski (2006: 438) in interpretivist research, reality is assumed to be "socially constructed, multiple, holistic, contextual". For interpretivist researchers, there is no objective reality; all individuals

experience reality as shaped by the dynamism and idiosyncrasy of their perceptions which they use to make sense of their worlds (Cova and Elliott, 2008: Tadajewski, 2006). The interpretivist position contrasts sharply with positivist researchers who adopt a "a realist position and assume that a single, objective reality exists independently of what individuals perceive… as a real, concrete, and unchanging structure" (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988: 509). From this schism, interpretivism and positivism differ fundamentally in terms of their overall goals or axiologies. Where positivist researchers aim for "explanation" via determinate, accurate, and defensible observations based upon testable hypothetical deductive means, interpretivism aims for "understanding" via informed, in-depth, and deliberative interpretations arrived at through inductive explorative means. Interpretivism aligns well with my study of escapism as the notion of "escape" does not exist as a single and stable, coherent generalisable truth but is likely embedded in and expressed through consumers' particularistic encounters with various thoughts, timings, and objects.

Epistemologically, the knowledge sought out as part of a positivist study is believed to be found in objectivist generalisations that exist independently of human perception and can be accessed through value and bias free observable data. In contrast, interpretivist work approaches knowledge through the researcher's own value-laden attempts to read the subjectivist meanings, fantasies, motives, impulses, restraints, and affects that are particularistic and immaterial (Cova and Elliott, 2008; Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). Accordingly, interpretivist researchers attempt to achieve transparency by recognising bias and positioning themselves to approach phenomena from their own perspective as informed by their idiosyncratic knowledge, experiences, and biography. For interpretivist consumer researchers, understanding the meanings of a phenomenon involves grasping not just the interpretations of consumers' social worlds but their own interpretations also (Cova and Elliott, 2008; Hogg and Maclaran, 2008; Tadajewski, 2006). A feature of the interpretivist perspective thus involves placing the researcher in the centre of the research methodology, to interpret consumer experiences and how informants make sense of the world (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Sherry, 1990). This is relevant to my research, as I seek to better understand the desires and reasons behind an escape within a context familiar to me as a fan, and how the effects or outcomes of an escape are dependent on one's own circumstances and reading of events that are occurring in the world.

My position as a binge-watcher, a fan of *HoC,* and of Kevin Spacey, enables me to gain an insider understanding of what binge-watching and Spacey fandom means to consumers who use them for escape and to draw upon emic shared understandings of the participants' binge experiences on their own terms (Hogg and Maclaran, 2008; Hudson and Ozanne, 1989).

In the next section I discuss how ethnography and more specifically how micro-ethnography is appropriate for this study.

2.3 The Adoption of Ethnography for this Thesis

Ethnography is widely used within interpretivist consumer research that seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the lifeworld setting of the consumers under study (Belk and Costa, 1998; Higgins and Hamilton, 2019; Nash et al., 2021; Scott et al., 2017) The aim of ethnography is to "see the world through the eyes of members of the culture being examined" (Pettigrew, 2000: 257) and to explore and document the social interactions amongst members of a particular culture (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994). Arnould and Wallendorf (1994) state the features of ethnography are as follows: (1) the collection of data in natural settings; (2) use of participant observation, involving immersion over a long duration; (3) generation of interpretations considered credible by informants; and (4) use of multiple data sources and it is envisaged these dimensions are capable of producing thick descriptions of social and consumer behaviour that are accurate at moments in time.

Ethnography has been used to access instances of consumer escapism previously (see Goulding et al., 2009; Kozinets et al., 2004; Scott et al., 2017) and most ethnographies involve visiting various multiple physical places and virtual sites to collect data. An example is Kozinets et al. (2004) and in their ethnographic exploration of escapism in the ESPN Zone Chicago, they spent time in various play and fantastical areas within the ESPN Zone, dedicated to "dining, drinking, viewing sports, and both playing physical and virtual games" (p.660). A specific culture can be better understood from spending an extended amount time in and around that place (Canniford and Shankar, 2013; Scott et al., 2017). Ethnography provides researchers with an in-the-field appreciation of practices and activities in the contexts in which they operate

(Holmqvist et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2017; Skandalis et al., 2019).

A challenge in undertaking an ethnography of binge-watch consumption is the lack of a collective site or community feel where the consumption activity occurs (Halfmann and Reinecke, 2021; Sun and Chang, 2021). Binge-watching tends to be intimate and fragmented across private domiciles and household living spaces rather than undertaken collectively in communal contexts. Unlike attendance of crowds at a music festival or a dancehall (Holmqvist et al., 2020; Skandalis et al., 2019), for instance, binge-watching is more atomised and subject to individual viewers' selection of when and what to watch at their personal discretion (Jenner, 2020). Furthermore, unlike the less frequent and out-of-home contexts of festivals and dancehalls, consumers engage in binge-watching as part of their everyday home life and therefore a full, immersive ethnography may not necessarily be the most suitable method. A binge is not always pre-planned and it occurs in a relatively tight, bounded space, with binge-viewers becoming immersed in a complex, darker TV show such as *HoC* from the comfort of their living room sofa (Feiereisen at al., 2019).

I decided to adopt a *micro*-ethnographic approach to this study in recognition of the radically particularistic nature of my thesis and its contextualisation within a specific, bounded research site (binge-watching one particular serial brand). Micro-ethnography is different to conventional ethnography because it "zeroes in on particular settings (cultural events or scenes)" and this draws on; "selected aspects of everyday life… giving emphasis to particular behaviours in particular settings rather than attempting to portray a whole cultural system" (Walcott, 1990: 64). As Streeck and Mehus (2005: 341) clarify, micro-ethnography centres on "microlevel analysis (i.e., the study of small, everyday behaviours)" and "emphasizes a moment-by-moment construction of meaning in particular activities" (p.323). Micro-ethnography provides validation that micro-level behaviours and action are important and a meticulous analysis of behaviour occurring in a particular social setting can reflect larger social practices (Streeck and Mehus, 2005).

Micro-ethnography has been typically used in a number of contexts, including analysing video-game play (Giddings, 2009; Taylor et al., 2015), student-teacher interactions in educational settings (Major and Mulvihill, 2018), and in nursing and care-giving studies (Pandya and Gingerich, 2002; Silverman, 2016). In Giddings'

(2009) study of analysing specific moments of video-game play, he describes micro-ethnography as an improvised, opportunistic approach to "recording brief moments of everyday activity" (p.249). Although centring on a less mundane and less everyday consumption, Prayag et al. (2016) used a micro-ethnographic approach to get close to the ephemeral experiences of tourists seeking out the hallucinogenic beverage "ayahuasca" when vacationing in Peru. Because drug tourism is, for many consumers, a transient and location-specific escape limited to a single consumption pattern, micro-ethnography provided the most suitable method to document the behaviour. Crucially, the authors explain that micro-ethnography "uses an ethnographic approach over a shorter time scale than a traditional ethnography. It also focuses on one location and/or single social situation to explain a phenomenon" (Prayag et al., 2016: 4). Micro-ethnography combines the traditions of conventional ethnography, but it has a tight focus on a specific activity within a particular setting, rather than looking at multiple phenomena occurring across a variety of settings (LeBaron, 2008). This conceptualisation of micro-ethnography resonates with my research as the intention to explore escapism through binge-watching centres on screen-based consumption where an escape through a narrative occurs, and the escape is localised to the context of a domestic silo (household). Micro-ethnography is appropriate to capture this form of binge consumption and I will now take a closer look at micro-ethnography.

2.3.1 A Closer Look at Micro-Ethnography

According to Streeck and Mehus (2005) micro-ethnography can be traced back to Goffman's (1971) *Micro-studies of the Public Order* and his belief that one should not study 'men and their situations' but rather 'situations and their men' (Goffman, cited in Streeck and Mehus, 2005: 384). Streeck and Mehus (2005) suggest Erickson (1971) was also a key figure in the early adoption of a micro-ethnographic approach. His approach to studying classroom conduct focused on moment-to-moment behaviours in the classroom and "micro behaviours" such as nonverbal cues, including eye gaze, and body postures which he suggests are small, building-blocks to understanding a collectively constituted culture. Erickson (1971) utilised audio-visual material collected of classroom interactions and were closely analysed and micro-ethnography and video is synonymous. Streeck and Mehus (2005: 341) acknowledge that micro-ethnography

"takes advantage of the availability of film and videotape to record real behaviour in ordinary contexts" and video-recording behaviour allows for repeat viewings and careful consideration of nonverbal elements that occurs in a particular context (Silverman, 2016). The notion of using video to record and capture small, tightly bound understandings of a phenomenon is a feature of micro-ethnography (Erickson, 1996; Silverman, 2016) and video recordings were utilised for this research study to get close to this screen based form of escapism (see Section 2.4.3)

Micro-ethnography is synonymous with "intimate behaviours in a single setting" (Roe, 1994: 23). There is an emphasis on restricting the researcher's focus – or *the ethnographic gaze* – to specific practices or behaviours. For example, Taylor et al. (2015) deployed micro-ethnographic methodology to achieve a close reading of players' particularistic identification with the protagonist of the videogame, *The Walking Dead*, while they played. Through a close analysis of players' discourse and gestures during certain moments of their game play coupled with contextualising interviews, Taylor et al. (2015) could determine how situations within a game, and the wider lifeworld in which a game is played, subtly shape and impact the depth and complexity of relationship that players forge with protagonists. The micro-ethnographic logic that privileges the researcher's attendance to hyper-particularistic and small-scale situations to reveal how realities and relations are refracted through such localized interactions appears appropriate for steering an exploration of fans' binge-watching experiences of *HoC* to better understand how escapism is experienced.

Taylor et al.'s study's focus on screen-based activity, or the intersection between human consumers and technology, is noteworthy also. They identify how micro-ethnography has been most recently and effectively applied to "recording, describing and analysing brief moments of everyday technocultural activity" (Giddings, 2009: 149 as cited by Taylor et al, 2015: 5). Kozinets (2019: 621) defines technocultures as "the various identities, practices, values, rituals, hierarchies, and other sources and structures of meaning that are influenced, created by, or expressed through technology consumption" and the consumption of new forms of contemporary technology are capable of altering the ways people do things and consume. Schmitt (2019) suggests technocultural activity or consumption is "the inflection of consumers' experiences by technologies as well as the injection of consumer desire and intent into technologies"

(p.826) and binge-watching is premised on a desire to be able to consume successive episodes of a TV show at one's own discretion. Technocultural activity encompasses a culture characterised by a high level of technological development and increased usage of technology by consumers, including, for example, social media, apps, new and emerging technologies such as virtual reality (Schmitt, 2019) and binge-watching TV, emerging from VOD can also be considered a form of technocultural activity.

In summary, micro-ethnographic approaches pertain to the following features (1) micro-ethnography validates the importance of attending to practices of everyday technoculture (Giddings, 2009); (2) it favours capturing small segments/micro-events of a cultural practice over different iterations (Taylor et al., 2015); (3) it revolves around micro-analysing participants experience and conditions in a particular setting (Taylor et al., 2015); and (4) it takes an approach of video-recording "micro" moments that are easily overlooked or forgotten (Giddings, 2009, 2014).

2.4 Data Collection Processes

2.4.1 Sampling Framework

The sampling strategy used in this study was a combination of purposive and snowball sampling and the sample has been purposively selected to be theoretically relevant. Silverman (2013) explains that purposive sampling should be used to "illustrate some feature or process in which we are interested" (p.141) and I purposely identified participants that were binge-watchers and fans of *HoC.* The sample call for this research was for consumers who had watched *HoC* over previous seasons (1-3) and were intending to binge-watch (for a minimum of two episodes consecutively) season 4 of *HoC.* The purposive sampling technique also restricts the sample based on the researcher's judgement which is beneficial as I was interested in recruiting participants who were fans, and were invested in the show, *HoC*.

I used the snowballing sampling technique to identify more potential participants through my original key participants (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). Through a combination of referrals from my originally recruited participants, word-of-mouth and referrals in my social networks and an advertisement poster that was displayed offline

across a campus notice board of a UK University from an initial pilot sample of seven participants, I was introduced to others willing to share their experiences of bingeing *HoC.* The combination of these sampling techniques resulted in a 15 participants, who were fans of *HoC* and ready to binge-watch forthcoming seasons of the show. The participants included eight males and seven females and were aged between 23 and 69 years of age. All were British, expect one participant who was Brazilian. The participants have varied occupations and all participants had a minimum of level 2 (GCSE) educational qualifications with the majority having an undergraduate degree qualification. The vast majority of the participants could be classed as belonging to the middle-class in Britain based on their occupation and education level. Table 1 (below) is a profile of my sample of recruited participants.

Table 1: Profile of Participants

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

2.4.2 Methods - Semi Structured Interviews

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews with the participants over three stages of data collection. Interviews continue to be staple of CCT ethnographic research (see Higgins and Hamilton, 2019; Husemann and Eckhardt, 2019; Murphy

2021) and I elected to use interviews, so as to provide data from a reflection on participants' binge-watch activities and habits, which given the everydayness of this type of escape, may include practices that they take for granted. An interview would provide more time to allow for a close and more nuanced perspective of this everyday escape to be explored. In total, 42 interviews were conducted over a duration of almost three years (February 2016 – January 2019), and the interviews lasted between 40 and 70 minutes. All participant names were anonymised and transcribed verbatim to form 602 single-spaced pages of data.

Most interviews took place in participants' homes, and a couple of interviews were conducted in a quiet university café to provide an atmosphere conducive to an intimate and informal conversation. These interviews coincided with the release of *HoC* season four (March, 2016), five (May, 2017) and the final sixth season (November, 2018). I adopted a 'conversational approach' to the interviews and Arsel (2017) suggests this interviewing style can reduce possible resistance from participants that are possibly nervous about disclosing details pertaining to their lifestyle choices and practices. As the micro-ethnography progressed, the interviews evolved and I had a better sense and judgment when to modify my questions, and became more confident and acute to follow up questions. Topics and questions were modified dependent on participant responses.

The first stage of data collection focused on the release of season four of *HoC*. For this stage of data collection (February-March 2016), all fifteen participants were interviewed pre-binge in February-March 2016, before the release of season four (4th March 2016). The pre-binge interviews began with grand-tour questions (see McCracken, 1988) to ascertain their binge-watch motivations, thoughts on the narrative worlds of *HoC* to date, and to gain an understanding of the role of the binge as a medium for escapism. Within a few days of the same participants completing their viewing of *HoC* season four, a post-binge interview was conducted to explore relevant emergent and conceptual areas. I took the opportunity to video record a number of these interviews (see Section 2.4.3) and this formed a videography (see article 1, Chapter 3).

Following the season four interviews, the majority of the sample expressed an interest in continued participation in the study, if it resumed for future seasons *of HoC*. Nine of the original fifteen participants agreed to take part in a second stage of interviews, to coincide with the release of *HoC* season five over a year later (30th May,

2017). The season five semi-structured interviews provided an opportunity to explore how participants' anticipations of bingeing *HoC* had changed against the backdrop of unprecedented real-world events and the impact of this on their experience of escapism. I followed up important lines of enquiry as they arose in the conversation, with minimal intervention so as to record the most emically significant experiences and narratives (Arsel, 2017). Post-binge interviews were not conducted for the second stage of data collection (season five) as the post-binge season four interviews tended to weigh towards discussing the shows narrative features and season plot points and I decided that data saturation was being reached.

A key consideration occupying my thoughts was: *when is it appropriate to withdraw from the data collection?* I concluded that after the season five interviews I was reaching a point of theoretical saturation. I was also conscious of how much I was asking from my participants. With these factors in mind, I opted against post-binge interviews for the fifth season of *HoC* and this decision was proved correct as the participants gave up their time to participate in a third stage of data collection (season six interviews). A third stage of data collection was not necessarily planned, but was an opportunistic response to unexpected events occurring in reality with the lead star of the show, Kevin Spacey.

Finally, the same nine participants agreed to participate in a final stage of semi-structured interviews to coincide with the release of *HoC* season six (2nd November, 2018). This stage of season six interviews focused specifically on Spacey's transgressions, and how (if at all) they had impacted on participants' fan interest and admiration for him. As the nine participants were fans of Spacey and prone to re-watching his films and shows, this final set of interviews also explored whether Spacey's violations had an impact on escapism and re-visiting his body of work. Only two participants of the nine participants finished watching season six, and informally the remaining participants mentioned season fatigue and Spacey's absence in the show as reasons they stopped watching *HoC*. Two post-binge interviews were conducted with the two participants in January, 2019 who had watched all of season six and these interviews focused on the absence of Spacey from the show.

In addition, asynchronous communication via the digital messaging application, WhatsApp kept me updated on each of the participants binge-watch experience and this included text communication between season releases of *HoC* and sharing observations

related to the show (see Appendix 6, and explained further in this chapter Section 2.4.4). Two of the participants chose not to engage in the asynchronous communication, and they emailed me to let me know when they had reached the end of the season four. I will now turn to the videography section of the methods.

2.4.3 Videography

Micro-ethnography lends itself particularly well to video-image-based data collection (Giddings, 2009; Taylor et al., 2015), particularly recording short segments of embodied aspects of daily life, and a close analysis of settings, practices and temporal unfolding around a binge-watch was important when exploring this screen based escapism. In Giddings' (2009) micro-ethnographic work, he discovered through analysis of video recordings of video game play that features and effects from a game can be carried from the virtual to actual reality. The videography provides an opportunity to watch consumers, watching television from the confines of their domestic household and the videography shows people bingeing and talking about their binge patterns and behaviours to reveal thoughts, imaginings, despairs and joys from binge-watching a TV season. In Taylor et al.'s micro-ethnographic study (2015), they engaged in discussing with their participants their technocultural activities, and I followed this approach too, and a number of interviews were video-recorded and participants were asked to reflect on their binge practices and experiences.

Although the videographic method has been growing in a rapid fashion (Belk and Kozinets, 2005; Belk et al., 2018; Rokka et al., 2018) discussion remains around what kind of methods should we expect in conducting good videographic work. Although no criteria to date exists (see Belk et al., 2018; Rokka et al., 2018), I took an approach of working with short segments of data (interviews, and singular shots of various participants binge practices) in close collaboration with the participants to provide a better understanding of their escapism (see Article 1, Chapter 3). I wanted to use videography as a form of representation that can be conceptualised as to allow for something different from text based articles and I selected videography as a method for analysing social practices, rituals, habits and temporal dimensions of a binge that may otherwise be difficult to represent. As Woermann (2018) suggests, videography is "capable of capturing the tacit, embodied, pre-conscious and local dimensions of social

conduct… exploring different dimensions of social life different from those already defined in verbal and quantitative forms" (p.463)

A number of the interviews in the first stage of the data collection were video recorded, and this idea emanated from seeing a call for a forthcoming special issue on videography in the *Journal of Marketing Management*. From the interviews came explanations and discussions around the embodied and temporal practices of binge-watching which then led me to film a small number of the participants from the sample, documenting their intimate binges, and to bring to life their binge-watching experiences. The videography uses a mixture of naturalistic interview video materials, expressive shots and stylistic re-enactments which is common in videography, helping to illuminate practices connected to binge-watching.

Hietanen et al. (2014) stress in a videography that "authentic representation maybe impossible" and a videography is a "representational device and can never be a neutral account of participants' realities and is always a selective expression of the researcher's position"(p.2020). My videography uses some artistic expression as a way of shedding light on otherwise difficult to observe binge experiences, often occurring late into the evening and produces close representations of the reality of participants' binge. The richness of videography presents a dilemma, in that it can easily be mistaken for an absolutely accurate representation of social reality (Schembri & Boyle, 2013). I followed an approach supported by Hietanen and colleagues (2014) that includes the recreation of videographic elements, and the videography captures the tacit dimensions around binge-watching as a form or escapism, which compared to text, may otherwise have been more difficult to convey and capture in words. The power of videography lies in it being particularly apt at recording expressions and bodily presence in contextual space (Belk and Kozinets, 2005) and this was realised in my videographic account (See Article 1, Chapter 3).

I also engaged in autovideography (Belk and Kozinets, 2005), whereby I recorded my own binge-watch experience of *HoC* season four, on the weekend release of the show (4th March 2016), Using a Sony camera and tripod, I video-recorded my first binge-watch marathon (see Appendix 5) and the purpose of engaging in autovideography was to explore the nature of my own feelings, sensations, affective states, emotions, and streams of consciousness related to this form of binge

consumption (Gould, 2008). Segments of my own video-recorded experience appear in the videography (see article 1, Chapter 3) and analysis of the video recording became the foundations for my thinking for other papers, particularly the short story (see article 2, Chapter 4). The power of using autovideography and analysing my own marathon binge experience gave me empathy and identification with other participants. I was able to relate to a number of participants who had also binge-watched *HoC* in a similar marathon fashion. Having experienced an excess binge, and re-watched it back and analysed it, I elaborated on this experience in the semi-structured interviews with participants who had also binged in a similar way. Reflexively, re-watching the video-recording allowed me to investigate the bodily and temporal qualities of a marathon binge-watch and this experience was captured in the short story (article 2, Chapter 4). I will next explain the telephonic communications aspect of the methods.

2.4.4 Telephonic Communications

The mobile phone emerged as a useful research instrument to instantaneously capture small or micro-moments of a particular participants binge-watch experience (field notes and photographs), affording the opportunity of "getting closer to consumers" but from a "position of distance" (Hein et al., 2011: 260/261). The participants were encouraged to keep notes, and take photos of their associated consumption practices during a binge-watch experience and all of the participants consented to this (although two participants choose not to engage in telephonic communication and preferred to send me an occasional email). I had not specified how to precisely record notes, or how to share notes and photographic materials (an oversight on my part). Spontaneously, in the first pre-binge-watch interview, a participant enquired if she could use the free-to-use, mobile phone application WhatsApp, to write and share field notes and photographs with me. In practical terms, writing notes and taking photographs on a mobile phone and sharing via WhatsApp is relatively straightforward, and unlike writing notes with pen and paper which might be more impractical when binge-watching, using the phone seemed more natural (Hein et al., 2011). I was also conscious of wanting to minimise disruption to participants' binge-watch activities, and using a pen and paper in darkened rooms may break the flow of the experience. Participants had indicated that their mobile phone was usually in

their vicinity when they binge-watched and it was a preferred way of making and sending notes and photographs. The participants were familiar with the technology and this is perhaps unsurprising as mobile phones have become deeply embedded in consumers lives (Hein et al., 2011). A benefit of using WhatsApp for the research was the immediacy of capturing the binge and *HoC* thoughts in real-time. Thirteen of the fifteen participants agreed to use WhatsApp and text messaging to share some insights of their binge in real-time (see Appendix 6) sometimes before, during or after a marathon binge session.

Despite the geographical remoteness with the participants, receiving images of the binge in real-time created a sense of "being there" (Hein et al., 2011: 264), and it supported relationship-building. The participants reflected in the post-binge interviews how the use of telephonic communications helped to make them feel like collaborators in the research process (Hein et al., 2011). Out of courtesy, I would thank the participant for the image and text upon receiving it. The photographs and field notes were later explored in the post-binge-watch interviews and involved auto-driving techniques (Heisley and Levy, 1991), whereby participants are presented with the stimuli (photographs and field notes) and then asked to "tell me about this experience". This supported the micro-ethnographic approach, zooming in on specific details and events, and offered further insight into their personal binge perspectives. The exploration of binge-practices and behaviours captured in the telephonic communication played a key role in enhancing my understanding of what occurs when a consumer binge-watches.

After the first stage of data collection (March, 2016), nine of the original fifteen participants expressed an interest to participate in a second stage of the study, coinciding with the release of *HoC* season five. This contact continued to be facilitated by asynchronous text conversations (using WhatsApp) between the participant and the first author (Bowden and Galindo-Gonzalez, 2015). The interactions supported the continuing relationship with the participants in the study and built rapport and trust (Hein et al., 2011). Occasionally participants shared observations, and perspectives on the forth coming seasons of *HoC*, including promotional shots and trailers. The asynchronous interaction was useful, particularly as it helped to inform some of the second stage interview questions.

2.4.5 Subjective Personal Introspection

Subjective Personal Introspection (SPI), or auto-ethnography, was first pioneered in consumer research by Holbrook (1986) as a novel approach to getting close to the consuming subject's feelings, fantasies, and experiences in their purest form. Holbrook (2005) describes SPI as an "extreme form of participant observation that focuses on impressionistic narrative accounts of the writer's own private consumption experiences with a phenomenon from the viewpoint of an informed and deeply involved insider" (p.45).

SPI has previously been used as a data collection type within micro-ethnography. For example, McArthur (2019) deployed SPI to situate herself in eight different videogame settings and it offered an opportunity "to report on her own play experience" to potentially "yield new insights and discoveries" (p.32). McArthur (2019) reported on her own personal feelings and experiences of her game playing experiences and in documenting my own binge-watch experiences and utilising SPI to examine my fan relationship with the actor Kevin Spacey I was focused on personal emotions and feelings. The emphasis of the SPI was on capturing my emotional experiences such as personal feelings, thoughts, fantasies and imaginations that may not otherwise be openly disclosed by my participants (Wohlfeil and Whelan, 2012).

In deciding to adopt an SPI methodology for this study, I sought to gain first-hand insights into what it is like to engage in marathon binge-watching practices, particularly watching an entire season of 13 episodes within a couple of days. This was significant as I wanted to be able to relate to a number of participants who stated that they intended to excessively binge-watch *HoC* season four when it immediately became available to binge. As suggested by Shankar (2000) to understand an experience as the subjects live it, "the researcher becomes the subject" (p.27) and because our experiences are own, researchers conducting SPI tend to put themselves under immense critical interrogation (Shankar, 2000). Six, maybe seven episodes of the TV show *Breaking Bad* (2009-2013) had been my previous binge-watch maximum. SPI would allow me to develop an understanding of how it would feel to undertake an excessive binge-viewing session and I wanted to know whether a marathon binge and such intense immersion

would change the escapist experience? I was interested to explore how a return to reality from a 13-hour binge escape might feel. These musings were pivotal in my decision to undertake SPI and as Shankar (2000: 32) suggests, SPI helps to orientate a researcher's initial considerations, "when our focus is on human experience… then what better place to start than by examining one's own?". I decided to join the fifteen participants in binge-watching *HoC* season four at the same time as they had planned to watch it and I shadowed the behaviour of a number of my participants intensions by engaging in a marathon binge.

I video-recorded my binge (see Section 2.4.3 and Appendix 6). Diary notes were also used and maintained on an *ad hoc* basis; sometimes before, during and after each episode, and they were all hand-written in a diary, unfiltered and instantaneous (Patterson, 2005) (see Appendix 4). My diary notes not only summarised accounts from a particular episode, but also captured my cognitive and emotional introspections of binge-watching (Shankar, 2000; Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993). These diary notes helped capture the experience of a marathon binge-watch and this helped form my thinking and development of article 2 (Chapter 4) where I used a short story formant to report on my own binge-watch experience. Article 2 (Chapter 4) is part auto-ethnographic (my own binge-watch account) along with slices of participants' experiences and the characters and places are fictionalised. The short story is a form of autoethnography, a term that in used interchangeably with SPI and Brown and Patterson (2021) argue that autoethnography, which refers to "ethnographies of the ethnographer's own culture" and not some "far-flung" study (p.10) is a style similar in practice to SPI and they consider it synonymous with SPI. Brown and Patterson (2020: 11) highlight a strength of autoethnography is that they "allow marginalised individuals to tell their story, express themselves and seek solidarity with the similar stricken". A primary purpose of article 2 (Chapter 4) was to report on a form of screen-based escapism that can be solitary as experienced first-hand, and by a number of my participants. The intention is that the story, or binge experience would resonate with other people and audiences.

I conducted a second SPI account as part of this study. As a devoted Kevin Spacey fan of twenty-five years, I provide my own private insights as a heart-broken Spacey fan, following sexual abuse allegations made against the actor in October 2017.

To develop a genuine understanding of how a fan negotiates and reconciles feelings of hart-break and loveshock (Giddens, 1992), I re-consumed my favourite Spacey films and TV show (*HoC*) as per my regular routine, of watching one every few weeks over the months that followed the allegations. In a similar vein to thought-watching exercises that are described by Gould (2012), I kept diary notes during the experience - reacting to scenes, characters, imagery and emotional feelings in relation to Spacey's performance (see Appendix 4). On conclusion of each of the eight films, and one TV series, I used my diary notes to write introspective essays. The nine essays range from 450–1,000 words (see Chapter 6 and an excerpt of an essay in included in Appendix 7).

Being an avid fan of both *HoC* and the lead actor Kevin Spacey, a degree of insider status is present. Lofland and Lofland (1995: 23) suggest that insider status can facilitate the gathering of rich data, "if you already a member in the setting, you almost naturally possess the convert stance". It is therefore acceptable for the 'native' to study their own culture or phenomenon under study, with the added benefit of having cultural understanding. Lofland and Lofland (1995: 17) stress, however, the need for distancing and detachment mechanisms to be in place, to "make the familiar strange". Regular reflection on my fan perspectives was undertaken and debriefs with my supervisory team provided safeguards to facilitate distancing.

2.5 Data Analysis and Interpretations

All the ethnographic data including interview transcripts, videographic materials, telephonic communications and SPI accounts were pulled together and a systematic comparison was undertaken, exploring differences and similarities across the data was applied across all stages of data collection (Spiggle, 1994). This included transcribing the data collected, followed by reading, documenting and systematising the data and transcripts in order to understand respondents and their experiences. Transcribing the data, myself was useful in terms of gaining familiarity with data. All parts of the data were revisited and reread several times. Inductive analyses of the combined data were undertaken in a hermeneutical approach (Spiggel, 1994; Thompson et al., 1994), which involved "moving through data collection and analysis in such a way that preceding operations shape subsequent one" and researchers "move back and

forth between stages" (Spiggle, 1994: 495) to allow categories to emerge inductively. An iterative back-and-forth process of relating a part of text to the whole (Spiggle, 1994) was applied to the data to generate theory building around what binge-watching means for our understanding of escapism and no preconceived hypothetical framework was used to guide or constrain the analyses. I applied Spiggle's (1994: 493) seven steps of data analysis and interpretation – "categorization, abstraction, comparison, dimensionalization, integration, iteration and refutation" and details of the steps and my process are outlined in the below.

- Step one: Categorisation and this equates to 'coding' or 'labelling' units of data
- Step two: Abstraction and this builds on categorisation and collapses or incorporates categories into fewer, high-order categories. However, abstraction goes beyond identification and classification of data and it involves grouping previously identified categories into conceptual cases, recognising that a unit of data is an empirical indicator of a more general construct of interest.
- Step three: Comparison and this step explores differences and similarities across incidents within the data and provides guidelines for collecting additional data.
- Step four: Dimensionlization involves identifying characteristics of previously identified categories.
- Step five: Integration is the building of theory that is grounded in data.
- Step six: Iteration involves moving back and forth between the previous five steps in the data analysis process.
- Step seven: Refutation is the final step and it involves deliberately scrutinising categories and constructs.

The first step that I undertook in the data analysis process was categorisation and idiographic (individual) understanding of each interview, SPI journal entry and telephonic communication message was attempted. I personally transcribed the data verbatim and from this I was be able to follow-up with participants on specific areas and questions in subsequent data collection stages. In step one, I read and re-read transcripts and key words or phrases that that connected to the participants account of

binge-watching and escapism was highlighted and noted. I began open coding the data, for example, motivation for binge-watching was noted on a transcript where the participant discussed it. This process of categorisation is associated with "identifying a chunk or unit of data as belonging to, representing, or being an example of some general phenomenon" (Spiggle, 1994: 493). In this way, the collected data becomes more structured since all the relevant data is labelled (Spiggle, 1994).

Step two involved going beyond the general identification of codes and incorporating more concrete categories to explain the relationships between and across incidents – abstracting into concepts. Through this iteration phase, I began to establish hematic similarities and linkages among the escapist experiences that the participants described and I abstracted previously identified categories into high order themes that were more transferable and theoretically relevant in relation to help answer the research question. This process was undertaken for each participant, interview, and transcript.

After each transcript had been interpreted at the idiographic level, a new part-to-whole phase commenced (Spiggle, 1994), whereby, each separate interview was compared (step three - comparison) and related to each other, points of difference and similarity were noted, and common meaning and themes were identified across the range of interview participants. The objective at this stage is to identify similarity and differences by comparing the collected data (Spiggle, 1994). Throughout this process, the developing thematic structure was continuously challenged and modified, accordingly and the interpretations were continuously revised. Each transcript helped to inform the broader themes.

The forth step, dimensionalization involves "identifying properties of categories and constructs" and this means exploring its "attributes of characteristics along continua or dimensions" (Spiggle, 1994: 494). Dimensionalization helps to identify relations between concepts or categories as well as exploring variation in attributes of the categories or constructs. For example, it was possible to identify a number of properties that related to passive forms of escapism and properties that related to active forms of an escape. In turn, I was able to trace these on a dimensional range (continuum) and the dimensions were noted accordingly. From this I was able to locate important elements of passive and active escapes that helped me to answer the aim of this study.

Integration is the fifth step in the data analysis process and this involved mapping out different emerging themes, and conditions that tend to cluster together and these can be integrated to theory (Spiggle, 1994). Axial coding was used and this can move to a higher level of abstraction onto a theoretical level. Goulding (2000: 263) explains that axial coding is the "appreciation of concepts in terms of their dynamic interrelationships. These should form the basis for the construction of theory". Once a theme was identified, for example, hysteric angst (see article 3, Chapter 5) I began consulting and integrating theory around angst and hysteria. I started to build its theoretical significance and its development in the data.

Iteration usually occurs during the process of data collection and describes how newly gained information in the course of previous stages of data collection can partially model the approach for proceeding stages of data collection (Spiggle, 1994). Iteration involved moving back and forth between earlier transcripts, preceding transcripts and visiting the theoretical literature. Earlier readings of transcripts informed later readings of transcripts, and reciprocally, later readings enabled me to recognise and explore patterns not noted in the initial analysis.

Refutation involves scrutiny of my own inferences, categories, constructs and use of conceptual frameworks. My supervisors also scrutinised my findings and use of concepts and theoretical frames, along with member checks of interpretations and the journal review process, whereby explanatory theories were subjected to critique.

2.5.1 Evaluating Research

Studies that fall under the positivist paradigm pay considerable attention to the robustness of the research design, paying particular attention to measures of validity, reliability and objectivity for evaluating the "trustworthiness" of the research (Hogg and Maclaran, 2008). Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed different dimensions for qualitative studies, such as this one, to consider; credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria has been subject to criticism (see Hirschman, 1986; Wallendorf and Belk, 1989) as it has been argued that Lincoln and Guba (1985) have essentially transferred positivistic criteria to non-

positivistic research (Hogg and Maclaran, 2008). This led to Wallendorf and Belk (1989) proposing a modified version to Lincoln and Guba's original framework and included a fifth dimension, integrity. Integrity considers the "extent to which the interpretation was unimpaired by evasions, misinformation or misrepresentations by participants" (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989: 70). This study employs Lincoln and Guba's (1985) dimensions for evaluating qualitative research, based on four key criteria - credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability and I have included Wallendorf and Belk's (1989) extended aspect of integrity to the assessment of trustworthiness.

Credibility Assessment

Credibility as an evaluation criterion is concerned with the confidence that can be placed in the truth of the research findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). A primary way in which I established rigor and credibility was through prolonged engagement with the participants and spending time in the field to experience the lived world of the participants (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Wallendorf and Belk, 1989). To reiterate, I spent time in many of the participants' homes during the data collection process and maintained trust and rapport with the participants across the three stages of data collection, over a three year period and I understood, as fully as possible, the context of their lives and experiences. In addition, I was also a binge-watcher and a fan of *HoC* and Kevin Spacey for many years and this enhanced my understanding of the participants' experiences.

I maintained self-awareness throughout the study concerning ways in which my own subjectivity has the potential to shape the research. I distanced myself from the field by immersing myself in the relevant literature as well as receiving comments from my supervisors who were 'outside the field' as it were. Frequent debriefing sessions with my supervisors provided a sounding board for developing my research ideas and methods. A good example was the idea of video recording my own SPI binge-watch experience and immersing myself in the world of my participants. The SPI aspects of the research were discussed and agreed in supervisory meetings. My supervisors' feedback throughout the various stages of the data collection process was helpful in "qualifying personal biases" (Hogg and Maclaran, 2008) and this was particularly relevant in relation to my own understanding of the emotional fallout experienced by fans when a beloved celebrity-brand transgresses and analysing the transcripts from

other, heartbroken Spacey fans. Member checks, in which the "interpretation and report (or a portion of it, perhaps written for the lay reader) is given to the members of the sample (informants) for comment" (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989: 74) were used and this occurred in two ways. Firstly, I asked all of the informants to check the interpretations presented in data collected. For example, in the videography, close collaboration with the participants ensured I represented their binge practices and habits authentically as depicted in the data collection and the participants in the videography all agreed with the emic interpretations. Secondly, member checks were carried out verbally throughout the interviews with constant checks of the interviewees understanding of the phenomenon, by asking questions such as, "Does that seem accurate to you?" and "Can I confirm that you…".

A further step to ensure credibility of the research included the input of peer's and peer scrutiny and this allowed for an enlarged perspective. I have presented my research at the Interpretive Consumer Research (ICR) workshop (see Appendix 8) and the European Marketing Academy Conference (see Appendix 9). Feedback from academic peers at the conferences developed some of my theoretical explanations, for example observations and questions from academic peers at the ICR conference allowed me to refine my theoretical thinking on narrative transportation and surreality (see Appendix 8). Additionally, the articles and findings have been shored up in the peer review through the publication of the manuscripts in leading academic journals.

Transferability Assessment

Transferability refers to the extent to which findings of the study can be applied in other contexts of analysis (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Wallendorf and Belk, 1989) and Lincoln and Guba (1985: 290) enquire, "How can one determine the extent to which the findings of a particular enquiry have applicability in other contexts or with other subjects (respondents)?". This study's inquiry into escapism was largely focused on the context of binge-watching *HoC* and the research findings can be transferred to the context of binge-watching other TV shows, different genres and series. The findings have the potential to be transferred and adapted to other contexts including, for example, other forms of screen-based escapism such as, browsing online, and watching movies. Additionally, complicating the division between passive and active escapes (article 1, Chapter 3) can also be considered and transferred in relation to listening to

Podcasts. Hancock and McMurtry (2018) suggest the podcast sensation, *Serial* (2014-present) is capable of igniting the audiences insatiable interest and imagination in a murder case that goes beyond simply listening to the podcast. In article 2 (Chapter 4) the focus is on binge-watching and the article suggests that when done in isolation this catalyses a reflection about one's life choices and trajectory, and crucially what is absent from one's own life. Various forms of prolonged consumption, when done alone have the potential to lead to a sense of emptiness and reflections on missing out on connection with others. Whether this is playing video-games in isolation, online browsing in seclusion, or even reading alone for extended periods of time. This thesis has suggested that categories of escapism need to be recognised for their fluidity and the findings extend beyond and apply to more than mundane, and passive classifications of escapism.

Dependability Assessment

Lincoln and Guba (1985) highlight an overlap exists between credibility and dependability, arguing that credibility gives credence to dependability. In order to address dependability, Lincoln and Guba (1985) stress that the processes and methods within the study should be reported in detail, thereby enabling a future researcher to repeat the work, if not necessarily to gain the same results. I have produced a detailed methods chapter and this address the operational detail of the data collection and each article presented in this thesis contains a methods section outlining the specific theoretical inferences deployed in those works. For interpretivist researchers, the context and people continually change (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989), and dependability should be weighted on whether the explanation advanced previously is enduring. I returned to the field for a second round of post-binge interviews in stage one of the research process and conducted second and third stages of data collection. At each round and stage of the data collection process, I would assess whether the participants meanings corresponded with the researcher generated interpretations of the data. Verifying my analysis with the meanings of participants has the additional benefit of ensuring a trustworthy interpretation of the data and also the validation of respondents in confirming or disconfirming results. Further, interpretations from the data were

discussed with a three-person research team (two supervisors) throughout the data analysing process, verifying my interpretations at regular intervals.

Confirmability Assessment

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the findings could be confirmed or corroborated by other researchers (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) and techniques for enhancing credibility include prolonged engagement, triangulation of methods, maintaining a reflexive journals and an audit trial are recommended (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Wallendorf and Belk, 1986). I have an audit trail including interview transcripts, journal notes, video evidence and telephonic communications collected from engagement with participants (see Appendix 3-7). Throughout the study, I was keen to adopt a curiosity about my own assumptions in terms of my participants' experiences of binge-watching and escapism as well as my assumptions about the research process. I wrote research notes and reflective essays after key stages, including reflecting on various stages of data collection, conducting and making a videography, as well as regularly reflecting verbally with my supervisors. Wallendorf and Belk (1989) acknowledge the importance of triangulation of methods for confirmability and also for integrity purposes. Triangulation is the convergence of methods with the purpose of strengthening a study's validity (Flick, 1992). The fundamental idea of triangulation is that the validity of a study's findings is enhanced when two or more methods that have offsetting biases are used to access a given phenomenon, and the results converge or corroborate (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983). The most discussed form of triangulation is the use of multiple methods in the examination of a social phenomenon (Denzin, 1978). For this study I used a number of methods in combination (interviews, videography, telephonic communications and SPI) to enhance the validity of the research. In addition, the data was triangulated across participants and the three data collection stages, comparing for example, the interviews with each participant across the various rounds of data collection and across participants, noting and limiting exceptions.

Integrity Assessment

Finally, Wallendorf and Belk (1989) suggested a fifth criterion should be added to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) original criteria for assessing trustworthiness in qualitative research. The fifth criterion is integrity and this is the process of checking for misinformation and representations. Wallendorf and Belk (1989) suggest integrity can be assessed through prolonged engagement, good interview technique, triangulation, safeguarding informant identity and researcher introspection. All my data collection methods, including interviews, my own diary notes, telephonic communications, video and photographs of my own binge and that of the participants are all authentic accounts and checks were conducted by my supervisory team. I anonymised my participants real names and identities and participants in the videography consented and agreed to appear in the videography. Prolonged engagement over three stages of data collection allowed me to learn more about the character of the participants and build rapport and trust, which can provide a good basis for assessing any potential clues to any potential deceptiveness (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989). In the various stages of data collection, I would enquire, or reframe a question and bring up salient points from past interviews to check for consistency of interpretations. Finally, the data collection methods employed were authorised and approved by Lancaster University Ethics Committee (see Section 2.6 and Appendix 1).

2.6 Ethical Considerations

Data was collected only after obtaining approval from Lancaster University's Research Ethics Committee and a confirmation of this can be found in Appendix 1). Once a prospective participant registered an interest in participating in the study, the participant was sent a copy of the participant information sheet and an electronic consent form (see Appendix 2 and 3). In advance of the interview taking place with each participant, I received electronic consent (email) acknowledging that the participant had read the participant information sheet and was willing to take part in the study. On arrival at the agreed location for the first stage of data collection (February and March, 2016), the second stage (May, 2017) and the final third stage (October and November, 2018) participants signed the consent form at each stage of the data collection consent to take part in the study was sought. All potential participants were

informed that the interview would be audio recorded, and a number of the interviews were video-recorded. Due to its inherent audio-visual nature, it is not particularly straightforward to conceal the identity of a participant in the videography, and I was conscious of potential ethical concerns. I discussed this with the participants, and all were happy and agreed to be part of the videography. Before each of the video-recorded interviews, I told the participants that before any finalised version of the videography was made public, they would be able to view and offer any comments. The videography was set up behind a password on the Vimeo service. No comments requesting changes or the exclusion of any material have been received. Similarly, participants were informed that the asynchronous messages that I received from each participant, may be made public, and all participants provided consent. The participants were given reassurances of promises of confidentiality and the offer to present transcripts to the participants for comment. The use of pseudonyms was adopted for all the participants. Participants were offered the option to withdraw from the study at any time should they want, and their anonymity was stressed throughout the process of data collection.

2.7 Personal Reflection on the Research Process

Ethnography is a reflexive process and I adapted to new themes as they emerged during the research process. Alongside this, I took a fairly open and opportunistic approach to the data collection to gain a better understanding of the research phenomenon as it unfolded through the research. In this study, reflexivity included responding to ongoing, chaotic and unprecedented real-world events including the Brexit vote in the UK, the US Presidential election of Donald J. Trump, and the #MeToo Movement which coincided with the demise of the Oscar winning actor and *HoC* lead star, Kevin Spacey. The first stage of interviews (March, 2016) revealed participant concerns about the state of the world. The UK-EU Referendum was looming and the US Republican Party presidential primaries were well underway. The data collection exposed concerns about reality and representations in *HoC*. I was reflexive in responding to real-world events and in the second and third stage of data collection (May, 2017 and November, 2018).

The relationships I forged with the participants, and the role that I had come to play and occupy in their lives, was significant to this study. As the research process progressed after the first stage of data collection, I felt as though I was balancing on a tightrope between being a researcher and conversing as I would with friends. After all, I shared so many interests with the participants, most notably our devotion to *HoC* and Kevin Spacey and discussing these interests led to other TV show recommendations, conversing about music, films and video-games. However, I wanted to maintain researcher professionalism and did not want the data collection processes to be a two-way conversation - it was therefore a fine balance between being an active listener and partaking in an exchange whilst keeping the focus on the participants. On one hand, seeing me as 'one of them' offered a detailed and rich understanding of the cultural context of the participants binge-watch experience, and enabled me to be reflexive from the outset. On the other, it meant that participants would often expect me to understand their perspective, and in a number of interviews the respondents would say, for example "you know what I mean?" or "you know in that episode when that happened?". To try and overcome this potential threat to data quality, I would often try to probe further, by asking them to elaborate and tell me more about that particular experience. I remained focused on the data generated rather than forging friendships; and in all likelihood my participants would have sensed this, and the result is that we maintained a friendly distance throughout. Many participants were very keen on the research topic and throughout were largely excited to discuss and disclose their binge-watch habits and talk about a TV show (*HoC)* and an actor (Kevin Spacey) that they loved.

I developed an internal dialogue that questioned the research that I was conducting (Cresswell, 2013). Shortly after each interview, I reflected on how I felt the interview had gone. I would critique my interviewing skills and consider any changes for the next interview. I would also seek feedback from the participants about their experience of being interviewed. Something I had not anticipated prior to interviewing participants was the benefits that the participants might gain from the experience. Participants described it as an opportunity to think about their binge-watch habits and fandom. More than this, they were also reflecting on decisions in their life that had led them to binge and consequences of binging. The reliance on parasocial relationships for companionship was a common reflection, and considerations of how much time and energy they devoted to binge-watching. The participants commented on how the interviews allowed them to

reflect of their lifestyle choices, and sacrifices in their personal lives that had manifested into binge-watching habits. Some participants would often try to enquire about my personal life, and would sometimes ask if my own binge-watch experiences were similar to theirs, which is understandable from their perspective. Prior to the interviews beginning, often in the set-up of the interviews, I tried to keep discussion away from the more personal aspects of my life and would often converse about my PhD intentions and the significance of the research.

After the second stage of data collection (May, 2017), I was starting to reach data saturation with themes and topics being repeated and thirty-two interviews had been conducted at this stage. I wasn't necessarily planning for any further stages of interviews if subsequent seasons of *HoC* were released. However, the idea to conduct a third stage of data collection (November, 2018) arose from my own reflections and considerations of my own disappointment as a devoted fan of Spacey. Additionally, a number of participants expressed interest in another set of interviews when news broke about Spacey's sexual abuse allegations. I had shared with them in previous data collection stages that I was a Kevin Spacey fan, and when the allegations emerged, I genuinely think they wanted to speak with someone who may also be experiencing hurt and disappointment with Spacey. Reflexively, I realised this was a good opportunity to explore fans' emotional fallout with a celebrity-brand and ceased the opportunity to conduct a third stage of data collection to coincide with the release of *HoC* season six (November, 2018).

Over the three-year data collection period, I was really active in engaging with the changing research context, and I had to be quick-moving and be flexible to opportunities for data collection. I have been studying a narrative form of consumption – consumers engaging and immersing themselves into intricate story worlds and engaging with their fandom interests, whilst I have simultaneously become a storyteller myself. I have learnt narrative form, telling stories through myself (see article 2, Chapter 4) and through a videography (see article 1, Chapter 3). I have embraced the opportunity to use the PhD to learn new skills, take risks and I have used diverse, alternative methodological approaches for theory building and dissemination of research. Writing a short story as a piece of academic text and smuggling in theory and findings was daunting and challenging. The special issue editors of the short story format (Brown and Kerrigan, 2020) had some loose criteria that pertained to storytelling

writing and techniques. Nonetheless, I drew on my SPI data, binge-watch diaries, participant interviews and telephonic communication to produce a story. I shared the ambitions of the short story guest editors (Brown and Kerrigan, 2020) and I wanted my research to be accessible to people outside the academic community, to be captivating and unorthodox, and crucially have academic value. These values were also a reason for conducting a videography and the videographic element of this study was not without its challenges. Aside from learning to use editing software and video recording equipment for the first time, I found it challenging to occupy a number of roles, including researcher, writer, editor, and director. A purpose of the videography was to show binge rituals and practices that may otherwise be difficult to express in text. Capturing what people naturally do when they binge and re-visiting participants homes to recreate a shot they described in an interview or through the telephonic communication, offered an opportunity to reimmerse myself in the data and I was able to generate further theoretical interpretations from taking this approach.

Finally, I have reflected on what other methodological ways I could have conducted for this study. I am intrigued by Nash et al.'s (2021) recent approach of undertaking a family ethnography, whereby the engagement of the consumption of a home-based gaming technology (Nintendo Wii) led to a form of extreme insider research. The principal researcher lived with four different families, over the course of four weeks, living with each family on a 24-hour basis for an entire week. When I first conceived this study, a similar approach to that carried out by Nash et al. (2021) occupied my thoughts. I briefly considered the idea of living with binge-watchers 24-7. However, I was concerned that a binge might not happen in the allocated time period that I would live with participants, as well as ethical committee concerns, the daunting prospect of the amount of data that could be produced, and worries about living with people that don't know me and I don't know them. The emphasis on sites and place was less important for this specific study and a multi-sited ethnography (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003) was not deemed appropriate as I was not necessarily seeking to highlight differences between research fields. I was seeking to better understand what happens to escapism when it does not operate according to how consumers think it should, and a micro-ethnographic approach was entirely suitable to address this research question. Although I have used this space to justify my approach, I am not necessarily trying to position my micro-ethnographic approach as necessarily "superior" than other

methodological approaches, and as Shankar and Patterson (2001: 487) note, “no methodology is perfect; what matters are the insights that might be gained”. The value of a micro-ethnographic approach is its ability to attend to opportunistic events, through multiple stages of data collection, and to explore shorter, more confined segments of binge consumption that occur in everyday households.

Chapter 3: Mapping the Extended Frontiers of Escapism: Binge-watching and Hyperdiegetic Exploration.

3.1 Introduction to Chapter 3: How the article fits into the Overall Thesis

Article 1 is about how binge-watching for sustained periods of time can catalyse viewers' thoughts and imaginations about these shows and involvement in narratives and characters extends beyond the screen. The impetus for article 1 came from the first stage of data collection, around the release of *HoC* season four (March 2016) when I was conducting pre-and-post binge-watch interviews with the recruited participants. The participants were discussing their experiences of binge-watching and a striking aspect was the after-effects of a binge. Participants discussed how remaining committed to the stories and characters of *HoC,* binge-watching episode after episode made it difficult to leave the show behind them. The experience of escapism continues beyond the consumption of a particular text, staying in thoughts and conversations long after the binge has finished. The narrative world of *HoC* was seeping into their time away from the screen, conversations with friends and family, updates on their social media threads, internet searches, conversations at work, undertaking the daily chores and ultimately the show had entered their thoughts as the participants went about their everyday lives. The effects of a binge have a lasting and on-going presence and the fantasies and narrative worlds that consumers escape to have the potential to extend beyond passively enjoying and observing a TV show.

I developed the idea to explore escapism beyond the point of simply watching and absorbing in that moment, but to conceptualise the "extended" frontiers of escapism. The standard frontiers of escapism are plotted across passive and active escapes depending on the level of interactivity and opportunities to achieve a somewhat "lasting presence" (Kuo et al., 2016; Russell et al., 2004; Seregina, 2014). In the case of TV consumption, it has been conceptualised as passive escape which are understood to be more observational than interactive (Kuo et al., 2016) and this helps the viewer relax and forget about their daily concerns and burdens (Russell et al., 2004). This position does not, however, explain the situation I was exploring, whereby the logic and effects of escapism appear to "extend" beyond the lived binge-watch moment, and the escape

into the world of *HoC* lingers long after the season finished. The escape was certainly not the same as "active" forms of escape but did have active elements which moved it beyond simple classification as passively observing a narrative unfold. The extended frontiers have various aspects of involvement and activity which enables consumers to re-visit the stories, characters and places from *HoC* at any time and there is on-going involvement and transportation to these narrative worlds.

I discussed with my supervisors how we might best explain the experience of consumers remaining immersed within a narrative – or diegesis – long after their binge was over. I recalled Professor Matt Hills' (2002) hyperdiegesis concept and Hills had drawn on it to consider the long-running BBC sci-fi drama, Dr Who (1963-present) and he presents the 'Whouniverse' (2014) as a world, due to its richness and depth where fans playfully speculate about what is not seen on screen. Indeed, consumers can draw on hyperdiegesis to engage their own imagination, and they put their thoughts to use to fill in the gaps that are absent from the story world. From this standpoint, I reviewed and analysed the data, and a strong emergent theme related to the depth of introspection that occupied participants after they emerged from having binged *HoC* over concentrated periods of time. *HoC* colonised pockets of the participants' psychic energies far away from their screen time, with speculation on character arcs and musings surrounding events.

Around this time, a call for papers for a special issue of the *Journal of Marketing Management* (2018) on *Screening marketing: videography and the expanding horizons of filmic research* was posted, with the stated aim of promoting filmic imaginations and facilitating engagements in research utilising videographic methodology. It appeared appropriate that a doctoral project that was largely about screen consumption should itself appear on a screen.

The final manuscript and videography, included in Chapter 3, were revised through the review process and complicating the imposition of divisions between the passivity and activity of escapism became more central to article 1. In an early draft of the videography and its accompanying paper, video poet John Koenig's convey of

"onism[1]" was deployed to help explain some of the affective textures that surround hyperdiegesis. Ultimately the concept was dropped from the paper though its premise and ideas would make a return later on in another paper (see Chapter 4). This manuscript and videography was presented as a competitive paper at the European Marketing Academy Conference (EMAC) in May 2018 (see Appendix 9).

[1] Onism denotes the frustration of being confined to the conditions of one existence and we used it to explore the contemporary consumer's sombre search for something beyond their quotidian lives through on-demand TV. Koenig, J. (2014). Onism: The awareness of how little of the world you'll experience. Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IrBlmpqh8T0

Jones, S., Cronin, J., and Piacentini, M.G. (2018). Mapping the extended frontiers of escapism: binge-watching and hyperdiegetic exploration, Journal of Marketing Management, 34:5-6, 497-508, DOI: 10.1080/0267257X.2018.1477818

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Mapping the Extended Frontiers of Escapism:

Binge-watching and Hyperdiegetic Exploration

3.2 ABSTRACT

Through a micro-ethnographic engagement with consumers' binge-watching experiences of the web-TV series *House of Cards*, this videography explores what we consider to be the "extended frontiers" of escapism. In contrast to passive/active classifications of escapism which risk reducing escapist fare to a *textual resource* which can be categorised discretely at the point of consumption, we consider "sustained encounters" with escapist fare as *appropriable textures* characterised by ongoing and less immediately discernible processes. Drawing upon Hills' (2002) concept of hyperdiegesis, we consider potentially "projective" forms of narrative transportation in binge-watching; heterochronic breaks from normal patterns of time; and *post-object* behaviours. In doing so, we outline how forms of escapism traditionally considered passive may under certain conditions represent much richer and more complex enterprises than previously imagined.

Videography available to watch at: https://vimeo.com/282476054/bac57f9b3b

Keywords: binge-watching, consumer culture, consumer experience, ethnography hyperdiegesis, theory

3.3 Introduction

> *"*[Binge watching's] *so profoundly antisocial… Consumed at such dosage, there's a lag between consumption and absorption. You emerge punch-drunk, eyes swimming. The characters visit you in your dreams. Real life seems messy by comparison and a pain to get back to."*
>
> Emma Brockes, *The Guardian*, August 2013

Since Holbrook & Hirschman's (1982) rallying call for consumer researchers to better account for the importance of fantasy in consumption, the market has regularly been recognised for its role in the provision of a myriad of resources and activities for circumventing the mundane (Belk & Costa, 1998; Goulding & Saren, 2009). The concept of escapism – or the self-selected separation of oneself from one's immediate reality – through the consumption of media resources, or *texts,* such as television, music, games and movies has long been an important subject of consumer culture studies (Batat & Wohlfeil, 2009; Giddings, 2009; Molesworth, 2009). The videographic research that this paper accompanies however centres not just on a solitary text as a resource for escapism, but is attentive to the complete temporal, spatial and cognitive commitment consumers make to this resource. Specifically, we account for the alchemy of space, narrative involvement, personal time, and imagination captured within "binge-watching" which we define as the marathon-consumption of serialised content from the same TV show for an extended period of time. While previous work has explored the liberatory dividends consumers as escapists can enjoy from short-term engagements with characters and stories in texts through theories such as narrative transportation (Batat & Wohlfeil 2009; Green & Brock 2000), immersion (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2010) and parasocial interaction (Giles, 2002), we suggest new concepts are needed to interrogate the wider existential nature and character of escaping through narratives over longer, more sustained periods.

We draw upon the potential of binge watching to extend beyond the frontiers of a "passive" or observational form of escapism, and induct escapists into the more active arena of what Matt Hills (2002) refers to as "hyperdiegesis", i.e. the potential for playful intervention and ideation with a narrative. In short, we contend with the ability of consumers to *actively* fill in gaps and secure answers within the TV narrative itself but

also within their own life-worlds throughout and around the time spent binge-watching. We classify this state of thinking about and engaging with a text over and beyond the core site of consumption (i.e. beyond the point of actual watching/observation) as the "extended frontiers" of escapism.

Through a micro-ethnographic engagement with consumers' binge-watching experiences of the Netflix series *House of Card*s, our videography problematises invoking clear distinctions between "active" and "passive" categorisations of escapism (see Kokho & Birch, 2014; Kuo *et al*. 2016). We theorise an ambivalence characterised by consumers' sustained exposure to these imaginary playgrounds, which are based on a stable and coherent possibility of spaces and events, and are free to be subjectively interacted with and consumed both within and around the actual practice of binge-watching. In total, our research is guided by the following question: how, under certain conditions, might forms of escapism which are traditionally considered passive exhibit aspects of an active character and what does this ambiguity mean for our understanding of consumers' use of escapists texts?

We therefore follow calls for videographers to "think more critically"; to adopt a *critical edge* and problematise theory through the medium of video rather than remaining simply descriptive and representational (Hietenan & Andéhn, *in this issue*). In contrast to the passive/active dichotomisation which risks conceptualising escapist fare as simply a textual resource which can be anatomised neatly at the point of consumption according to antecedents and processes, we consider sustained encounters with escapist fare as *appropriable textures* characterised by a more agglutinate existential state which goes beyond the point of consumption. Here, we propose the extendability of escapist mediated realities. To begin our commentary, we first provide some theoretical background to our videography.

3.4 Theoretical Underpinnings

3.4.1 Hyperdiegetic Worlds: Looking beyond Passive vs. Active Escapism

In a recent attempt to better crystallise a tacit "active" versus "passive" categorisation of escapism, Kuo & colleagues (2016) provide a useful discussion of the differences in interactivity and presence as key points of differentiation amongst escapist texts. For

these authors, conventional television viewing represents a clear form of passive escapism (or third person observation) as it lacks ability for both interactivity and real presence in the narrative world. In contrast, pursuits that require interactivity and presence from a first-person orientation, such as taking control of a character in a videogame, are painted as active forms of escapism. These thresholds, while intuitive, become difficult to delineate however when looking beyond *diegeses* (i.e. constructed and presented narrative structures within the primary text) and accounting instead for the possibility of *hyperdiegeses* (i.e. narrative structures amenable to co-construction and extension beyond the primary text). Recognising the possibility of hyperdiegeses allows for texts which are conventionally considered passive to be revisited as sites that can, under certain conditions, offer greater forms of interactivity and closer text–audience presence than previously observed. This, we argue, necessitates that particular pursuits, such as binge-watching, must be recognised as ambiguous phenomena that require alternative conceptualisation.

Hills (2002: 137) originally defined hyperdiegesis as, "a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text, but which nevertheless appears to operate according to principles of internal logic and extension". The phenomenon catalyses the cognitive abilities of those who live outside of the text to work within its depth and coherency to complete ludic and narrative gaps. Hyperdiegesis suggests mediated realities, while delivered through primary narratives, image and sound which cannot be objectively changed, can nevertheless be appropriated by consumers in their own imaginings and interactions with others. Hills coined the term to denote the internal consistency, comprehensibility and longevity that makes cult TV serials such as *Doctor Who* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* cohere as ontologically secure worlds that can support discussion with others and internal dialogues with oneself, while fostering speculation, conjecture and ongoing cultural production. The hyperdiegetic world demands critical, committed and active engagement from its audience or, as Hills (2002: 138) suggests, requires "stimulating creative speculation" to fully become "a trusted environment for affective play". Elsewhere, hyperdiegetic explorations have been conceptualised as going "beyond" the television set (Ross, 2008) and existing in the minds and lives of consumers as "vast and incompletable metatexts" (Gwenllian-Jones, 2004: 85). Moreover, such explorations cannot be discretely bracketed

away as "passive escapism" because of the ambivalent interactions between the text itself and the consumer's imagination:

> "Immersive experience is an alchemical effect of text and imagination, a species of willed hallucination that transports the reader into another realm. It is not a passive experience; the reader must play an active part in creating and sustaining its integrity, drawing on memory as well as imagination to reinforce its perceptual substance." (Gwenllian-Jones, 2004: 84)

In contrast to Kuo et al.'s (2016: 501) understanding of interactivity as objectively exerting discernible control and opportunity to "directly influence" the mediated reality, media scholars (including Hills and Gwenllian-Jones) suggest interactivity must also be understood more subjectively as a less discernible form of cognitive process constituted by an indirect interaction of the consumer's imagination with the narrative world. Moreover, these authors did not at the time of writing consider the on-demand, self-scheduling binge-watching activities of consumers and so, in the current research, we submit the importance of *sustained exposure* to televisual narratives. This adds a temporal aspect to Gwenllian-Jones' "alchemical effect" quoted above.

We suggest consumers' exposure to consistent themes, characters and plots of a single text over sustained periods provides an even closer, longer proximity to on-screen issues, further facilitating the conditions for hyperdiegetic exploration. Sustained exposure, we suggest, creates "continuous flow" (Williams, 2003: 95) between episodes, and ameliorates unnatural gaps, recaps and unwieldly continuity devices between the ongoing production of narrative which might otherwise challenge consumers' presence in the text, thus allowing for continued immersion and absorption, and contrasting with Kuo *et al.*'s (2016: 501) positioning of such viewing as "passive" or "predominantly observational in nature". To provide an empirical case for problematising the passive-active dichotomy and the possibility of more ambiguous extended frontiers of escapism, we now turn to the context of our study, *House of Cards* – a series designed by Netflix's streaming video service to be binged (Klarer 2014), and we detail how some of the principles of hyperdiegesis exist within the text.

3.4.2 The Hyperdiegesis of House of Cards

Escapism, like all forms of consumer behaviour, is not the endogenous result of individual agency alone but is prefigured and enabled by structural and contextual conditions of the market (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). Hietenan & Andéhn (*in this issue*) argue video plays a particularly important role in the subjectifying machinery of the capitalist system. By extension, marketised video services such as Netflix act with machine-like efficiency towards inducing and activating desire and indoctrinating audiences as consumers. In Netflix's political drama series *House of Cards* (2013 – Present, *HoC* thereafter), narratives around power and its corrupting influences, and the dramatic characterisation of those in power, are handled strategically to ensure that the serial is particularly amenable to ongoing audience analysis, deconstruction and speculation. The agentic interpretative powers of audiences are thereby leveraged as a source of value by Netflix and audience members are "put to work" as reflexive, loyal consumers of complex, marketizable narrative worlds.

HoC's antihero protagonist Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey) and his aides represent complex carnivalesque remoldings of real-world political figures. Off-screen threats to Frank's political career and faint glimmers of backstories, characters, circumstances and places of relevance to his past are carefully punctuated into the series to allow for reflection and discussion by the audience. The "overarching intricacy" and "coherence and continuity" between episodes that Hills (2002: 138) considers to be so central to the phenomenon of hyperdiegesis is carefully leveraged as the flagstone upon which *HoC* is built. The series' director David Fincher has asserted the importance of producing narratives according to a "long-form" nature, implying that texts such as film do not afford audiences the same complexity, longevity or richness of characterisations that television facilitates (Sepinwall, 2013). To preserve the "ontological security" of this long-form televisual nature (Hills, 2002: 138), *Netflix* ordinarily releases all episodes of a new season of a show as a package, thus circumventing interruptions between the narrative and thereby eliminating audiences' wait for subsequent episodes (Klarer, 2014: 205).

Through binge-watching *HoC*, audiences are immersed in "Frank's world" and while its entirety may never be fully revealed to them onscreen, they are left with enough textual detail to imagine possibilities beyond the material presented to them. Following

Hietenan & Andéhn, we must recognize that the producers behind video material such as *HoC* engage and encourage consumers through providing "the frame of possibilities of our unconscious desires" (*in this issue*). The hyperdiegesis that these producers help to incubate reflects desires to express identity and connect with others through shared discourse and debate. These desires are further assisted by web resources such as fan forums, fan-based websites, and social media pages which extend opportunities for speculation, fantasy and rumination beyond the television set and ensure that the experience of escapism cannot be fully contained to or exhausted within a single medium.

3.5 A Note on Methods

The decision to conduct our research using a videographic design rather than more conventional modes of representation was largely galvanized by nascent conversations that center on the belief that videographic work can and must have an explicitly critical orientation (Hietenan & Andéhn, *in this issue*). In our study, we wished to take a critical approach to the concept of consumer escapism using a medium suitably equipped both to deliver a polemic engagement with extant conceptualizations of escapism and to represent the evidence that problematizes these conceptualizations. The graphic nature of film, we felt, provides a suitable canvas to theorise the ambivalence between both the passivity and activity of escapism as it is lived and might otherwise lose its communicative impact in more conventional, textual forms of representation. Videography makes visible what otherwise might never be seen or remain unsaid (Belk & Kozinets, 2005) and, in our study, allows for the passing of time and the changing of space to be captured as they occur rather than retrospectively summarized in the static, introspective accounts of traditional interview-based work. This dynamism was particularly important in telling our theoretical story through the context of binge-watching, which includes participants' long-haul commitment to the TV series, real-time expressions of emotion, and ongoing speculation about what may or may not occur next on the screen.

Overall, our videographic research is based upon an improvised micro-ethnographic approach (Streeck & Mehus, 2005; Erickson, 1992) and is part of a larger research project which explores the motivating conditions and social dynamics of binge watching. Micro-ethnography typically works within "small-scale", localized ecologies to derive limited segments of data to describe "brief moments of everyday technocultural

activity" (Giddings 2009: 149). Micro-ethnography lends itself particularly well to video-/image- based data collection, and has previously used such visual means to provide close readings of transitory, proximal sites of escapism (Taylor, Kampe & Bell, 2015). Our micro-ethnographic videography of binge-watching centres on 15 binge watchers who have professed to bingeing *HoC* and other TV shows. Participants were recruited through a snowball sampling approach: the lead author approached acquaintances identifying as binge watchers with an interest in *HoC*, and from this initial participant-set was introduced to others.

Departing from traditional micro-ethnographic investigations, which may avoid consulting participants' opinions/reflections, we follow Taylor et al.'s (2015) approach to discussing with participants their techno-cultural activities. In-depth interview were therefore conducted with each participant in February 2016 before the release of season four of *HoC* to ascertain their binge-watch motivations, their thoughts on the narrative worlds of *HoC* to date, and to gain an a priori understanding of the role of the binge as a resource and medium for escapism. A second post binge interview was conducted with these same participants within a few days of their completed binge of the 13-episode 4th season to explore relevant emergent and conceptual areas. A number of these interviews were video-recorded and all participants captured provided signed consent to be featured in a final video product in addition to permitting material be used for research purposes more generally. A collaborative approach between the first author and participants was nurtured to produce videographic images of the material settings (Belk & Kozinets 2005), chiefly consumers' living rooms, kitchens and bedrooms over long periods, sometimes late into the evening.

As a research team, analysis of the full range of data was undertaken in a hermeneutic and recursive back-and-forth approach to ensure that the representations, conceptualisations and subsequent interpretations truly reflect the recorded data (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1990). The video-based data was then collated thematically, reviewed by the full research team, compared with written analytic notes, and ultimately produced into a short film. The iterative hermeneutical approach of shifting back to the data, researcher notes and the literature continued throughout post-production of the film.

3.6 Running Commentary

In our videography, we visit first how sustained commitment to the hyperdiegetic world of *HoC* represents a form of "projective" narrative transportation, whereby consumers project their thoughts, concerns and ideas onto the text during immersion. Second, our film explores the often-solitary nature and long-haul commitment a consumer makes to a binge, and how self-scheduling their own narrative pace outside of standard time can be considered as a form of "heterochronism" (Foucault, 1986). Third, our film captures the practices by which consumers mourn the conclusion of their favourite, serialised content, and prolong their escapism through post-binge behaviour. We now explore these three areas in more detail.

3.6.1 *Projective aspects of Narrative Transportation*

One of the most striking areas of discussion to emerge in our research is that the often-long-term commitment made to alternative worlds is not simply a practice in detached or *mindless* transportation. Rather, binge-watchers bring personal and social concerns with them on their journeys, and often return to reality with learned insights and speculations to better accommodate their own lives. This phenomenon closely relates to the concept of narrative transportation, conceptualised as a process by which "the consumer actively seeks to be taken away from one's everyday life into different narrative worlds, where one could experience a different self" (Batat & Wohlfeil, 2009: 372). Previously, Kuo et al (2016) have suggested that narrative transportation, while achieving captivation, ultimately lacks opportunity for true interactivity, thereby positioning this phenomenon as a passive form of escapism. We agree that while binge-watching certainly does lack potential for genuine presence and influence over on-screen activities, classifying the narrative transportation involved in prolonged binge activities as unconditionally passive becomes problematic. When taking into account both the time committed to the transportation, as well as conditions that a consumer departs from, interactivity is detected between the textual events and the consumer's own biographical experiences and knowledge.

The questions that are left open, the plots that are hinted at but never executed, and the spaces that are left unvisited in the *HoC* world allow for hyperdiegetic

exploration. In the film, one of our participants goes so far as to describe feeling as though she has come to know on some level how it is to live and work in the White House while watching *HoC*. The considerable amount of time that binge-watchers invest in living with characters takes viewing beyond the domain of passivity, and provides them with texture for actively probing, introspecting upon and interacting with real-world issues. More than simply retreating to other worlds to be transfixed, our videography shows evidence of the transportation being *projective*, where participants use narrative worlds as a platform upon which to project their fantasies, concerns, worries, anxieties and problems.

In our film, we hear how participants project aspects of their own lives onto Frank's narrative world over the course of their binge and, in the hours and days that follow, they reflect upon his world as a basis for figuring out their own reality. Participants discuss their processes of rationalising the world of *HoC* as *more real* than current political realities, and the fictitious Frank Underwood administration as more sensible than, and perhaps preferable to, real-world political bids for presidency. Ultimately, the narrative world, over the lengthy and enveloping journey of a binge, becomes a platform that consumers can use to make sense of their real-world concerns.

3.6.2 *Heterochronism and Temporalities of the Binge*

Throughout the micro-ethnography, time and its displacement emerged as an important theme. While other research has explored consumers' scheduling of transgressive and energetic communal pursuits towards the search for more intense, authentic, and liberatory encounters than what is afforded to them over the rhythms of day to day life (e.g. Belk & Costa, 1998; Goulding, Shankar, Elliott & Canniford, 2009; Goulding & Saren, 2009), our videography documents a more individuated, sombre, and markedly less bacchanalian usage of time. Binge- watchers schedule opportunities for binges in their personal diaries, and save up 'free' time after work and at the weekend to retreat under blankets, *cocoon*, and consume television for extended periods. Our participants discuss strategies such as storing up episodes to "treat themselves to a binge" and relishing such dedicated periods as opportunities to really *"get in"* to the on-screen worlds. Such willingness to sacrifice time for personal periods of escape conform loosely to what Foucault (1986) has described as "heterochronism", or temporalities of *otherness* which separate individuals from the usual rhythms of time and presence, thus providing

"a sort of absolute break with their traditional time" (Foucault, 1986: 26). Our film documents the localised commitment to long-form television, such as *HoC*, as functioning as a transitional territory that exists somewhere, or rather *sometime*, on the peripheries of everyday life.

Participants are seen to disregard the standard division of night and day, and draw instead on the number of episodes or seasons watched as a benchmark of the time passed. This shifting of participants' recognition of their continued progress from the clock to the text provides an unusual dimension to escapism that sits beyond discourses of passivity or activity. While Kuo et al (2016: 503) suggests passive escapism such as watching TV "offers the benefit of mental absorption through narrative transportation without the need for mental or physical exertion", in our film we hear a participant recount the disregard of her typical sleeping schedule to watch an entire season and a half of *HoC*. She describes beginning her binge in the evening but finishing that same binge around 5am the following morning. Curiously, we see that for many informants, such lengthy commitments of their time (and their concentration) are not registered as particularly lengthy at all – rather, time almost ceases to exist during the binge. Binge-watching is instead situated in a "quasi-eternity" where both the typicality and record of passing events are allowed to dissolve and disappear, yet the time committed is still recognised as "fleeting, transitory, precarious" (Foucault, 1986, 26). Our film captures the idea that time itself is up for scrutiny, its orthodox measurement can be escaped, and the enjoyment of texts such as long-form television series becomes almost unlimited by the enticing prospect of holding in there for *just one more episode*.

Additionally, besides the ambiguity surrounding the passing of time, the currencies of speed, completion and "newness" are important components of binge-watching. The power granted to consumers to complete an entire season of *new* episodes upon their collective release is discussed by participants in the film as comparable to a race to the finish. The time dedicated to completing this race also extends far beyond the hours spent in front of a screen. In our film, we account for binge-watchers committing time to discussing and unpacking the events and occurrences of the TV series with others during water-cooler conversations at work, on online forums, and across social media posts and community fan pages. While the time associated with binge-viewing appears at face value to be sunken into a solitary, hermit-like domestic activity, our film also

documents how consumer's appetite for hyperdiegetic exploration demands time away from the screen and outside of the home.

3.6.3 *Combatting the "Post-Binge Malaise"*

The final thematic area documented in our film is concerned with the balance between the felt rewards of hyperdiegetic exploration within and around the binge and the sense of loss that can emerge and linger after reaching season finales. Our participants describe mourning processes which are similar in tone to those described by Russell & Schau (2014). This section of the film captures participants' wistful and melancholic feelings of encountering the end of a season and contending with a vacuum now left in their recreational time, a period referred to by journalist Matthew Schneier (2015) as the "post-binge malaise". Participants can be seen turning to social media, online forums, web-commentaries, after-show talk shows, and even award shows, to extend the relationships formed with TV characters and to keep their narrative playgrounds alive for hyperdiegetic exploration. These activities fit within a domain known as post-object fandom, a category of transitional behaviours that may occur as "responses to the specific moment when a fan object moves from being an ongoing text into a dormant one which yields no new instalments" (Williams, 2011: 266). Unlike other forms of bingeing (e.g. alcohol, food and drugs), future availability of the vice in this context (i.e. the TV show) is not immediately available after the fix has finished. Binge-viewers must sometimes wait for over a year until the release of the next season. Because participants have committed long, heterochronic and concentrated bursts of their time to texts such as *HoC*, the conclusion of a season serves as a disruptive or destabilising threat to consumers' escapist potential. In this period of mourning, looking to the TV series' actors' other work and activities helps offer some semblance to the aesthetic universe that binge-watchers have spent much time immersed in. Consumers' desires to keep their hyperdiegetic exploration active, and to seek continued imaginings of on-screen characters suggests a residual state of escape that centres on the personal resolve and ingenuity of the escapist rather than textual nature of the escapist fare itself, thereby sitting outside of active-passive dichotomisations of escapism. Finding ways to overcome the post-binge malaise ultimately sustains binge-watchers' links to the narrative world, allowing its characters and events to remain immortalised in their lives.

3.7 Conclusion

Our improvised micro-ethnography has allowed us to think critically about what we consider to be the frontiers of escapism. We find recent efforts to set the boundaries of escapist pursuits through anatomising discrete mechanisms and classifying these pursuits as active or passive to be useful, though we suggest there is difficulty in clearly delineating such categorisations within activities which draw heavily not just upon a central text but also the diversity of the escapist's personal resources and the displacement of time itself. Drawing on binge-watching, we depart from the idea that such contexts constitute a resource for specific and discrete forms of escapism but might be more usefully thought of as *appropriable textures* which can be variably committed to and extended at will. The hyperdiegetic explorations which are brought about from sustained exposure enables consumers to prolong and extend the frontiers of their escapist pursuits beyond their immediate consumption of the text alone. The on-going nature of the binge, and personal reflection and speculation over the course of that binge, allows consumers to believe that the world is bigger than the one that has been represented to them, and escapism to this world becomes a richer and more complex enterprise.

We recognise that video is by no means "an innocent practice" (Hietanen et al., 2014: 2020), rather video is situated in a particular political agenda and its consumption is tied to purposeful planned simulations and thereby loaded with power dynamics. The strategy of service providers like Netflix to encourage bingeing and to catalyse individuals' imaginative expansion of worlds in a variety of endless directions ultimately suggests that there are extended frontiers of escapism worthy of further exploration and theorisation. While our micro-ethnography broke ground on these frontiers through theorizing individuals' experiences of bingeing as it is lived, we recognize that this approach risks sustaining views that are more individualistic than they are systemic (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). Therefore, we urge future videographers to look beyond first-person accounts of hyperdiegesis toward unpacking, through film, the governing machineries that shape these phenomena but might be less amenable for introspection and discursive expression. Namely, we propose that powerful videographic work could be delivered through accounting for the affective and contextual powers of the Netflix "desiring-machine" that inscribe and encapsulate the micro-social experiences accounted for in the current study.

3.8 References

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3.9 Summary and Reflections on Chapter 3

The process of writing and publishing article 1 was important for me in terms of the impact it has had on the development of my ideas and thinking for my PhD, and also in starting to shape and influence scholarship in this domain. Article 1 documents the ambiguous nature of sustained exposure to a particular text. It suggests hyperdiegesis enables consumers to prolong and extend "the frontiers" of what might have previously been considered passive escapism in ways that involve participation as *more* than an observer

A number of considerations for the thesis emerged. Firstly, the research complicates the dimensions of escaping into narrative worlds, to reveal that rather than getting away from the present reality, consumers draw on the show to try and figure out issues in the real world. This consideration helped me to think about how individuals draw on a narrative world to reflect on issues that are more personal to them and relates specifically to circumstances in their own private lives and this is further explored in article 2 (Chapter 4). In addition, it shaped my thinking about how the turmoil in the real-world infringes on escapism and this is explored further in article 3 (Chapter 5).

The second consideration centres on how the temporalities of a binge can have destabilising effects, resulting in some temporary loss of structure in the participants' lives, for example, sleep patterns being disrupted as the binge continues. The participants' normal routines were temporarily disrupted as they remained committed to a binge, driven on by a desire to reach the season finale. This consideration helped steer and develop my thinking about the temporal issues related to a marathon binge and this was further explored in article 2 (Chapter 4), in particular the idea that time itself feels displaced when you commit to a binge. Perception of time seems to change (Woermann and Rokka, 2015) when consumers are fully absorbed in a show.

Finally, this chapter explored the mourning period that follows a prolonged binge session, where consumers grieve the finale of their favourite TV shows and engage in the "hyperdiegetic extension" of these narrative texts to try and prolong the experience of fantasy. This was important to the development of my thinking for article 2 (Chapter 4). An area for enquiry that emerged was how consumers actively engage with social media and visit various fan fora to meet like-minded fans and keep the narrative worlds ongoing. The importance of the fan relationship with the show and the lead actor, Kevin Spacey

started to transpire too. The parasocial relations extended beyond Spacey's character portrayal of Frank Underwood and interest in Spacey himself was important and contributed to the enjoyment and immersion with the show. These ideas are developed further in article 4 (Chapter 6). A benefit of devouring and finishing a season quickly is the ability to join in, or spark up conversations offline and online, without worrying about episode spoilers. Rather than it being passive, my participants mentioned how they posted show updates and contributed to online discussions themselves after a binge and this helped to prolonged the escape. It provided some sociality and connection from what might be considered a fairly solitary practice (Feiereisen et al., 2019) and allowed me to think about tribal behaviours and connections that form in and around a binge (see Chapter 4).

In terms of impact of the article in scholarly communities, article 1 has been cited in a number of top-tier publications, including the *Journal of Consumer Research* (Feiereisen et al., 2020), *Journal of Psychology and Marketing* (Nanda and Banerjee, 2020), *Tourism Management Perspectives* (Irimias et al., 2021), *Arts and the Market* (Kottasz et al., 2019) and the *Oxford Handbook of Entertainment Theory* (Halfmann and Reinecke, 2020). It was shortlisted for the *Journal of Marketing Management* Best Paper Award 2018 and was listed as Highly Commended (2018).

Chapter 4: Existential Isolation… Press Play to Escape

4.1 Introduction to Chapter 4: How the article fits into the Overall Thesis

Article 2 explores binge-watching from the perspective of a single consumer, revealing that an escape and its accompanying narrative world are drawn on to make sense of one's *own* circumstances in life. The format of this paper is unconventional, insofar as it takes the form of a short story, based on my research. This story was written in response to a call for papers for a special issue of *Marketing Theory* (2020) entitled *Expressions of Interest*, with the guest editors challenging authors to prepare short stories whereby "theoretical conjectures" were "smuggled in and not spelt out" (Brown and Kerrigan, 2020). All submissions were subject to the usual academic process of double-blind peer review by three reviewers.

Following the special issue call, I began thinking about and working on some ideas that emanated from the first published paper (article 1), but had not been fully advanced in that paper. While the short story developed and reimagined some themes from the first paper (including the temporary loss of structure, temporalities of a binge, and subdued feelings encountered around the post-binge malaise), it also enabled a return to some early ideas around experience of "onism", which had been considered for inclusion in the first paper but ultimately dropped over the course of peer review. With the short story format, the embers of onism were reignited and evolved as a way of capturing the essence of how a prolonged binge-watch leaves consumers feeling condemned to reflect upon what they are missing out on. The article adopts a position on onism which was originally developed as a neologism to describe the "frustration of being stuck in just one body, that inhabits only one place at a time" (Koenig, 2014).

Speaking to a neoliberal ideology which is inherently focused on the individual, personal responsibilities and life conditions at the expense of community, article 2 highlights that whilst binge-viewing can offer a gateway to escape and immersion into imagined worlds, in choosing these imaginary spaces, consumers inhabit places that are less real and lived than their own actual world. When they return to their own real world (after the escape and binge has completed) they have to face the things that are lacking in their own lives and that have facilitated the binge in the first instance.

Following a call for researchers to explore consumption experiences of single individuals (Ratner and Hamilton, 2015), I decided to provide a singular, solo consumer's perspective of binge-watching. As a single person, I wanted to give a genuine insider perspective of what it means for an individual consumer to commit to a marathon binge session and how immersion into a single-story world infects imaginations and conversations. The short story illustrates how binge-watching serves to combat feelings of isolation that a single person may encounter, filling a sense of otherwise threateningly empty social and personally felt time (Whitehouse-Hart, 2014). Whilst also recognising that this stay-at-home form of consumption may facilitate more time insulated away from making real-life connections. The story reveals how solitary, marketised forms of consumption can ground a consumer to the familiarity of their own existence. TV shows and escapism can become a crutch, something that consumers can fall back on, and the allure of parasocial relations provide a temporary means of coping with feelings of loneliness. The story suggests that spending too much time consuming in isolation catalyses a fundamental craving for human connection and here the works sets out to conceptualise a new form of tribalism (Cova et al., 2007).

The story draws on the TV show *Mad Men* (2007-2015) for context. Given the break of typically twelve to fifteen months until a new season of *HoC* was released and wanting to stay immersed in the binge-watch context, I explored other texts to binge on and I had natural access to where the phenomena under study are occurring. Although *HoC* was the main focal point for the research, binging on other shows in the interim period, between each new season being released allowed me to stay fully immersed within the research context. I shadowed my participants' intentions, whereby binge-watching is part of their everyday consumption and lived experiences and they watch a number of shows at any one time.

Jones, S. (2020). Existential Isolation… Press Play to Escape, *Marketing Theory*, 20(2), 203-210.

4.2 Abstract

While consumer research has frequently visited the fantastical search for escape from everyday life, this story (part autoethnographic, part fiction – all the characters and incidents are the author's creation) documents a solo consumer's spirited desire to escape from beyond what quotidian life affords, and society's sometimes unwelcome gaze, in a more sombre and hermit form than has previously been explored. The story plays on immersion, narrative transportation, and parasocial imaginings around a prolonged binge-watch marathon and coping with the existential isolation, a resource in constant need of replenishment.

Keywords: binge-watching, escapism, introspection, narrative transportation, solo consumption, tribes

I've always loved reading books - when I was a young boy, my mum used to walk me to the public library near my school and I would daydream about reading every text in there. Thirty-three years later, my love affair takes me to Lenny's book shop, situated in-between a cluster of quirky independent cafés. Lenny came to Northern England as a child, when his parents escaped civil conflict in Turkey and he inherited the store from his father. The book club meets once a month. This evening, sitting in the cosy, candle-lit back room we transgress to debate the merits of book to screen adaptations. It finishes with Sophie speaking of the subtle messages being overlooked for the more lurid aspects in the TV adaption of Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale. Substituting the camera for the written word is met with universal disapproval from the book club collective, but I harbour a secret. I find myself watching more than reading.

Leaving through the shop's front entrance, and I feel a strong inclination to reach for something to read from the treasure trove of Lenny's pristine second-hand collection, neatly arranged by the arched wooden door. As I wander home, book in hand, through the nearby park on this late, dusk evening, the tall oak trees overseeing the park perimeter try to hold off the taunting darkness. My thoughts immediately jump to winter, inadvertently skipping past autumn. Winter's imminent arrival means I can hibernate, be reclusive, relatively guilt free. What I failed to admit to the club, and now I'll own up to, is aside from a quick journey to Waitrose for weekly food supplies, book club is the first time I have ventured out of the house in days. Despite the over-time rate, I declined semester three teaching. Instead, I've been watching a lot of TV. Not simply limited to the box nestled in the corner of the living room, I'm streaming shows on my laptop and phone, watching around seven hours a day. Consequently, I have become less of a people-pleaser. The invite to Mark's 40th birthday party was promptly declined. The walking club can jog on. The council letter, dated five weeks ago, detailing 'drastic action required' on the upkeep of my allotment has ominously been ignored. In fact, the only social commitment I keep, is book club. It's my only interaction, some weeks.

As a middle-aged singleton, I find myself being ever more individualistic. I see fewer people, and I'm guilty of making less effort. Friends are married with children, many are divorced with children, and I decided some years ago, after a wretched double-dose of heartache, that Amy Winehouse was right, 'Love is a Losing Game'. The last relationship, her final words haunt me like a phantom presence. As the rain

hammered on the car roof, my break-up protests went unheard. She slammed closed the car door, and as the raindrops collected in her blonde hair, she pointed furiously at the car - from inside my lip-reading techniques were tested to the limits. I picked up some expletives about driving a two door, climaxing with, "your bumper sticker should read… selfish bastard on board". Was she right? My relatively self-centred, care-free lifestyle, remains alien, and perplexing to my friendship groups. In fact, my single status is the subject of roundtable discussions at dinner parties, camp fire chats at festivals and with mates gathered in the pub, usually when I've gone to purchase the next round. Ironically, overhearing this acts as a catalyst for further self-withdrawal.

There are times when singledom self-inhibits me from engaging in activities, especially when they are observable by others. Cinema is a passion of mine. I once managed a 12-screener in the South-West of England. Having been privy to management meetings, CEO briefings and endless emails about the 'bottom line', '*For the Love of Film*' tagline seems disingenuous. Too often the multiplex exists to sell you a super-sized, sugary soda, and a gargantuan box of popcorn at pumped up prices. To extract the last morsels of money from your purse, they charge extra for an unkempt VIP seat, possessing dubious claims of 'extra leg room'. I've tried to cleanse myself from the multiplex experience, and tend to frequent the city's arthouse cinema. Last time I looked, they weren't showing Harry Potter in 11 of the 12 auditoriums. In case you're wondering, the remaining screen was reserved for the film, 'Day After Tomorrow' - a ludicrous ice-age thriller filled with clunky dialogue.

In my not-inconsiderable experience, cinema is built on duality. Day and night. Solo and collective. Niche and Mainstream. Weekdays house loners, weirdos, the elderly, singletons, and die-hard film nuts. By seven o'clock, the cinema foyer transforms into a hedonic playpen for first daters, comfortable couples, loud lads posturing, and finally, girls bonding and catching-up. On Saturday, February 10th 2018, I broke the first rule of solo screening. I cautiously approached the cinema for the **eight o'clock** screening of A Quiet Place (2018), a suspenseful 'silent' thriller, set in a post-apocalyptic universe.

Cinemas serve up problems for the solo viewer. Firstly, the rows of seating are assembled evenly. Perfect for visiting couples, awkward for the lone patron. Requesting seat one on aisle E is met with plausible distain. The seller unashamedly informs me, "the seat next to you will go unsold, now". Nevertheless, the aisle seat would allow for

my hastily ‘already planned exit’ the precise moment the end credits start to roll. Like a police line-up, god forbid affording any couple an opportunity to see me, captured in the florescent lights of the foyer, to be fingered as “*the solo screener*”. “It was him officer, he was on his own”. As the screen door softly closes behind me, the auditorium is bathed in bright lights, and my entrance is greeted by a quiet intake of breath, signalling the group-think of the audience, “he’s on his own – something must be wrong with him”. Upon entering the couples’ zone, peak Saturday night, I feel like an unwelcome outsider. I panic momentarily thinking about where row E is situated, and twenty-eight other pairs of eyes track my power walk to my seat. Seated, the chair is upholstered in comfy, red velvet and I sense the couples in my closest vicinity whispering. I am consumed with a paranoid consciousness. Restricted from looking at my phone, fidgeting, I guzzle my hot chocolate faster and faster. I long for the lights to fade, and the trailers to fire up. I sit, anxiously and watch customers continue to stream in. Relief arrives as the previews start, and the lights dim. My mind is awash, contemplating new ways for places like this to encourage solo cinema going. It might start with some staff training. How about they don’t shame the unaccompanied viewer? What about joining solo screeners with others, also participating alone? How about, I don’t ever do this again, and box-set binge at home instead?

This is what I have been doing. My box-set binges have taken over my days and nights, offering an endless escape from a reality that I don’t always fit in. I don’t think we’ve ever been more overwhelmed with things to watch. Undertaking the somewhat predictable, nightly scroll through Netflix’s limitless library, I suffer from choice paralysis – surrounded by infinite possibilities, it makes selecting a new TV series a difficult decision. There is an abundance of options in our viewing platforms too. There’s retro TV, catch-up TV, regular TV, Now TV, Netflix, Amazon, YouTube, HBO, iPlayer, and HULU. There are specialist networks and dedicated 24-7 channels screening fly fishing tournaments, shows turning us into real-life detectives, and a dating channel set in a fried chicken shop. Last night, as I settled into bed, I hopped on to YouTube. Its algorithm pushed me towards compilations of people saving each other from near-fatal traffic collisions, and footage of some fiendishly difficult to open tech packaging. The struggle was cathartic.

I had always privileged watching films above TV. In movies, Scorsese, Bigelow, Peele, Ramsey and Spike Lee are remarkable story-tellers, and I thought TV

was a pretty low bar. However, a couple of years ago my brother bought me my first TV box-set for my 35th Birthday. It changed everything. In the subsequent years, I turned into the show's unofficial spokesperson, championing televisual crime fiction as an art form. The series was HBO's The Wire. The Wire portrays contemporary Baltimore and the show offers a close study of criminal behaviour and the ensuing havoc between communities and law enforcement. The Wire is so complex, it required my full participation and the box-set format was its natural home. There is no tidy, formulaic, redemptive episodes - nothing is ever wrapped up neatly. I had reached season three in no time. TV viewing was forever changed - self-scheduling my own escapism. Up until recently, three successive episodes had been my absolute maximum. However, this was about to change.

I was lecturing at 9.00am to a class of final year students, and attendance was surprisingly good, given that it was a cold, bleak morning. Roshon was lurking, and I was aware of his presence, as I wiped clean my frequently criticised hand-writing from the whiteboard. Roshon was a thin, eleven stone or so with brown eyes and black hair in straggly wisps. Was he going to ask if mobilisation of co-created resources was an exam question? Surely, not another discussion on the distinction between tribes and neo-tribes? Actually, Roshon was seeking advice for his upcoming assessment day at a prestigious London advertising agency. The all-day affair sounded exhausting. Roshon would be subjected to psychometric testing, and interviews. Followed by an afternoon working with Audi on a campaign to market the luxury interior of the A8 model, a 4-door saloon with the world's first relaxation seat, using a heated footrest complete with massage function. During our chat, Roshon enquired about *Mad Men*, and its relevance (or not) with modern-day advertising agencies. Roshon confessed to watching all seven series of *Mad Men* in less than a month, and was visibly surprised I hadn't seen a single episode. Wishing Roshon genuine good luck, I immediately pulled my phone from my pocket, and bounced onto Netflix, searching for *Mad Men*. After some buffering, there it was, in its entire splendour, seven series, all 92 episodes waiting to be devoured. A quick read of the synopsis: '*The show centres on the professional and personal lives of those who work in advertising on Madison Avenue - self-coined "**Mad Men**" - in the 1960s. The stories focus on those at one of the avenue's smaller firms, Sterling Cooper'*. A perfect end-of-week tonic, and I added the show to 'my list'.

The bus was only a single decker and jam-packed. Observing my fellow commuters, I looked around to see a middle-aged man in a tight-fitting Marvel T-shirt, zooming in on photos on his Facebook timeline; a petite, spectacled lady reading a Trump tweet, chuckling or crying, I couldn't distinguish; a teenager sat at the front, wearing bright blue headphones, squeezing in a quick episode of Stranger Things. People are constantly looking to be somewhere else, and I was struck by how alone we all are. Has consumption of things like TV and social media become more of a commitment than entertainment? There is a constant sacrificing of time away from our real lives, and these commodities seem to be self-selecting reminders of who we are not, and the roles we may never fulfil.

The bus heaved itself along the road, eventually reaching my stop, conveniently placed for a visit to the supermarket. A fresh batch of supplies would accompany the long-haul bout of marathon viewing. The supermarket was hectic and a kid wearing a Monsters Inc. baseball cap, was zooming around on a scooter, constantly harassing his distressed Dad, dropping unwanted items into his basket. As I wandered down the aisles, I was purposely thinking about *Mad Men* and what food sources will work best to enrich the experience of the binge-watch. I watched *The Sopranos*, with meat feast pizza, beer and large bags of hand-cooked prawn cocktail crisps. I joined Tony Soprano in becoming a slob, and our waistlines exponentially increased together, almost every weekend. *House of Cards* was a slower setting. The American political system, language and terms, required focus, and cups of strong tea and chocolate digestives were staple favourites. A bowl of rum and raisin ice-cream made a series finale appearance. I was thinking ahead, given that I'm unlikely to re-surface until Monday morning. My basket was a mixture of indulgence and healthy as a counter balance. Builder's tea, organic yoghurts, three pre-packed salads, steak, raspberry jam doughnuts, mini Heinekens, two 300 low calorie meals, and the pièce de résistance, Canadian lobster.

I looked at my phone, and it read 19:17. Having selected the most comfortable seat, with reclining features, I cracked open a Heineken and the 10oz rib-eye steak was cooked to perfection. Its luscious marbling effect made the meat look so tender and juicy. *Mad Men* was ready to go and I pressed the play button…

Fast-forward to 21:50 and episode three finished. Just before I composed my thoughts… 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 auto play kicked in - each episode automatically bleeds into the next and I tuned in, and tuned out of my real-life. I was gripped whilst Don Draper,

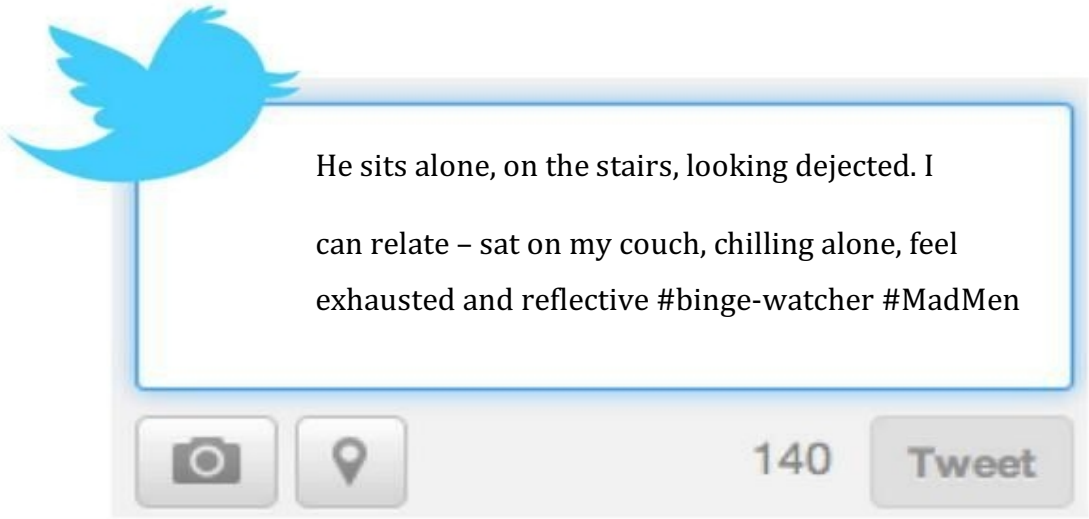
the main protagonist, and his colleagues at the fictive Sterling and Cooper advertising agency, merciless outlaws in swanky suits, pitched adverts for part of the day, and spent the rest smoking, drinking and womanising. Draper is mysterious, smooth and alluring. The most interesting *Mad Men* might be women, and there were glimpses that Peggy Olson (secretary with copywriter aspirations), has the potential to shake things up. I found the show incredibly immersive, with every detail beautifully restored to give it a 1960's feel, which radiated from the screen. I felt like I was working at this ambitious, Madison Avenue agency. Watching *Mad Men* reminded me of reading a favourite book, and for the last few hours, I've been taken away from my living room and travelled to a distant world filled with endless possibilities. I was Alice, into the wonder, but much better. I had experienced what it might be like to live in 1960's Manhattan. In episode two, I was granted covert access into the girls' break room area, the excitement palatable, passing around a recently legalised Lady Chatterley's Lover. Next, I was transported to the majestic boardroom, seated alongside Don pitching for Nixon's election campaign. I journeyed with Roger Sterling (co-owner of Sterling and Cooper) up the 23-floor ascent, when the lift was unexpectedly broken. I shared his exhaustion upon reaching the summit. The experience of watching it alone, bathed in the ghostly light of the screen, enhanced the enjoyment and transportation experience to the world of *Mad Men*.

My Fitbit on my wrist buzzed again, reminding me that I hadn't moved for the last four hours. I pondered momentarily, whether to keep going, or fall into bed and dream of 1960's New York, instead? I was experiencing a duality of pleasure and pain. The show helped me forget about everything else, a welcome distraction from my own existence. The narrative of the show spoke to me personally, and enhanced the enjoyment of losing myself in the series. Draper's story was one of a man, desperately wanting to transform himself. I remained gripped, wanting to know what was going on with him. On the other hand, the experience confronted me with feelings of loneliness and remoteness. Couples were frolicking, families were sharing the very things absent in my own life. There's pain from the ideology of the show compared to my own realism. Aside from the narrative, there was angst from feeling out of control. Netflix had imprisoned me, with these rapid, next-episode countdowns. The algorithm must know I will succumb, and hang in there for "just one more episode". I felt grubby, having eaten two doughnuts and downed two thirds of a warm beer during the last

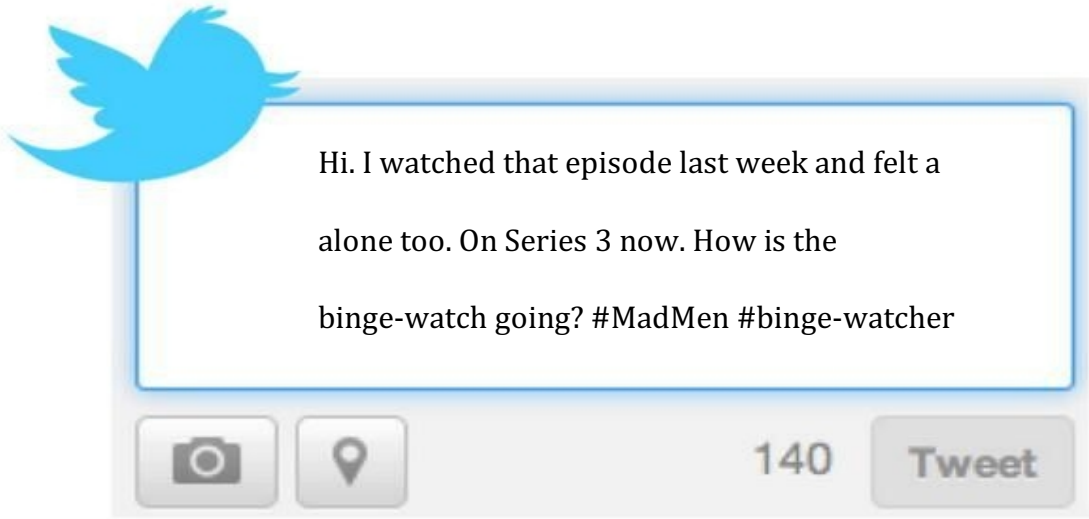
episode. I was physically exhausted and fought off the urge to sleep several times. Watching a box-set feels a bit like a chore, obliged to finish it, and the winning prize is being able to talk about the series to anyone willing to listen.

I completed my first, and only thirteen-episode *Mad Men* marathon. My thoughts scrambled, and my clothes crumpled from this exhausting journey. As the sunlight crept in from behind the blinds, heralding the arrival of a crisp, fresh morning, this only heightened my feelings of guilty excess. I was dizzy, disorientated, tired, fat and annoyed with myself for succumbing to what amounts to staring at a screen for an unhealthy period of time. The sacrifice of sleep and comfort had been too much. But more than that, I was drowning in thoughts about the existential nature of my life and what resonated was a fundamental craving for genuine human connections. Binge-watching serves to bring doubts and anxieties about the individualistic self-interests that have driven my life thus far to the surface, introducing the possibility of a reality that is different to one's own. Wonderings about all of the opportunities I rejected to progress in the way that I have, and all of the relationships that could have been but never were, had driven the experience of an isolated binge-watch. Surrounded by a sense of interrogating the existential "opportunity costs" of my current life trajectory, this set in motion a chain reaction of rumination and further imaginings that reflected a curiosity that may never be satiated.

One of the episodes, I lost count, likely around 4.00am, was incredibly powerful, and emotionally charged. Draper poignantly pitches the carousel slide projector to Eastman Kodak executives. "This device isn't a spaceship, it's a time machine. It takes us to a place where we ache to go again," he says, using the carousel to switch to a photo of his daughter, Sally, sitting on his broad shoulders, moving to a picture of his wife, Betty, holding a baby, to another of him carrying his bride over the threshold, which he says is "to a place where we know we are loved". The emotion is heightened, as he rushes home to discover a vacant house. This scene, echoing emptiness, and desolation was reflective of my non-stop binge ride. I posted on Twitter, not expecting anyone else to be binge-watching *Mad Men* at the same time as me



I was wrong. Eleven people, living in varied and remote locations as far-flung as Osaka, Japan and more locally, in Cumbria, liked the tweet and a conversation with other *Mad Men* devotees ignited. Rebecca was a fellow laggard to the *Mad Men* fraternity and her follow-on tweets expressed her desire to acquire some cultural capital, before a university reunion. Rebecca had drifted away from her university friends, but *Mad Men* was her contingency conversation - giving her something to say at dinner, and acting as a useful deflector from the open interrogation of her life. She had tried *Breaking Bad*, but the once milquetoast high school teacher was hard to empathise with. She had turned back time and visited the 1960's, instead. This was Rebecca's first, of many connections that morning, and more followed over the coming weeks and months.



Rebecca kept me posted on her *Mad Men* adventures and was always ahead of me in the race to the finish line. I was watching at a more cerebral pace, clocking up a few

episodes each day. In sharing *Mad Men* updates, a small collective formed, existing on a virtual, somewhat proximal level. This *Mad Men* tribe shared a real and observable consumption of a like-minded devotion to the show, and others, noticeably *Game of Thrones.* However, we were naturally isolated from one another. While, there were no desired collective rituals, or struggles for unity, we engaged with each other, like we do with our onscreen heroes, in a way that mirrors and reflects the distance between one another. Rebecca encouraged me to cheat on my beloved *Mad Men* and watch other shows. First up was the Scandinavian thriller, *The Bridge*. Rebecca also pointed me towards *The Guardian*, where a *Mad Men* blog lives. Each episode is dissected with fan care, passion and precision and reading the comments below illuminated the viewing experience. The blog has a long-tail, and late one evening, after the climax of the season four finale, I posted:

> *Don's pitch to the cancer foundation was amazing, along with his critique of tobacco companies appeal to sell teenagers adulthood and rebellion - conformity and non-conformity in one easy package.*

To my surprise, people liked the comment and someone responded with anti-marketing rhetoric, serving as a natural accompaniment. Sharing and camaraderie, on Twitter timelines, fan blogs and Facebook groups means you don't have to Netflix and chill alone. The freedom, and opportunity to self-schedule our consumption patterns, doesn't necessarily mark the death of the water-cooler moment. There is a new water-cooler, living on-line, constantly alive, welcoming those late to the party to join the final celebrations. Now, I'm happy to say, I'm no longer in the office with Don Draper and that adventure ended satisfactorily, some months ago. Instead it's eight o'clock on a Saturday night and I've returned to the cinema. I'm sitting in screen seven, waiting for the latest Guillermo del Toro adventure to come on screen. As I wait in anticipation, my phone pings. An alert informs me a new season of Narcos has just dropped and I find my fingers swiping it away. I no longer have the same urge or appetite to binge-watch… Rebecca will be back soon, she has gone to buy us some popcorn to share.

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4.4 Summary and Reflections on Chapter 4

Article 2 reveals how prolonged immersion in imaginary, narrative worlds can intensify thought about one's own life, and the willingness to binge-watch and entertain ourselves can lead to contemplations about how one lives one's life. While the paper privileges an image of an "agentic" individual who makes decisions and is, at least apparently, in control of their consumption behaviours and desires, the paper also tries to capture what Cedestrom and Grassman (2008) call the "masochistic reflective turn" (p.42). This term indicates that at the same time as deriving enjoyment from something, for example, binge-watching, the consumer can be equally aware of the misfortune of their situation. Engagement in any consumption activity can have contradicting and dual emotional experiences (Canniford and Shankar, 2015; Mick and Fournier, 1998). On one hand, there is some something exciting about disrupting normal routines and letting the fictive world taking precedence over the world of origin. Consumers actively give and immerse themselves into a story world. On the other-hand, such prolonged immersion can raise anxieties about an individual's priorities and interests that have driven one's life thus far.

A consumer can bring ruminations and contemplations back from their sustained immersion in a narrative world, and outcomes or expectations from escapism are more multi-valanced than previous theorisations seem to suggest, and this is considered further in article 3 (Chapter 5). The story explores how a binge can be intense and a return from an escape can be melancholic. Emotions of emptiness and sadness are by-products of the escape, particularly when one reflects on the parasocial relations that were formed. The significance of parasocial relations and how they are integrated into everyday life was an important construct and this is explored further in article 4 (Chapter 6).

Article 3 is largely personal (part auto-ethnographic and part fiction – some of the scenarios and characters before the binge occurs are fictious). Although my life experiences and my own binge-watch encounter is unique to me, their transferability can be accounted for by other consumers (including the reader), who may share or have experienced similar experiences. Transferability is achieved when a story elicits an emotional response from the reader, such as empathy or even identification with my experiences of a binge (Holbrook, 1995). Engaging fully with the phenomenon and

cultural environment (Gould, 1991; Holbrook, 2005) of the binge-watch context allowed me to write the story, and it was an authentic account of one of my prolonged binge-watch experiences, interspersed with participant findings from the various stages of data collection.

Finally, a short story seemed an appropriate format for this research as it quite difficult to expose one's inner feelings, thoughts, and experiences of fantasy in more traditional academic forms of representation (Brown, 2012). The story reflects my dual role as both researcher and subject, and I wanted to report on a character - a real, living, breathing individual that readers may relate to, and yet is frequently absent in academic articles. As Brown (2012: 15) suggests, in academia, "our characters aren't so much flat as steamrollered". The power of storytelling allowed me to utilise self-introspection, and the character is there to be encountered. I wanted the reader to come away with a sense of what it might be like to experience a prolonged binge-watch, to rely on and turn to the screen for imagined relationships, experience the loneliness of a binge, and ultimately live in that reality for that time. Ironically, I wanted the reader to get lost in the binge-watcher's world.

In terms of impact of the article in scholarly communities, article 2 has been cited in *Tourism Management Perspectives* (Irimias et al., 2021) and the Consumption, Markets and Society reading group at the University of Strathclyde (Glasgow, UK) discussed the short story and positive feedback was received from members of the reading group.

Chapter 5: The Interrupted World: Surrealist disruption and altered escapes from reality.

5.1 Introduction to Chapter 5: How the article fits into the Overall Thesis

Article 3 centres on how changes to reality can alter and upset consumers' escapes from reality. Escapism through television viewing is facilitated by a strong sense of 'what is real' represented in TV shows, and Busselle and Bilandzic (2008) refer to this as "external realism" which is the "extent to which stories or their components are similar to the actual world" (p.256). Realism judgements are predicated on applying pre-existing schemas about the external world to the narrative text and Busselle and Bilandzic (2008) suggest that a high degree of realism is achieved when viewers can observe similarities between the fictional and real (external) world. This consistency helps viewers to be drawn into the narrative world, to suspend their disbelief about events unfolding in the show, and achieve escapism (Busselle and Bilandzic, 2008; Green, 2000). If we acknowledge that consumers' ability to escape through texts like *HoC* depends on how well those texts reflect and represent the world that is familiar to them, then a question emerges about how escapism is experienced when reality itself does not feel as familiar?

The inspiration for article 3 (Chapter 5) stemmed from the events taking place in the world beyond the binge-watching context. By serendipity, the data collection for this doctoral project was undertaken at a point of major socio-political upheaval. The upheavals experienced in 2016 provided particularly important contextualisation for the consumption of a political-drama like *HoC* and capacity for its viewers to suspend their disbelief. For many viewers, it seemed that the political events represented in *HoC* were out of step with the backdrop of dramatic and unprecedented events occurring in real life. Just some of the headlines include the 45th US presidential election resulting in the inauguration of real estate magnate and reality TV star Donald J. Trump (November, 2016), the referendum instigating the UK's 'Brexit' from the European Union (June, 2016), the migrant crisis in Europe (2015 - ongoing), and continued international strife with the Russian Federation (2016 - ongoing). These contextual conditions upon *HoC* season four's release (March, 2016), and the season five release (May 2017) radically

altered its consumption for consumers and the returns that consumers get from their escapism. Through the ongoing data collection, it emerged that it was almost impossible for binge-watchers to be able to escape into *HoC* without bringing some of their critical faculties into play, questioning the believability of the storylines unfolding. Those who I spoke to about *HoC* had immense trouble suspending their disbelief when the events on the news networks far outweighed the universe of *HoC* in terms of strangeness and what they considered to be outright chaos.

We discussed in supervisory meetings how this wider contextual awareness could provide consumer research with a more nuanced understanding of the relationships between consumption, escapism and the conditions of reality itself. We realised that the word 'surreal' was gaining traction to describe real-world events and lexicographers choose 'surreal' as their word of the year in 2016 (Marriam-Webster, 2016). I was interested to delve further and started to explore the work of André Breton (1896 – 1966), who helped form surrealism. Breton's writings include the first *Surrealist Manifesto* (*Manifeste du surréalisme*) (1924). Breton speaks of a "surreality" (from *sur-realite* meaning above our reality or *on* our reality, but not *within* it) a seemingly contradictory state where the unconscious and conscious states of experiences reconcile to provide a more potent form of reality, an absolute reality. This led us to consider how reality may be altered by the emergence and manifestation of defamiliarising – or *surreal* – conditions in the taken-for-granted world and surreality may serve as a major disruption in consumers' lives, capable of altering their understanding of how reality operates. As a consequence, what consumers once appreciated as seeming realistic in narrative worlds like *HoC* becomes compromised and can alter or challenge their escapist ambitions and outcomes.

This manuscript was initially presented as a competitive paper at the 9th Interpretive Consumer Research Workshop (ICR) in April, 2017 at the University of Stockholm, Stockholm, Sweden (see Appendix 8). The paper was well received at the conference and was given an honourable mention for excellence. Over the subsequent two years since the workshop, article 3 reflects a more advanced stage of my theory development and the hermeneutic analysis process.

Jones, S., Cronin, M., and Piacentini, M.G. (2020). The Interrupted World: Surrealist disruption and altered escapes from reality, *Marketing Theory*. 20(4), 459 – 480.

The Interrupted World: Surrealist disruption and altered escapes from reality

5.2 Abstract

Following Breton's writings on surreality, we outline how unexpected challenges to consumers' assumptive worlds have the potential to alter how their escape from reality is experienced. We introduce the concept of "surrealist disruption" to describe ontological discontinuities that disrupt the common-sense frameworks normally used by consumers, and that impact upon their ability to suspend their disbeliefs and experience self-loss. To facilitate our theorization, we draw upon interviews with consumers about their changing experiences as viewers of the realist-political TV-drama *House of Cards* against a backdrop of disruptive real-world political events. Our analyses reveal that, when faced with a radically-altered external environment, escape from reality changes from a restorative, playful experience to an uneasy, earnest one characterized by hysteretic angst, intersubjective sense-making and epistemological community-building. This reconceptualizes escapism as more emotionally multi-valenced than previously considered in marketing theory and reveals consumers' subject position to an aggregative social fabric beyond their control.

Keywords

Assumptive worlds, binge-watching, Breton, escapism, realism, surreality, suspension of disbelief

5.3 Introduction

The increasing dread we feel about the world… is reflected and stirred up by this series [House of Cards season 5]. Watching it will not give you any respite. A show that was once a pulpy piece of escapism now feels rather weighty, even important.

Edward Tew, *The Guardian*, 6th June 2017

Escapism, in its many forms and representations, is often achieved through appealing to what is knowable, comprehensible, and therefore *realistic,* to consumers (Schwartz, 2006; Seregina, 2014). Escapist spaces or story worlds, such as the ESPN zone for example, are theorized to function according to real-world "cues" or themes (such as sports) which speak to a familiar, discernible order that allows for a "worldlike quality" and ensures that the experience becomes "instantly decodable" (Kozinets et al., 2004: 661). Comparably, story worlds such as the "mountain man rendezvous" operate according to fantastic but familiar real-world structures and adherence to mass-mediated representations of a semi-mythic past (Belk and Costa, 1998). Even heterotopic and rarefied adventure challenges, where participants experience feelings that are radically different to those that they might encounter in day-to-day life, are made decodable by adhering to common and familiar tropes of the real-world such as friendship, endurance and success (Scott et al., 2017). In many of these cases, the real-world is approached as a stable, knowable and static index that individual consumers can draw from, learn from, and use selectively to coordinate and make sense of their escapes from it. Accordingly, under the assumptions of a coherent, decodable, and knowable reality, marketing theory has placed emphasis on the variety of personal and social motivations that underpin individual consumers' escape-seeking behaviours (see Goulding et al., 2009; Kerrigan et al., 2014; Tumbat and Belk, 2011) rather than on the variability of reality itself or how it is perceived and escaped from.

Building on Askegaard and Linnet's (2011: 387) invitation to better situate "acts of consumption… in a world that reaches beyond the subjectivity of the agent", in this paper we theorize the dynamic conditions of reality and explore how violations against consumers' "assumptive worlds", which comprise their bases for understanding and

internalizing reality, impact upon their experiences of escapism. To facilitate our analysis, we draw upon an empirical investigation of consumers' escapist experiences through binge-watching the Netflix realist political TV-drama *House of Cards*. Between its fourth (Netflix, 2016) and fifth seasons (Netflix, 2017), audiences of *House of Cards* witnessed unprecedented real-world events that outpaced those produced onscreen in terms of improbability, not least the ascendance of real-estate magnate and reality TV star Donald J. Trump to presidential office in the United States, the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom, and the rise of far-right populism internationally. As queried by one correspondent writing for *The Financial Times*, "What on earth can the scriptwriters do to match what's actually happening? Especially in a series that was dreamt up in one political climate but reaches us in a completely different one" (Dalley, 2017), or another writing for *The Guardian*: "What happens now that House of Cards has become a sunny version of the material it intended to make dystopian?" (Loofbourow, 2016).

In response to the surge of historically aberrant occurrences in the real-world, 'surreal' became one of the most searched for terms in 2016 and declared Merriam-Webster's word of the year. Following this cultural insight, we borrow from aspects of André Breton's (1924) original theorization of surreality to assist in our consideration of how the nature of escapism itself, and the functions it serves, change for consumers when common-sense assumptions loosen their grip and an unprecedented change to the fabric of their taken-for-granted worlds is experienced. This leads us to our research questions: (1) How do surreal conditions alter the consumption of escapist texts that are modelled in relation to the 'real world'?; and (2) How do the functions of escapism change for consumers when their assumptive worlds are violated?

In undertaking this research, we derive a new theoretical perspective on consumers' experiences by inscribing them within the potentialities and limitations of the assumptive worlds that individuals use to orient and stabilize their lives. In a related theoretical vein, we show that during periods of disruption to consumers' fabric of assumptions escapism produces variegated emotional and intellectual effects stemming from heightened self-awareness, critical sense-making, and efforts to reconstitute the world around themselves. Hence, we depart from previous work in marketing theory and consumer research that positions consumers' escape attempts as generally playful, "self-loss" activities that result in carefree abandon and release from the pressures that everyday life places on their selves (Belk and Costa, 1998; Cova et al., 2018; Goulding

et al., 2009). Escapism, when reality itself is under scrutiny, becomes less about the pleasures of "losing it" and more of a sobering process of "finding" what was lost to oneself. Our research here helps to map out the less obvious and ambiguous effects of consumer escapism which fits with calls to consider the more unintended consequences of consumer experiences (Lanier and Rader, 2015).

5.4 Theoretical Underpinnings

5.4.1 *Escapism in Consumer Research*

Though escapism has been deployed as a term in marketing theory and consumer research for quite some time (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Hirschman, 1983), only in recent years has its major theoretical forms and functions been formally crystallized. Kuo et al. (2016), in recognizing that "escapes" are central to the consumer experience literature but remain appreciably undertheorized, set about positioning escapism as a relativistic concept, arguing that "escapism is highly idiosyncratic with regards to individual differences" (p.503). They separate "passive" forms of escapism, which are mostly observational like reading comic books and watching TV, from more "active" variants, which are interactive like playing videogames or physical sports. Both forms operate by immersing consumers in some activity, with stress-relief emerging as the key motivator for "escape", but only active forms allow consumers to confront, rather than simply avoid, the specific nature of their stressors through affirmation and control. Active forms of escape have attracted a disproportionate amount of attention in consumer research, resulting in a corpus of studies that centre on highly participatory and extraordinary experiences through which consumers seek transcendental release from the structures of their day-to-day lives (Belk and Costa, 1998; Goulding et al., 2009; Tumbat and Belk, 2011) and even the logic of the market itself (Kozinets, 2002). However, in an attempt to introduce a more comprehensive and inclusive conceptualization of escapism, Cova et al. (2018: 456) suggest, "escape is not always grandiose. Escape also lies in the ephemeral and unremarkable instants of dis-identification". They suggest that in addition to the anti-structural dreamlands most typically accounted for in consumer research, consumers seek to disidentify with various aspects of their lives – including their own *selves* – through absorption into "mundane experiences like binge eating or binge watching" (p.455), "restorative" experiences such as a trip to a local café (p.452), and

even “warlike, painful experiences” like obstacle races (p.455). For Cova and colleagues, these less extraordinary forms of escapism centre on circumventing one’s self-awareness and engaging in a type of “self-suspension” or “losing oneself”.

Elsewhere, Kerrigan et al. (2014: 148) in their analysis of listening to music whilst running provide us with an account of what they call the “multifaceted experience of pleasurable escape” whereby there are deeper and less apparent facets or layers of self-suspension at play. Their analysis illustrates how consumers might engage in activities like running to escape the monotony and inactivity of everyday life while also layering music “on top of this escape” in order “to escape further” from the pain that their body experiences when being active (p.161). The end result of these various facets is that pleasure can be derived from escaping deeper “into” inner worlds rather than simply “from” the outside world (p.155). Comparably, Jafari and Maclaran (2014) in their treatment of the escapist potential of make-up practices and routines find consumers escape not only *from* boredom, but also *into* the aesthetics, intricacies and fantasies of their creative efforts.

Importantly, while the contributions of these various authors provide useful and fine-grained conceptualizations of the many types and facets of escape – whether in “active” or “passive” forms, in anti-structural or more familiar environs, through processes of “self-affirmation” or “self-forgetting”, or moving “into” inner worlds beyond departing “from” outer worlds – escapism is nevertheless universally understood to result (to varying degrees) in intentional and positive states of abandon. Regardless of how it is achieved, escape is theorized to bring about “a means of gratification that could offset the frustrations of everyday life” (Cova et al., 2018: 451) and has been frequently conceptualised as a “form of refuge” from the humdrum of existence (Jafari and Maclaran, 2014: 371) and as “a way of releasing stress and breaking free” (Kerrigan et al., 2014: 150).

Consumer research frequently emphasizes how individuals achieve pleasure and renewal by removing themselves from the coordinates of their known reality – “real work, real friends, real facts, in other words, the real world” (Calleja, 2010: 335) – in favour of encountering an “alternative world” or “alternative reality”, however ephemeral this may be (Belk and Costa, 1998: 236; Seregina, 2014; Tumbat and Belk, 2011). The separation between one’s real life and alternative worlds has been interchangeably referred to as a

dichotomy between "everyday reality and a correspondingly unreal experience" (Belk and Costa, 1998: 219), "everyday reality and fantasy" (Kozinets et al., 2004: 664), or "the ordinary and the wondrous" (Calleja, 2010: 350).

These dialectics of reality-unreality manifest in consumer research are useful for emphasizing escapists' imagined distance from reality however some have argued that escape, in practice, is never fully separated from the real world; rather fantasy is achieved through its negotiation with elements of reality (Seregina, 2014). In the notable case of Belk and Costa's (1998: 232) exploration of the escapist mountain men rendezvous, the authors admit that, "[p]erhaps surprisingly in light of the unreal character of the modern rendezvous, [a] key ingredient to accessing the power and fantasy of the mythical mountain man is having not only appropriate symbolic objects but also objects deemed authentic". To be fit for escapism, the rendezvous must *feel* real; it cannot be total fantasy, rather it must correspond to some "authentic" and true to life reality. The theoretical dynamics of this are considered in detail in the next section.

5.4.2 *External Realism & Experiencing Escapism*

Beyond the parameters of consumer research, commentators within literary and media studies contend that reality is never truly abandoned during moments of escapism; for escapist goals to be met some threshold of realism must be reached (Bruner, 1991; Busselle and Bilandzic, 2008; Schwartz, 2006). In most cases, consumers' ability to become "transported" to even the most wondrous, unreal places is contingent upon these places being made credible and realistic; congruous with what can be known and made imaginable. Television is recognized as a wellspring for escapism because of "its ability to carry a socially convincing sense of the real" (Fiske, 1987: 21). Soap operas, which operate under realist principles for instance, "attempt to reproduce a series of elements (urban and rural landscapes, fashion and culinary patterns, linguistic behaviour, moral values) which viewers will accept as 'proximate'" (Castello et al., 2009: 467), or rather, *close* to what they are familiar with. Realism thereby acts as conduit for invoking familiarity, understanding and recognisable experiences, all of which allow the consumer to become enthralled and committed to fictive worlds, thereby increasing their ability to withhold their judgements (i.e. 'suspend their disbeliefs'), lose self-awareness, and achieve escapist goals (Green et al., 2004).

One key tenet of experiencing escapism through story worlds is the level of "external realism" we see reflected in them, a phenomenon Busselle and Bilandzic (2008: 256) define as "the extent to which stories or their components are similar to the actual world". Consumers approach escapist texts by applying pre-existing schemas and assumptions about the external (actual) world to the textual narrative. Accordingly, there is a need to look beyond components of the text itself and examine the wider, protean conditions and contexts that underpin and shape real-life. Perceptions of external realism – and the subsequent ability to escape – may be compromised as much by events in the consumer's world, including vacillating ideological circumstances, social structures and historical conditions, as by inconsistencies or failures in the production of the text itself. As Propst (2009: 332) points out, all narratives remain open to further inspection, resulting in the consumer "reassessing" and reinterpreting story worlds to account for "the context of the reader's situation". It is this final point that leads us to consider the concept of surreality and its usefulness for theorizing the emergence and manifestation of defamiliarizing conditions in the actual world.

5.4.3 *Surreality & Assumptive Worlds: Introducing Surrealist disruption*

The surrealist intellectual movement that took root within Europe in the early 20th century brought with it the revelation that 'reality' is a mutable phenomenon couched in the fragility of taken-for-granted assumptions. Contemporaneous with the Russian artistic techniques of de-familiarisation or estrangement (*"ostranenie"*), the surrealists sought to champion the erasure of the bourgeois value of rationalism through displacing the familiar and challenging the common-sense and normal. Subversive art, accounts of dreams and hallucinations, and nonsensical writings were all valued by the surrealists as mechanisms to challenge people's expectations and threaten their sense of coherence and stability, ultimately hastening the advent of an over-arching 'surreality' (from the French *sur réalité* meaning above or *on* our reality, but not *within* it) (Cardinal and Short, 1970; Dell'Aversano, 2008).

Surreality, as a state which destabilizes rational assumptions and a socially-produced 'known' reality, is described by surrealist pioneer André Breton (1924: 14) as the "resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*". Breton speaks of surreality being assembled from a "fabric of adorable improbabilities" (1924: 16) – a sequence of

unprecedented and fanciful occurrences in the actual world which accelerate the disintegration of trust in realist principles or what he refers to as "le regne de la logique" (reign of logic) (1924: 9). Being faced with conditions of great uncertainty may serve to beget a feeling that one's personal grasp on reality has been undermined, and thereby hasten what Breton (1934: 129) refers to as, a "crisis in consciousness".

While Breton is parsimonious with exact definitions, it is here that the concept of "assumptive world" (Beder, 2005), helps to reveal what precisely is affected during a crisis of consciousness. The assumptive world can be defined as "an organized schema reflecting all that a person assumes to be true about the world and the self on the basis of previous experiences; it refers to the assumptions, or beliefs, that ground, secure, and orient people, that give a sense of reality, meaning, or purpose to life" (Beder, 2005: 258). Because of its capacity to orientate and secure us, the assumptive world resonates with Breton's assertion (1924: 10) that we are "protected by the sentinels of common sense". Comparable to Bourdieu's writings on "habitus" (1990 [1980]), common sense is borne from internalizing and forming expectations about the world we live in, such as the experiences we have had, the places we grew up, and the media that we consume. In this sense, assumptive worlds are understood to be cumulative or as Breton puts it, "the sum of the moments of reality" (1924: 11). The cumulating nature of assumptive worlds also fits with Emirbayer and Mische's (1998: 971) notion of "the iterational dimension" of human agency; the acquiring and reactivation of "past patterns of thought and action, as routinely incorporated in practical activity, thereby giving stability and order to social universes and helping to sustain identities, interactions, and institutions over time".

Despite their ability to structure and stabilize social experience via the conditioning quality of the past, assumptive worlds can be challenged and violations can and do occur. This happens when some things (or even everything) that the individual assumes to be real is undermined and disruption enters his or her life (Kauffman, 2002). In health philosophy, for example, Bury (1982: 169) provides us with the concept of "biographical disruption" to explain how conditions such as diagnosis with a chronic illness can serve as "a major kind of disruptive experience… where the structures of everyday life and the forms of knowledge which underpin them are disrupted". Such conditions which engender a destabilizing effect upon one's assumptive world have been referred to elsewhere as "critical situations" (Giddens, 1979), "moments of dislocation" (Howarth 2000), and "moments of disconcertment" (Verran, 1999).

Through "the breaching of common sense boundaries", Bury (1982: 169) discusses how disruption of the "explanatory systems normally used by people" catalyze a fundamental rethinking of what is considered to be *real*, and forces individuals to try and make sense of "an altered situation" (p.170). Taking this logic forward, we suggest that the onset of Breton's surreality serves as a particularly disruptive force in consumers' lives, capable of altering their assumptive worlds by introducing dramatic improbabilities to their social universe. Rather than being a discrete endogenous catalyst (e.g. illness) for a single individual's biographical disruption, surreality instead encompasses the dislocatory effects of various exogenous events (e.g. previously unimaginable changes to the external environment) on a whole aggregate of individuals' engagements with the material world. The ability of consumers to fall back on their own schemas and approach what they consider to be real, or what they appreciate as real, under some Bretonian sense of surreality is compromised. We now turn to our empirical case – *House of Cards* and the events occurring around its release – to explore how such ostensibly "surrealist disruption" can impact upon the consumption of realist television and alter the nature of the escapism consumers achieve through it.

5.5 Contextual Background: House of Cards

In February 2013, the first season of the realist-political drama *House of Cards* (*HoC* hereafter) was released by Netflix, with all 13 episodes simultaneously made available. *HoC* functions as a chiaroscuro representation of the ruthless pragmatism in American politics and invites audiences to observe the real-life, present day state capital of Washington DC populated with Machiavellian characters and motives (Klarer, 2014). The drama follows Francis (Frank) Underwood, a Democrat Congressman, and his struggle for power, which ultimately culminates in his inauguration as President of the United States. From the outset, *HoC* was intended to appeal to the assumptive framework of audiences and the show achieves external realism by depicting characters who fulfil real-world positions at the White House (e.g. the President, Chief of Staff, First Lady) behave in public as these figures are expected to, and engage with political issues that closely resemble and reflect current events occurring in the real-world (e.g. national election campaigns, economic issues, domestic terrorism, international affairs, the media). The series sees Frank Underwood do whatever it takes to get ahead in his political career and engage in practices that may surprise audiences including blackmail, murder,

and vote-rigging – but always executed with the clandestineness, cunning subterfuge and guile we might consider conceivable for a career politician. The audience also achieves "imaginary proximity" (Propst, 2009: 344) to Frank through the show's close coverage of his complicated relationship with the First Lady (Claire Underwood) including their unhappiness in their marriage and readiness to engage in extramarital affairs.

The fourth season of *HoC* was released in March 2016 to coincide with the backdrop of the real-life American presidential election. Promotion included a spoof presidential campaign for Frank Underwood that aired during a CNN debate among real Republican presidential candidates, and Underwood writing a piece for *The Times* newspaper advocating Brexit in the UK (Horton, 2016). Despite such overt efforts to intersect more closely with the TV show's real-world surrounds, 15 months later when *HoC* season five launched (30th May 2017), reviewers detected a growing gap between *HoC*'s content and the reality it tries to emulate. Spencer Kornhaber of *The Atlantic* (30th May, 2017) specifically contrasts the characters of *HoC's* temperamental poise and perceived competency against the lack of restraint or forbearance amongst their real-world counterparts in the Trump administration:

> The Donald Trump era obviously places Cards in a new context… Cards has never felt farther from reality... Its vision of politics is one of competence, in which everyone from junior staffers to presidents have veneers of poise.

Comparably, James Poniewozik, writing for *The New York Times* suggests: "The Trump administration shakes 'House of Cards' hard… the idea that adults are still in charge, that the Presidency is still beholden to a pretense of decorum, has been disrupted by the election of a TV star" (June 6th, 2017). Moreover, in discussing the effects of such a dramatic shift in political reality prior to the upcoming release of *HoC* Series 5, Mark Lawson of *The Guardian* (26th May, 2017) proposes: "The challenge for House of Cards now is whether its depiction of a preposterously exaggerated president will work as a comically cathartic commentary on Trump or may seem dull and understated in comparison to the nightly news bulletins". Common amongst these correspondents' reports is the observation that it has become more difficult for consumers to suspend their disbeliefs when watching *HoC* now that their assumptive worlds have been collectively disrupted by real-world events. This has implications for how the show is received and the type of escapism that its loyal consumers derive from it.

5.6 Methods

The data for this research stems from a larger study on the motivations for and meanings of consuming long-form TV series within situated ecologies over concentrated periods of time i.e. "binge-watching". *HoC* was chosen as the case for analysis because we required an established TV series where viewers were both familiar with and invested in its characters and storylines. *HoC* was embarking on its fourth season at the beginning of our study in early 2016 and was set to be released in a full-season "binge-ready" format by Netflix making it an ideal context. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling facilitated by a combination of word-of-mouth in the lead author's social networks and an advertisement poster that was displayed offline across the campus notice boards of a UK University and online through social media. The sampling call invited individuals who had watched *HoC* over multiple seasons and intended to binge-watch season four to participate in an interview (released March, 2016). From an initial pilot sample of seven participants, the lead author was introduced to others willing to share their experiences of bingeing *HoC*. The study consisted in total of fifteen participants, ages 23 – 69 (see Table 1) who self-profess to be fans of *HoC*.

The purpose of an initial first round of interviews in early 2016 was to gain an understanding of participants' life worlds, their motivations for consuming *HoC* in a marathon-viewing/binge-watching format, and the role of both the show and their binge behaviour as potential resources for escaping aspects of their lives. The interviews began with grand-tour questions (see McCracken, 1988) pertaining to their general life conditions, their media consumption, and the motivating as well as environmental conditions for consuming TV shows in marathon sessions. We invited participants to tell us about any rituals and habits that accompany their binge behaviour as well as the possible role of escapism in their binges. We then shifted the topic to *HoC* and asked them to elaborate on why that show lends itself particularly well to bingeing, their experiences of engaging with its narrative world, and its relationship with the real world. In addition to the interviews, the first author – in recognizing the value of mobile phones in supporting and enhancing consumer research (Hein et al., 2011) – encouraged participants to record short diary entries and take photos on their smart phone devices of their binge-watch experiences of *HoC*. These materials were shared with the first author

through text messages sometimes before, during or after a marathon session and helped to record the context of "being there" (Hein et al., 2011: 264). Permissions to use participants' content were readily granted and this helped to provide further insight into their experiences.

Nine of the original fifteen participants agreed to take part in a second round of interviews to coincide with the release of *HoC* season five scheduled for a year later (30th May, 2017). Contact with these nine participants was maintained for the fifteen months between the releases of *HoC* season four and five. This contact was facilitated by asynchronous text message conversations between each participant and the first author (Bowden and Galindo-Gonzalez, 2015). The use of asynchronous text communication provided a useful platform for participants to share any observations and opinions related to *HoC* that emerged in real-time. This included spontaneous reactions to the trailers and promotions for the fifth season as they were released online. Messages from participants also included links to various press articles centred on the challenges of producing compelling political fiction during real-life political turbulence and fan-made memes of *HoC*. The text-based interactions revealed points of intersection between the consumption of *HoC* and disruptive real-world occurrences, therefore helping to inform and steer the lines of enquiry taken up in the second-round follow-up interviews in May 2017. These second-round interviews provided the research team with an opportunity to explore participants' experiences of bingeing *HoC* against the backdrop of changing real world events and the impact that these changes had on their ability to suspend their disbeliefs and experience escapism.

All interviews, from both rounds, lasted between approximately 40 to 70 minutes each, were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and issued anonymizing pseudonyms. Institutional ethical approval was gained for the study and with each interview, informed consent was obtained.

Table 1 *Study Participants*

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

Inductive analyses of the combined data were undertaken in a "hermeneutical back and forth between part and whole" approach (Spiggle 1994: 495) to reveal a number of provisional categories. In the tradition of previous interpretive studies that have approached consumer escapism (Goulding et al., 2009; Kerrigan et al., 2014; Kozinets et al., 2004), no preconceived hypothetical framework was used to guide or constrain our analyses. Instead, the categories were allowed to emerge inductively through open and axial coding and these were developed into themes in conversation with explanatory concepts from the literature as we found them. It was through this emergent design that we were first led to writings on surreality and the current project's analytical focus became crystallized. Surreality, as our emergent and principal theoretical lens, helped to sensitize and frame three final thematic foci that reveal changes in how escapist texts like *HoC* are engaged with when the conditions around them change. As a final step in analysis, these themes were further developed and refined with secondary theoretical materials which helped to label, abstract, and integrate of a number of occurrences (Spiggle, 1994). After abstracting our descriptions to conceptualizations and achieving confidence in their meaning and importance, we were able to identify the theoretical link

– what we came to call surrealist disruption – between our themes. The results are presented in detail in the following sections.

5.7 Findings

Our findings are organized to reveal how consumers' experiences of escapism through *HoC* have been altered by changes to their assumptive worlds. First, we outline how surrealist disruption has changed the nature of our participants' escapism from a trivial pleasure into one punctuated with 'hysteretic' angst. Second, we explore how escapism takes on the character of a sense-making activity during times of crisis in the real world. Third, we explore how escapism, during such times of crisis, becomes more of a community-based experience rather than an individuated one, thus enabling intersubjective ways of overcoming an epistemological purgatory and collectively rebuilding the assumptive world.

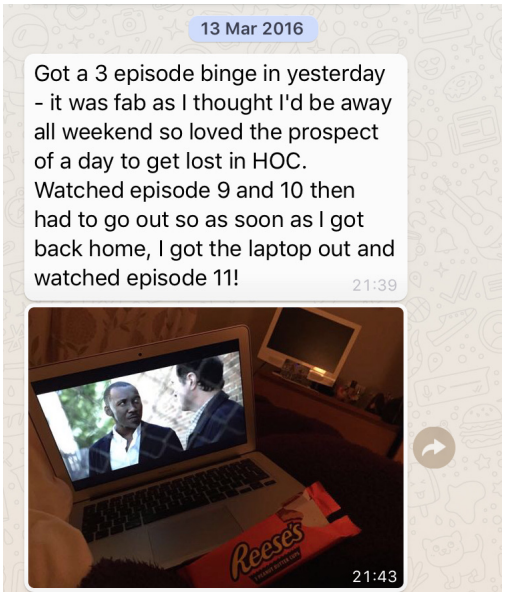
5.7.1 *Hysteretic angst: An uneasy escape*

Instead of experiencing a "pleasurable escape" (Kerrigan et al., 2014: 148) or allowing consumers to enter a "more desirable state of being" (Jafari and Maclaran, 2014: 371), our data reveals how activities like binge-watching *HoC* amongst a backdrop of surreal conditions trigger anxiety about the reality they are escaping from. Here, Bourdieu's concept of "hysteresis" – the angst that arises "when a field undergoes a major crisis and its regularities (even its rules) are profoundly changed" (Bourdieu, 2000: 160) – helps us to explain the transition of escapism from an experience of pleasure to one of anxiety. Under such circumstances, the "old" habitus that a subject has built up over his or her life no longer 'fits' the new field conditions that he or she must consume within. The effect is not dissimilar to dissonance or "trained incapacity" (Burke, 1984), and our data suggests shocks to consumers' assumptive worlds necessitate a traumatic reappraisal of reality thus making it difficult to uncritically suspend their disbeliefs when seeking escape.

As context for this theme, before the mid– to late– 2016 political watershed period changed their field conditions, participants generally described their binge-watching experience of *HoC* as a fun, uncomplicated and relaxing form of escape. This is reflected

particularly well in a text message sent to the first author by Sarah, a primary school teacher, around the time of our first stage of interviews wherein she enthusiastically describes spending a day marathon-viewing *HoC* and attaches an image of her reclining on her bed with a laptop and snack food:

Figure 1: Enjoyment from binge-watching *HoC*.



At that point in the research, Sarah associated her enjoyment of *HoC* with the opportunity to *"get lost"* signalling self-loss or, specifically, the tenets of narrative transportation such as engrossment, immersion, and captivation (Batat and Wohlfeil, 2009; Green et al., 2004; Kuo et al., 2016). Moreover, Sarah's discursive tone (*"it was fab", "loved the prospect"*) indicates that this was felt and experienced as a generally pleasurable departure from one's own world. Similarly, in the first round of interviews, Sue, a copy-writer, suggested that she had typically consumed *HoC* in multi-episode binges – often at the end of a workday or the weekend – as an easy and accessible escape from the quotidian pressures of her work life. While the amount of time she committed to her marathon viewing of *HoC* was voluminous, the nature of the escapism she achieved, she suggested, was quite perfunctory, light-hearted, and restorative:

> *"Oh, it was great, and after a hard day, it was time to sit and enjoy the thrill of the narrative and the storyline really gripped me from the start... At the weekend, I figured I could probably fit five in and I think I did six".*

Such insights are consistent with observations that people engage in increased consumption in a condensed period, like bingeing of various kinds, as an accessible and unchallenging way to "suspend their reflexive self" and turn attention away from personal life conditions (Cova et al., 2018: 456; Goulding et al., 2009). Upon returning to Sue fifteen months after the initial interview (May 2017) however, she described how her ability to retreat absentmindedly into the diegetic world of *HoC* was no longer possible:

> "*My experience of watching it [HoC] will have changed completely. In a way, all of our lives have changed, the world has changed politically, here and in America since I watched the last one. I'm kind of worried that things in the real world are so bloody awful… I am concerned that I will get sucked into the fantasy of HoC and prefer that life that is in there instead of the reality that is playing on the news reels in regular life and there is a danger there."*

Instead of being able to suspend her disbeliefs while watching *HoC* and lapse into a mindless state of self-loss, Sue's critical faculties are put into full operation and a type of angst or worry now hangs ominously over her. Comparable to Bourdieu's hysteresis, wherein a subject experiences a "counter-adaptive 'lag" (Kerr and Robinson, 2009: 833) that impedes their adaptation to new and unusual conditions, Sue is conscious that the reality she lives in (and that *HoC* tries to emulate through its realism) has changed drastically around her. Sue fears being "sucked" into and possibly preferring the fantasy world of *HoC* and this corresponds with Breton's (1924: 47) suggestion that "existence is elsewhere". In this case, a more "real" existence for Sue appears to be found in the world of *HoC* rather than the real world and watching *HoC* becomes a constant reminder of this unsettling fact. The inability of *HoC* to keep up with the new 'rules' of the world means bingeing *HoC* no longer serves the same form of escape that it once did. When she watches season five of *HoC,* Sue is not just confronted with the hard truth that *HoC* is now out of touch with reality, but that she is out of touch:

> "*It's going to be weird to make sense of HoC now. The world has gone mad and it makes fiction more challenging to accept. I want to re-engage with the narrative of HoC, but there is a less of a connection between HoC and reality and perhaps that is my worry, I need some detachment from real life… I'll be unhappy if I watch it and get scared of the reality of the world. Real life is scary enough on its own."*

Elsewhere, Jhanvi has experienced similar hysteretic experiences from consuming *HoC* amongst the backdrop of real-world disruption. Jhanvi, who worked as a news correspondent for a major British broadcasting group during the Tony Blair era of British politics (1997 – 2007), suggested in her first interview in 2016 that the political realism of *HoC* appealed to her originally at the level of professional interest. *HoC,* at that point, mapped cleanly onto Jhanvi's assumptive world and fulfilled her expectations about how the real-world works, thereby providing her with a compelling, straightforward and accessible form of escape:

> *"I remember looking and thinking oh yeah it is 3 o'clock in the morning and I don't have to do anything, and you finish one episode and it will say you have about 10 seconds before another one starts. I then just have to watch it cos you are completely taken in, and you completely forget what's going on in your own life and completely involve yourself in someone else's (…) Well you feel like, and especially with series four that it is real and you are not just watching a drama, you are watching a real political event unfold which is quite interesting (…) I did home affairs stories and you just know from the media side that politics is ruthless. It's ruthless, and from watching HoC it's interesting to see how the media works now. Alistair Campbell and that level of ruthlessness is what I remember. It is so accurately portrayed* in *HoC."*

Upon returning to Jhanvi in the second round of interviews however, we found her appraisal of *HoC*'s realism to have changed drastically. In 2017, she was keen to relay to us her concerns that the fictive world of *HoC* no longer reflects the reactionary and chaotic discord of the political climate springing up around her and serves as a reminder what has been lost for her personally:

> *"I remember thinking, can I really watch this series, considering the soap opera of Trump? It will be hard to believe Frank Underwood is President. I have been quite depressed about it cos you think well, watching the American election unfold and seeing what happened with the Muslim ban, and obviously being of Muslim origin it was so pertinent. I got back to thinking about [HoC], and it will probably not be as exciting as anything in real life, so my feelings have changed to it, cos of the way the Trump administration operates".*

Breton (1934: 118) speaks of surreal events being capable of the "unrolling of historical realities" and, for Jhanvi a Muslim woman, the Muslim travel ban ordered by the real-world US President in January 2017 constitutes a major unravelling of historically established truths and constitutional protections. Such unravelling disconfirms Jhanvi's expectations about contemporary statesmanship, diplomacy and democracy therefore disrupting her ability to engage with fictive treatments of these concepts in *HoC*. She mentions being *"quite depressed"* because the show makes her think about the current state of affairs and, accordingly, Jhanvi's transportation into the world of *HoC* is no longer experienced as a self-suspending form of escape.

5.7.2 *Re-stabilizing assumptive worlds: A sense-making escape*

The second theme to emerge from our data centres on how consumers when faced with surreal conditions use escapism as a way to help them understand their present, real-life circumstances. Breton (1924: 18) posits that in order to come to terms with surreality, subjects are compelled to engage in "further inquiry" and, despite the futility of doing so, will try to impose reason upon strange, uncharacteristic circumstances; "our brains are dulled by the incurable mania of wanting to make the unknown known, classifiable" (p.9). In accordance with this phenomenon, our data suggests that, following shocks to their assumptive worlds, consumers experience escapism not necessarily as a way of "getting lost", but instead as a way of searching for hope, "finding themselves", and making sense of their surroundings. Breton (1924: 10) speaks of the potential, here, for surreality to provoke a "human explorer" instinct, a propensity to carry out investigation – or a "search for truth" – assisted by *the imagination* rather than more rational traditional means. In our data, we see consumers attempt to re-stabilize their assumptive worlds through the imagined world of *HoC*. Beyond just using *HoC* as fodder for playful, mindless escapism, it offers our participants a chance to reorient and reproduce their reality "as it was" and perhaps how it "ought to be".

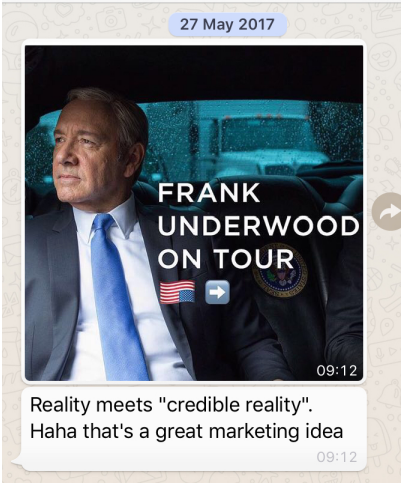
During the second round of interviews, Phil, a lecturer in entrepreneurship studies, discussed how watching *HoC* has, since the radical disturbances in real-world American and British politics, provided him with an opportunity to reaffirm his thoughts about deference to 'normal' political governance:

> *"I guess the show is aware of what's happening in reality and that will feed into some of the show's themes... House of Cards needs to be like the shining path almost, the moral lesson, the better way, because that educates the audience to aspire for that better way. Watching it might actually restore your faith, and it should be the other way around."*

Phil's appreciation of *HoC* as a "shining path" that intentionally sits outside of the surreality going on around it indicates that it is no longer experienced by him as a simple facsimile of reality but, in a post-2016 world, as a sense-making tool; a vestige of a more sensible time and a framework to educate consumers about returning to a "better way". Under conditions of surreality people are "seeking after new values in order to confirm or invalidate existing ones" (Breton, 1934: 118) and Phil believes *HoC* – because it now stands at odds with the reality it has historically tried to mirror – functions as a *"moral lesson"* in refining and improving that reality.

In advance of the release of *HoC* season five, Lee, a designer and part-time wedding photographer sent the first author a text message with an attachment of a photo featuring "Frank Underwood on Tour" (Figure 2) which coincided with the real President, Donald Trump's, first official foreign tour. The image was part of a publicity stunt whereby the actor that portrays Frank Underwood, Kevin Spacey, was photographed by a real-life former White House photographer, Pete Souza, during a tour of Washington DC. Lee captions the image with *"Reality meets 'credible reality'"* which, when taken in context of when the message was sent, implies that life under the fictional President Underwood presents a more sensible or believable scenario than the real-world Trump administration.

Figure 2: Participant comparing *HoC* with Reality



Here, Lee's musing that the prospect of Underwood touring as President confronts us with something more *"credible"* than reality suggests a case of "[c]rossing the line from fiction into life" (Bowman, 2006: 279).

The irony is that while *HoC* was originally conceived as a darker chiaroscuro version of the real-world political landscape, it has become for some of our sample a less improbable version of reality. Accordingly, our participants draw on the narrative world of *HoC* as a platform to compare their displaced reality against and it becomes a search for hope. This is expressed clearly by Gary, an administrator at a local government office:

> *"What's happening in real-life will play on my mind when I'm watching it now. That's a good thing about House of Cards, is it does make you think… I'll be looking for positive outcomes on the show, and probably be thinking, well why aren't the government doing that? And when you finish watching it, you are thinking, oh could that happen? The real world will probably seem less sensible. When you see the news, the natural reaction is to turn to somebody and say, you know what happens next? In House of Cards they did this, or that."*

While Gary once binge-watched *HoC* as a restorative switching-off activity, since the rise of populism in the UK and abroad, he now considers the show more closely and in tandem with real-world problems. By watching *HoC* under the alienating conditions of surreality, Gary and others now seek out a "knowable" space with its own discernible structure and internal logic to anatomize their fears and to locate "*positive outcomes*" from the show. Disruptions to their assumptive worlds have ensured that our participants' escapism through *HoC* is deepened in terms of its cognitive and critical demands. *HoC* is consumed

in the post-2016 world almost as a way to find "reminders of the past" and to locate something that may be invisible or absent in reality.

In the second-round of interviews in 2017, Camila, a South American research student, declared that she has stopped watching the news on TV altogether. Frustrated by a media agenda heavily focused on reporting Brexit and events in Washington DC, what she considers to be "*political Deja-vu*", Camila now spends her down-time retreating into long form television series:

> *"I now see House of Cards as a serious version of the American political system, compared to what is happening right now. I feel like the real life one is a cartoonish version of what politics should be. I feel that Frank Underwood is doing a serious job and I'll watch it to remind me of how Presidents should behave."*

Rather than becoming disillusioned with *HoC* and its increasing distance from the events of the real world, Camila explains how *HoC* serves as a more serious depiction of politics and governance. Escapism into *HoC,* for her, centres less on forgetting the "cartoonish" real world or losing oneself in another world (Goulding et al., 2009; Kerrigan et al., 2014), and more on remembering how things ought to be. This corresponds with Cova and colleagues' (2018: 459) recognition that we should not always consider "self-forgetting" as "a *sine qua non* condition for escapism". Participants, such as Camila, who are reminded of how Presidents "*should* behave" when watching *HoC* have their long-standing assumptions re-stabilized by the show. Rather than providing an opportunity to forget the world, escape through *HoC* during moments of dislocation offers assurances of how institutions, like governments, once functioned, ought to function, or may function again in the future. The idea that people prefer to seek out what they know and are familiar with confirms Breton's (1924:10) view that "forbidden is any kind of search for truth which is not in conformance with accepted practices", and our participants' expectations operate in accordance with their established, assumptive frames. One of our participants, Simon, a bassist in a blues band, for example reflects on the terrorist attack in Manchester (UK) in May 2017, and oscillates between former and fictional Presidents as a standard for judgement:

"The Obama administration was well run, intelligent, thought out and diplomatic… If you just look at the way Frank can hold a conversation, the intellectual capacity he has to manipulate and even take something that is horrendous and actually use it in a positive advantage and then a couple of days ago you had the Trump speech on the bombing in Manchester and that speech was like a schoolboy in a schoolyard"

Camila, Simon and others no longer watch *HoC* to experience what they might once have considered to be extraordinary villains. They now, ironically, watch the show to reflect upon credible characters, such as President Frank Underwood, that are "somewhat different from what they have… [in] reality" and as a way to "consciously or unconsciously shape one's behaviour and experience of the world" (Bowman, 2006: 278-279). Here, the escape into the show is to remind themselves of how things can (once again) be.

5.7.3 *Resolving Epistemological Purgatory: A communal escape*

The final dimension of our analysis centres on how the onset of surreality has shifted escapism away from largely individuated, atomized consumption towards a need for collective, shared activities characterized by critical intersubjective discourse and debate. Breton (1924: 35) acknowledges that the effects of surreality will catalyze "the effort to be social" leading to discussions about "disorder" with others whereby "there is no conversation in which some trace of this disorder does not occur". This also fits with literature that suggests disruptive events actuate increased social contact with others (Perry and Pescosolido, 2012).

Many participants spoke about coming together with other consumers to try to contextualize, problematize, and adapt their reading of *HoC* to the changing spectrum of real-world conditions around them and, as a group, achieve some kind of escape through immersion in dialogue and debate. Such collective action discursively addresses an "epistemological purgatory" which can be defined as a situation where subjects' assumptions about reality are out of step with current conditions leading to doubt about "realness of their experience" (Barker, 2002: 281). Being situated in epistemological

purgatory means consumers cannot "simply assume that a fictional world functions like the actual world" (Busselle and Bilandzic, 2008: 259), thereby compromising their ability to suspend their disbeliefs and escape. In coming together to discursively address and move past the deadlocks of this purgatory, our participants escape reality through protracted and meaningful conversations *about HoC* rather than simply *through HoC*. For them escapism takes on a more complex, relational character than by direct consumption alone.

Some of our participants spoke about the depth and longevity of "after-show discussions" with friends and colleagues in the hours and days after watching *HoC*. Lee suggests *HoC* will open up conversations with people about the nature of the reality that the show is trying to reflect:

> *"HoC is very relevant to the world at the moment. It's kind of informative… thinking about what might happen in reality. You learn about political systems and activities in America, so I think it is a good form of information. I think it will make way for a lot of conversations with mates and people you work with, given that it might be reflective of what's going on."*

Lee's consumption of *HoC* acts as catalyst to seek out others, to share his experiences of *HoC,* and these communal discussions allow for his acquired knowledge from watching the show to be validated socially by an "epistemological community" (Whelan, 2007: 958). An epistemological community comes into being when individuals who share a body of specified knowledge, and are in possession of the standards for developing, evaluating and problematizing this knowledge, engage in discourse. Such communities are particularly useful for freeing oneself from the self-doubt and uncertainty that stem from being in the liminal state of epistemological purgatory. As Barker (2002: 281) suggests, "epistemological purgatory is the springboard for [a] vast self-help and support community… a central aim of this loosely organized community is to address... self-doubt and alienation". For Lee, an epistemological community enables a collective interpretation of *HoC* and, in doing so, helps him to think through disruptions to his assumptive framework and 'relearn' a world that is different from the previously known one (Kauffman, 2002).

Another of our participants, Simon, recognizes binge-watching *HoC* in the current political climate provides him with "*intellectual capital*" and a source of knowledge to enable him "*to understand what is going on, and being able to discuss it afterwards*". The knowledge he acquires from watching the show may be considered an "epistemological foundation" (Whelan, 2007: 960). In other words, it gives him sufficient "experiential credentials" to access an epistemological community which can involve "drawing comparisons between members' experiences… that shares particular beliefs, categories, terms" (Whelan, 2007: 960). This communal analysis of *HoC* takes place post-show to extend escapism beyond the initial viewing experience into immersive and sustained interactive discourses with others. Importantly, the epistemological communities that Simon, Lee and others engage with are qualitatively different to the types of consumption communities traditionally accounted for in marketing theory (Cova and Pace, 2006; Cova et al., 2007). Consumption communities constitute social, proximate groupings who cohere around a shared consumption activity to experience – and escape – together and express their identities as part of some kind of dedicated and collective emotional action (Goulding et al., 2013). In contrast, the epistemological communities revealed by our data are constituted by individuals who have engaged separately in their own independent consumption (i.e. watching *HoC* privately, alone) later finding opportunities to utilize insights gleaned from their consumption mostly within the parameters of conversation with others about larger but related issues.

Sarah explains how she met up with some long-distance friends, and, by chance, their mutual interest in *HoC* emerged as a useful conduit to engage in conversations about the real-world political turmoil around them:

> *"I met up with some friends from Wales and we hadn't seen each other for a while and we were chatting about stuff, and I said I had been watching House of Cards and then suddenly everyone got super animated because people are so invested in this show, especially with the American election coming up and Trump running for President. It was great to get other people's views on what the hell is going on."*

In this case, knowledge of *HoC* provided not just fodder for its own deconstruction and analysis but helped facilitate immersion into an analysis of reality more generally. Here, we can see archetypal aspects of escapism – investment and immersion - achieved

through *"super animated"* social discourse rather than discreetly watching the show alone. Consumers enter a space for "communal sociality and solidarity" (Goulding et al., 2009: 759) that serves as an escape from their own epistemological purgatory. Engaging with one another to address *"what the hell is going on"* helps them to attenuate their uncertainty and become what Whelan (2007: 963) refers to as "knowers". This coming together as epistemological agents, in the hope of achieving a better understanding of the real world, indicates a new relationship between the escapist space and reality, and supports Scott et al.'s (2017: 40) suggestion that it is "impossible to determine exactly when people may be engaging in escapes". Following Scott and colleagues, we recognize that escape is not always easily detectable; it can occur in a multitude of obscure and less obvious ways including through various forms of social interaction. Consumers, in this instance, achieve some kind of escape after watching *HoC* through connected, passionate conversations with others. This post-consumption discussion helps consumers to come to terms with disruption and, in doing so, offers its own form of departure from anxiety and concerns.

5.8 Discussion

Recent work has suggested that as a theoretical construct, "escapism has not enjoyed a uniform definition in the consumer research literature, and consequently, its usage has been inconsistent" (Kuo et al., 2016: 498). At the heart of this inconsistency, we argue, is that the protean relationship between escapism and reality is seldom considered. Specifically, the aggregate of shifting structural conditions, which impact upon and interact with individuals' personal life experiences to confirm or disconfirm assumptive frameworks of reality, has not been sufficiently factored into theoretical accounts of escapism. This paper set out to theorize how moments of dislocation in the external environment – what we have termed surrealist disruption – have the potential to alter how escape from reality is experienced. Our findings reveal that when reality is perceived by consumers to have been disrupted in some unexpected way, those marketplace resources that serve as an effective means for escape are subject to their own disruptions leading to changes in the character and the functions of escapism. Overall, these insights have allowed us to present two important contributions for marketing theory.

First, our analyses reveal that rather than being a continuously ontologically secure author of one's own reality and any attempts to escape from it, each consumer is limited and constrained by the inflexibility of his or her personal assumptive worlds. This, we argue, has bearing on the meanings and functions of one's consumption experiences when a potential mismatch between what one assumes to be real and unreal, or between one's expectations of reality versus its manifestations, is encountered. Many of our participants expressed awareness that reality 'feels' different to them; that they are hostage to dislocatory events and issues outside of their immediate agency and control, and that this has impacted their experiences of escaping from it. This has parallels with Lambert's (2019: 342) observations that consumers living through the current epoch of (post-)postmodern neoliberal capitalism "feel as though they *should* have agency" but ultimately, when reflecting on life in general, "do not feel that occurrences [are] necessarily under their control or their choice". Accordingly, beyond consumers' capacity to "use consumption to experience realities" (Arnould and Thompson, 2005: 875), we would add, reflexively, that *realities are drawn upon to experience consumption.* This ontological reversal is an important way of thinking about the relationship between the consumer and consumption, as it recognizes the mutable nature of reality itself as a mediating influence that can overturn, subvert and challenge the assumptions individuals bring to their consuming lives, and potentially lead to forms of action, feeling or thought that connote, for them, unintended results and experiences. Put differently, the changing conditions that shape consumers' reality around them have the potential to structure and constrain their ways of being and acting in relation to the material world in unpredictable and less intentional ways. As we have seen from our data, consumers' intention to escape can be disrupted by structural events that result in the emergence of unexpected and ambiguous experiences, such as hysteretic angst, sense-making and epistemological community-building. This problematizes the often tacitly held view that reality is a relatively stable, consistent construct from which escape is under total agentic command, and highlights consumers' epistemic inability to fully appreciate and predict the effects of unstable, inconsistent contextualizing situations which are made available to them, rather than of their making. The real theoretical value of our study is, thus, in revealing the consequences of dislocatory events in consumers' realities and the potential emergence of alternative experiences that are not necessarily disappointing. We identify the conflict between the unquestioning reproduction of schemas and the ambiguities of new and unforeseen circumstances as a cause for

unintended functional consequences – or what have been referred to elsewhere as the "anti-functional" dimensions – of consumer experiences (Lanier and Rader, 2015).

As a second contribution, our analyses continue in the spirit of providing a more multifaceted understanding of escapism (Jafari and Maclaran, 2014; Kerrigan et al., 2014) by revealing the emotionally multi-valenced nature of escapes within mundane settings. We suggest that escapism, however ordinary the context might be, is capable of invoking negative feelings for consumers beyond the more positively valenced emotions one would typically anticipate. Cova and colleagues (2018: 450) recently classified activities like binge-watching TV series as "mundane escapes" that "[comprise] the small everyday escapes facilitated by technology and especially digitalization". They theorized that mundane escapes are considered to be unambiguously "playful", a clear "means of gratification that could offset the frustrations of everyday life" and an accessible way to "prevent experiencing actual anxiety" (Cova et al., 2018: 451-452). On the contrary, our findings reveal that, under certain conditions, these types of escape are capable also of distilling and amplifying the frustrations and anxieties of real-life thus resulting in less playful gratification and more of a conflicted and uneasy experience for consumers. We contribute here with the addition that when the reality that one desires to escape from has lost its predictability, then ordinary, mundane escapes can centre less on abandonment and more on sense-making and rediscovering the coordinates for one's existence. This helps to complicate and provide parameters to Cova and colleagues' assertion that mundane escapes "allow [consumers] to escape from self-awareness", to "lose themselves into an activity", and provide some kind of "search for self-suspension" (Cova et al., 2018: 452). While self-loss may very well be the intended outcome that consumers seek from mundane escapes, if there is disruption to their assumptive frameworks then escape itself can (whether intentionally or not) become experienced less as a case of losing oneself – quite simply, because the consumer is already 'lost'. Ironically, escape may then become more about reconstituting, or re-*finding*, the world around oneself.

This, we argue, ensures that escapism during periods of discontinuity or dislocation in the external environment has the potential to become a sobering and thoughtful experience characterized by recognizing the collapse of one's own assumptive world and critical reflection on the structural constraints over one's ability to adapt. Our suggestion that escapism has multi-valenced complexity is consistent with recent work that prompts reflection on the more cynical and dissenting feelings consumers encounter

within a 'postemotional' marketplace than those that are purely hedonic and sanative (Cronin and Cocker, 2019). As argued by Illouz (2009: 394), "it is unreasonable to assume that one single emotion is at the heart of consumer culture". Only by recognizing the potential for encountering diverse, and oftentimes unintended, affective results through marketplace-mediated behaviours and circumstances, can marketing theorists appreciate the full range of functions and effects that experiences like escapism are capable of producing.

As a note for future research, we encourage continued exploration of the unintended, improvisational and anti-functional experiences of altered escapes. While our attention centred on how escape can potentially be disrupted by structural events leading to unexpected consequences, more can be learned about the full range of emotions and behaviours felt and undertaken by subjects during their altered escapes. Moreover, our singular focus on the context of binge-watching has revealed only the contours rather than the full complexity of the entanglements between consumers, escapism and reality. A number of dualistic categories have emerged at both explicit (e.g. real versus surreal) and tacit (e.g. confinement versus escape) levels throughout our analyses. In full recognition of the limitations that accompany such potentially reductionist ways of categorizing phenomena (see Canniford and Shankar, 2015), we urge future researchers to think more complexly about the continua or dimensions between the poles of dualisms identified here. Theorisations undertaken at that level, we advise, should not necessarily centre on identifying separate and discrete categories of escapist experiences but rather on unpacking what happens phenomenologically for consumers across the many, fluid and varied ways they attempt to escape various states, conditions, circumstances and environments.

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5.10 Summary and Reflections on Chapter 5

In article 3, I suggest that a surrealist disruption can occur whereby one's grasp and expectations of reality are undermined and this can impact upon the consumption of realist TV. When consumers' assumptive frameworks (their basis for internalising, evaluating and accepting reality) have been disrupted, this impacts on how they consume content that has been modelled on what they previously considered to be their actual reality. The ability to suspend one's disbeliefs and escape into story worlds premised on external realism is impacted and under the circumstances described, escapism can yield unintended consequences, different from those originally sought after.

Whilst consumer research has recognised the pursuit of a pleasurable experience to be a desirable outcome of escapism (Goulding et al., 2009; Kerrigan et al., 2014) this article suggests that researchers look beyond the pursuit of one singular emotion and recognise the potential for encountering a range of affective results. Similarly, previous research has suggested that categories of consumers seek out an escape, or experience an escape for similar reasons. For instance, Tough Mudder runners want to experience pain as way to achieve a self-escape from themselves (Scott et al., 2017) and night clubbers want to suspend the rules and norms governing everyday life to "lose it" (Goulding et al., 2009). However, the article recommends that researchers embrace the notion that a range of functions might be experienced in an escape, rather than a singular emotion or outcome. Consumers may still aim for and desire an escapist experience that yields pleasurable outcomes, however, consumers may also experience far more unintended effects because of the impact of real-world disruptive occurrences that can take place.

A further point for reflection is in relation to the real-time consumption of a TV show sitting alongside what is occurring in reality and how this can impact on consumers' willingness to suspend their disbelief and escape into a story world. At the point of the data collection, the unprecedented and surreal world events that we draw upon in article 3, including the Presidency of Donald Trump (2017-2021), and the on-going Brexit negotiations and subsequent fall-out from the UK's decision to leave the EU (2015–2019) have now dissipated. Roll forward to 2021, and President Trump is no longer the occupier of the White House and the EU withdrawal agreement was finalised in December 2019. This has led to me consider that a viewer watching *HoC* now, might experience a different

kind of escape compared to the account in article 3. This raises questions about whether the ability to suspend one's belief around *HoC* now increases or fades as the external realism (how we expect the world to operate, in relation to fictional places seen on screen) regains some semblance of 'normality' and reality operates according to one's assumptive beliefs and knowledge. Many of my participants enjoyed reconsuming and revisiting *HoC*, but were more reserved or anxious to visit the world of *HoC* when their expectations of the show were challenged.

Following the logic that external events or forces can occur beyond individuals' agentic control this led me to theorise how a celebrity transgression, an act of wrongdoing that sits completely outside the control of a devoted fan, is capable of provoking feelings of hurt, grief and disappointment and this became the inspiration for article 4 (see Chapter 6).

Chapter 6: Celebrity-brand Break-up: Fan Experiences of Para-loveshock

6.1 Introduction to Chapter: How the article fits into the Overall Thesis

Having previously explored how experience of escapism can become altered by external conditions in article 3 (see Chapter 5), I became interested in how the interrelated experience of "fandom" might be challenged by other kinds of externalities. Fandom and escapism became fairly permeable constructs to me over the journey of the thesis. To commit to following a TV show, over multiple seasons and to devour it at a marathon viewing pace suggests the viewer must find themselves caring about and invested in some or all of its cast members. It occurred to me that such homology between binge-watching and fan attachment meant an analysis of one would be incomplete without consideration of the other. The inspiration for this originated on the morning of October 30th, 2017 when I awoke to read overnight news that Kevin Spacey, the leading man and "face" of *HoC*, had been accused of sexual assault and harassment. As more allegations of sexual assault began to emerge against Spacey, I was contacted by a couple of the participants who had been interviewed in the previous data collection stages. They expressed their upset and feelings of betrayal with Spacey which closely shadowed my own. News soon broke that Spacey would be removed from *HoC* meaning that would be the end of all of our chances to binge-watch any new seasons of it.

I began to reflect more critically on the absurdity of my reactions to Spacey's transgressions, particularly as this someone I did not personally know. I decided to subject my emotions to analysis. Why should I feel bad about transgressions of a man I never met and is unlikely to even know who I am? And why will I lament the inevitable cancelling of *HoC* because of his transgressions*?* After all, it's only a TV show. Why do we react so badly when the things we direct our fandom towards are compromised? Although I was acutely aware my relationship with Spacey was one-sided and non-reciprocal, there was some feelings of hurt and upset caused by his immoral conduct. I was experiencing a form of emotional pain, which is characterised by the loss of somebody and I was experiencing a state of feeling heartbroken (Meerwijk and Weiss,

2011), albeit with somebody who doesn't even know me. I recognised myself that I need to show, or perform the frustrations and feelings of disappointment that I was encountering with Spacey and I was no longer able to support Spacey. I was troubled when I tried to reconsume his classic films and TV shows.

An inability to forgive Spacey, differs to Bhattacharjee et al. (2013)'s account of moral decoupling which refers to judgements that separate performance from immorality, thus allowing an individual to condemn an immoral act, while supporting the transgressor. Moral decoupling involves extricating the immoral violation or transgression from the performance of the moral actor, allowing individuals to continue enjoying an artist's work. However, being a fan of an artist, the interiority of psychology is largely replaced with the exteriority of community and emotional displays. As suggested by Wohlfeil et al. (2019) and Fournier and Eckhardt (2019), the appeal of following and admiring a celebrity-brand, such as Kevin Spacey comes from a blurring of boundaries between the private and public, or the celebrity performer and the private person and in this manuscript, I explore how this makes it difficult for fans to decouple and problems arise when fans try to reconsume Spacey's work.

Being a fan of Spacey has meant something in terms of my identity and it is a sizeable commitment and investment of emotions. This performance of trauma in the wake of his transgressions, included hiding away a signed photo that I personally received from Spacey, talking to my Mum about my grief, so I could explain to others the anger and upset that I was encountering. Similar accounts were provided by a number of the participants in a final stage of interviews to coincide with the release of *HoC* season six (November, 2018). They were also devoted fans of Spacey and disclosed feelings of hurt, betrayal and disappointment and they similarly felt compelled to show or perform their emotional heartache.

I discussed with my supervisors how we could account for a consumer-celebrity break-up, where the fan falls into the position of feeling let down by an adored celebrity-brand. We returned to Rebecca Williams' (2011) 'This is the Night TV Dies. Television Post-Object Fandom and the Demise of the West Wing' which we initially consulted when plotting out article 1 (see Chapter 3). Williams examined how fans had negotiated their reactions to the ending of the American political drama series *The West Wing* (1999-2006). To account for their loss, Williams drew on the work of sociologist, Anthony Giddens (1992). Giddens' notion of 'loveshock', described the period of

mourning necessary after the break-up of a real-life relationship and it encapsulates the emotional trauma of falling out of love with someone. I draw on and extend Giddens's concept of loveshock to explore the emotional fallout that fans experience when their parasocial relations with a celebrity breaks down. The following paper reveals how fans "play up" and dramatise how hurt they are to tacitly legitimise, enfranchise and ultimately reify their imaginary relationships.

The manuscript was submitted to the *Journal of Business Research* (JBR) in December 2020 and invited to revise and resubmit the manuscript. A revised version of the paper (included in Chapter 6) was re-submitted in June 2021.

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Celebrity-brand Break-up: Fan Experiences of Para-loveshock

6.2 Abstract

Following the logic that the love fans have for celebrity-brands is based on parasocial relationships, this paper explores the illusory aspects of the trauma that is experienced when these relationships end. Drawing on an analysis of fans' responses to abuse allegations made against the American actor, Kevin Spacey, in 2017-18, the paper explores how fans perform a break-up with a celebrity-brand wrongdoer. The paper builds upon and adapts Giddens' theorization of loveshock – which encapsulates the disorienting after-effects of falling out of love – to propose the new concept of para-loveshock. The analyses reveal para-loveshock is performed socially and discursively through three fan practices – externalization, flagellation, and sublation. Loveshocked fans engage with the wrongdoing of a celebrity-brand as an opportunity for self-expression, self-understanding and a re-writing of their identities. Recognizing how fans perform and legitimize their feelings helps to sensitize managers to the importance of consumer identity work following celebrity-brand transgressions.

Keywords: Celebrity, Fandom, Giddens, Parasocial Relationships, Para-loveshock, Transgression

6.3 INTRODUCTION

The market-mediated relationships that consumers forge with celebrities play an important part in their lives. Celebrities, or what are interchangeably called person-brands (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019) or celebrity-brands (Dion & Arnould, 2016), can provide consumers with a source of entertainment, a catalyst for inspiration, and the illusion of companionship (Kerrigan et al., 2011; Wohlfeil et al., 2019). As with any relationships, however, consumer-celebrity relationships are precarious and can be negatively impacted by some perceived wrongdoing or transgression, engendering negative feelings (Banister & Cocker, 2014; Finsterwalder et al., 2017). In the context of shifting global judgements and their impact on consumers' tolerance of celebrity misbehaviour – especially in light of "cancel culture" (Wei & Bunjun, 2020) and the #MeToo movement (Rose, 2021) – the issue of fan responses to transgressors is likely to be a concern for brands, public relations and media coordinators who are reliant on celebrity fandom.

Existing research in the celebrity-branding space emphasizes various moral reasoning strategies undertaken by consumers to maintain support for celebrity wrongdoers while insulating themselves from dissonance (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013; Lee & Kwak, 2016; Wang & Kim, 2019). Though that work reveals the complexity of the psychological processes through which consumers evaluate negative publicity about a celebrity, we know less about the socio-cultural and interpsychic consequences that celebrity transgression has for consumers who identify strongly as *fans*.

For those who invest much of their time, money and emotional energy in their fandom, the handling of "collective trauma" following critical junctures in their relationships with brands is recognized as a deeply relational activity (Russell & Schau, 2014; Weijo et al., 2019). This paper explores transgression as a critical juncture capable of engendering the total dissolution of the consumer-brand relationship and garnering particular forms of social expression. Celebrity transgression, we argue, gives way to a shared experience of heartbreak for fans that requires careful and interpersonal handling within the wider social context that surrounds it. In recognition that broader culture may not acknowledge the validity of their heartbreak or may evaluate it negatively, we explore the ways that fans negotiate and legitimize the depths and reality of their loss.

Our exploration is underpinned by the following research question: how do fans manage and perform "falling out of love" with a celebrity-brand in the event of brand

transgression? Addressing that question provides a response to calls for further research on the social and communal domains that critical junctures in consumer-brand relationships play out within (Russell & Schau, 2014).

To facilitate our enquiry, we draw upon and expand sociologist Anthony Giddens' (1992, p.103) theorization of "loveshock", which encapsulates the disorientation and distress associated with the ending of a relationship. We propose the new concept of *para-loveshock* to capture fans' experiences of mourning the dissolution of a relationship with an idolized figure they have no proximate or reciprocal interactions with. Our concept is underpinned by the assumption that fans' love for celebrities is parasocial or, in other words, characterized by one-sided emotional commitment which is unlikely to be reciprocated except in the consumer's imagination (O'Guinn, 1991; Wohlfeil & Whelan, 2012). We theorize how fans *reify,* rather than simply cope with, their trauma as a way of legitimizing the significance of their relationship with the celebrity-brand and its dissolution. By reifying – or "making appear real" – their trauma, consumers assure themselves and others that their fandom was a "real" thing with its own weight and importance.

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

6.4 THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

6.4.1 *Celebrity Transgression: A brief background*

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

The assumption underpinning work on moral reasoning is that when motivated to support a celebrity transgressor, consumers will seek to rationally and pragmatically negate any setbacks to their support. Such a view, while important, is nevertheless adrift from the identity investments, communal constructions, and cultural configurations of the "fan-celebrity" relationship (Hills, 2002; Johnson, 2007). First, while a "non-fan" consumer with only a mild-to-moderate positive attraction to a celebrity based on performance might well be able to decouple judgments of performance from judgments of morality, a "fan", on the other hand, tends to experience a robust *holistic* attraction to the real 'private person' behind the public persona also. The difficulty for fans to detach or decouple parts of the celebrity is presented in Wohlfeil et al.'s (2019, p.2048) account of the "multi-constitutional, polysemic consumer appeal" of celebrities and Fournier and Eckhardt's (2019) "two-bodied" conceptualization of the celebrity-brand, whereby two constituents—the person and the brand—are indivisibly linked. Second, fan commitment to a celebrity is not strictly a rational individuated activity but is marked by shared

fantasies and "fantagonisms", the interactional expression of "personal significance", and social efforts to legitimize intensely felt "possession" of a celebrity's work (Duffett, 2013; Johnson, 2007). Beyond psychological processes, Duffett (2013, p.121) clarifies that "fandom is a sociocultural phenomenon mediating between wider elements that are only connected indirectly to the depths of the mind. These elements, whether discourses, practices, or social identities, frequently make connections between the private and public, the individual and collective". Parmentier and Fischer (2015) identify the "fan detective work", the "creation of collective intelligence", "widespread disgruntlement" and "gossiping" fans engage in when making sense of any perceived missteps of their favourite celebrity-brands. Fandom tends to straddle public and private domains, such that fans' interactions with one another influence and alter each other's perceptions.

To claim the identity of a 'fan' requires not just a willingness to rationalize away any dissonance that can emerge during uncomfortable parts of the fan-celebrity relationship, but also to socially perform, communicate and legitimize one's feelings when there is risk of that relationship ending. Accordingly, instead of relying on established psychological discourses of moral reasoning in times of celebrity transgression, we consider how consumers discursively and culturally handle the threats posed to their self-identification as impassioned fans. To provide some conceptual scaffolding for our analysis, we will now turn to the concept of parasocial relationships.

6.4.2 *Parasocial Relationships*

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

dialogic exchange, mutuality, and the social nuances of sustained togetherness are largely absent. The result is a fictive relationship denuded of the depths, complexity and interactivity we see with prolonged human interactions.

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

A second characteristic of PSRs is intertextuality (Hirschman, 2000; Wohlfeil et al., 2019). Engaging in intertextuality refers to the ways that fans follow a celebrity – and make linkages – across multiple and intersecting sites, texts, and cultural narratives including interviews, media reports, autobiographies, behind-the-scenes exposés, and the celebrity's own oeuvre of work or content. This enables fans to feel as though they *truly know* a celebrity not just as a performer but as a "real" and complete person behind their public image.

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

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

Lastly, as alluded to by the above, the concept of love – however unrequited it may be – can function as an integral part of PSRs. The boundaries between love and friendship or companionship are porous; both being based on foundations of intimacy. Accordingly, some have identified "parasocial love" as "a fundamental ingredient of the consumption of celebrities" (Illouz, 2009, p.395). By way of example, O'Guinn (1991) observes how some fans perceive their fandom towards the singer-songwriter Barry Manilow as comparable to a committed, loving relationship, with devoted fans referring

to him as a significant other, "most typically as a lover, husband or friend" (p.104). Elsewhere, in his introspective account of his fan relationship with the film actress Jena Malone, Wohlfeil reflects on feelings of romantic and sexual attraction which signal for him the possibility that he very well could "be in love with her" (Wohlfeil & Whelan, 2012, p. 517). However, as with any scenario where love and admiration is bestowed on somebody, the relationship can be precarious and susceptible to violations or transgressions. This leads us to consider the concept of loveshock and its value for explaining the disorientating after-effects of falling out of love with a cherished celebrity.

6.4.3 *Love & Loveshock*

In his work on intimacy and society, Giddens (1992) describes different types of love including *passionate love* "a generic connection between love and sexual attachment" (p.37), *romantic love,* a love that "fastens upon and idealises another, and it projects a course of future development" (p.45), and a *confluent love*, which is an "active, contingent love and therefore jars with the 'for-ever', 'one-and-only' qualities of the romantic love complex" (p.61). Related to confluent love is a *pure relationship* which refers to a "social relation [which] is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it" (p.58). Pure relationships exist solely for whatever benefits that relationship can provide for its partners (Giddens, 1991, 1992). In this sense, fans' parasocial relationships with celebrities are considered to loosely fall within the category of pure relationships. Keeping with Giddens' conceptualization, Williams (2011, p. 269) classifies fans' attachment to celebrities as "fan pure relationships" on the grounds that "requited emotion is not a requirement for their existence". Although celebrity-brands may not be able to reciprocate fans' love, there are other benefits that fans derive from celebrity-brands such as entertainment, identity attachments, and sociality with other fans.

Pure relationships are characterised by their fragility and high rates of dissolution. Giddens (1991, p.90) states that "anything that goes wrong between the partners intrinsically threatens the relationship itself" and according to Williams (2015, p.26), "a fan pure relationship may only be sustained while it offers ontological security and a

sense of trust in the other party". Thus, in a fan pure relationship, the fan may exercise agency and freedom to break off the relationship when the celebrity fails to deliver the necessary rewards or fractures the fan's trust through transgression.

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

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

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

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

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

Continuing to love a celebrity following allegations of immorality may risk compromising fans' own moral standards necessitating a break-up and leaving a vacuum in their lives that may not be understood by non-fans. Managing that loss requires distinct approaches to negotiating, legitimizing and communicating the grief one feels. In this circumstance, the dissolution of parasocial love caused by a celebrity transgressor provokes what we consider to be a case of "para-loveshock", which is performative and based on social drama and carefully shared feelings rather than organic or unfiltered emotion (see also Gopaldas, 2014). Transgression, because of how it may be perceived in broader culture, may mean fans' grief is less easily shared and the validity of their loss is less socially acceptable. Before we move on to theorizing how fans manage the process of falling out of love with a celebrity in the event of immoral action, we provide an account of our research context and methods.

6.5 RESEARCH DESIGN

6.5.1 *Research Context*

This study focuses on the "cancellation" (i.e. de-celebrification) of the television and film actor Kevin Spacey and fans' experiences para-loveshock following the loss of his public image. Spacey gained critical acclaim for his roles in major motion pictures including *The Usual Suspects* and *American Beauty* culminating in Academy Awards in 1995 and 1999 respectively. From 2013-17, Spacey portrayed the fictitious US President Francis Underwood in the Netflix drama series *House of Cards* winning Golden Globe Awards. In late 2017, allegations emerged that Spacey had made unwelcome sexual advances on a minor some years previously. An investigation into the conduct of Spacey during his 11-year tenure (2004-2015) as artistic director at The Old Vic in London, revealed 20 individual allegations of inappropriate behaviour (BBC News, 2017). As a result of the accusations, Spacey was dismissed by Netflix and removed from the final season of *House of Cards* (2018). Director Ridley Scott also replaced Spacey in his film, *All the Money in the World* (2018).

In the aftermath of Spacey's alleged transgressions, various commentators in the media discussed fan experiences of betrayal and falling out of love with Spacey. Referencing Spacey's portrayal of President Frank Underwood in *House of Cards*, Mitchell (2017), writing for *The Guardian* explains how she will miss the character, "*If you commit to a character, as I have with Underwood, it can be very difficult to part company with him, no matter what an actor is accused of*". Elsewhere, questions emerged as to whether fans can still enjoy the actor's work:

> "*So, does this mean I can't watch him (Spacey) again? Is it possible to separate what I'm seeing on screen from the actor's vile behaviour in real life; to gloss over the fact that a guy who often played bad guys actually is one? (...) Would I support, say, a Kevin Spacey comeback at some point? No… But their past work? Well, that's where it gets troubling*" (Moore, 2018).

With these questions and sources of concern in mind, we now outline the methodological considerations underpinning our research.

6.5.2 *Research procedures*

The empirical work for this paper is derived from a larger socio-cultural study of the fandom and context surrounding the Netflix political drama, *House of Cards* (*HoC* thereafter). A sampling call was undertaken via an advertisement poster and promotion to the lead author's social network which invited individuals who had watched *HoC* over multiple seasons and intended to binge-watch the latest season to participate in an interview. From an initial pilot sample, the lead author was introduced to others willing to share their experiences leading to an eventual data pool of fifteen participants, aged between 23 and 69 (see Table 1). Many of the participants were revealed to be dedicated fans of Spacey and his wider work in TV and film.

Table 1 ***Study Participants***

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

Participants engaged in multiple interviews over a three-year period with each data collection round scheduled to coincide with a new season release of *HoC* (season 4 to 6). The data drawn upon specifically for this study is taken from the final round of interviews undertaken at the season six release of *HoC* (November 2018), centring specifically on whether awareness of Spacey's transgressions impacted upon participants' fan interest and admiration for him. All interviews lasted between approximately 40 to 70 minutes each, were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and pseudonymized. Institutional ethical approval was gained for the study and informed consent was sought and obtained from all participants.

Along with the interviews, the lead author, a devoted Spacey fan of twenty-five years, committed to undertaking a subjective personal introspection (SPI) of his own first-hand encounters with para-loveshock. The intention here was to provide a closer and richer reading of the embodied, sensual aspects of perceived betrayal, pain and shame as they are experienced by a heart-broken fan. Achieving such a confessional would likely remain inaccessible or, at the very least, shallow if relying on third-person accounts via interviews alone. The approach adopted by the first author is consistent with previous accounts of fandom undertaken from a holistic insider perspective (see Wohlfeil &

Whelan, 2012; Wohlfeil et al., 2019). Over the course of his Spacey fandom, the lead author accrued DVDs of his films and TV shows (including US Region 1 formats released ahead of their UK issue), movie soundtracks, digital downloads, and memorabilia associated with the actor including framed movie prints, posters and an autograph (*see Figure 1*). These collections engender a feeling that Spacey is part of the lead author's everyday life (Wohlfeil et al., 2019).

Figure 1: Selection of Lead Author's Spacey Collection

To prompt an understanding of how feelings of loveshock are felt and negotiated, part of the SPI involved the lead author re-watching a collection of his favourite Spacey films over the months that followed news of the allegations and subsequent erasure from popular culture. Attempting to maintain some connection is considered significant when mourning the loss of a loved one, and reconsuming Spacey's work enabled the lead author to bring the affective contours of his relationship to the surface for evaluation. In a similar vein to "thought-watching" exercises (Gould, 2012, p.455), the author sketched diary notes during the reconsumption experience and fleshed these out into fuller introspective essays. Those essays were entered into a combined data pool with interview transcripts for this research.

Inductive analyses of the combined data were undertaken in an iterative "back and forth between part and whole" (Spiggle, 1994, p.495) and emerging interpretations were continuously revised. Analysis employed *open coding* to identify concepts in the data and *axial coding* to develop emerging codes related to larger categories of interest (Spiggle, 1994). Categories were developed into higher order themes through constant comparison with explanatory theories from the literature and the emerging theoretical framework. What follows is our interpretation of a number of occurrences across the main themes underlying our overall conceptualization of para-loveshock.

6.6 FINDINGS

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

6.6.1 *Externalization: Other-Directed Displays of Grief*

The first major theme to emerge from the data centres on fans' efforts to align their feelings with like-minded others to legitimize their sense of heartbreak and betrayal. By externalizing their grief, or placing it in a shared space, what they feel can be constructed as more "real". Fans who mourn their adored celebrity's public fall from grace seek to have their heartbreak validated by others because their grief sits beyond what is normatively acceptable (Doka, 1999; Harju, 2015; Russell & Schau, 2014). According to

Doka, such sorrow is a form of "disenfranchised grief", described as "a grief experienced by those who incur a loss that is not, or cannot be, openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported" (1999, p.37). He adds: "The concept of disenfranchised grief recognizes that societies have sets of norms - in effect, 'grieving rules' - that attempt to specify who, when, where, how, how long and for whom people should grieve" (p.37). Feeling bad about the downfall of Spacey breaks these grieving rules because of how continued fan interest in a celebrity wrongdoer may appear to non-fans. Accordingly, Spacey fans seek out spaces, including online platforms that facilitate, normalize and support their expressions and sentiments of grief for Spacey. The first author recognized the importance of qualification from like-minded others which, he felt, could serve as a resource to offset feeling alone in his grief and legitimize a feeling of loss that he felt was not openly accepted by greater society:

> *"Spacey is damaged, and so are most of his films and any enjoyment has gone. I spoke to my mum last week about this... She is a massive fan too. She told me about a website where people support him (The Daily Mail was apparently outraged) ...I looked up the site (supportkevinspacey.com) and people were posting stuff about how much they miss him, the allegations and how his withdrawal from acting and society has created a massive vacuum in their lives. Every post was supporting his comeback and I guess that's the purpose of the site. I didn't post anything because I wasn't sure I was going to belong to this group – I'm upset with him, he's let me down, and he's also embarrassed me a bit – taken my investment in him for 25 years and pretty much shat on it. Their grief on the site feels real and raw – some genuine messages of heartbreak and forgiveness." (Researcher field notes, 26/02/2018)*

Although the first author had trouble seeing how he *"was going to belong to this group"*, sites like supportkevinspacey.com enable aggrieved fans to conceptualize themselves as mourners who may identify with one another's pain, and allow their feelings to be "mirrored, recognised and thus legitimised" (Harju, 2015, p.136). These principles run in parallel with the concept of brand community and other forms of communal consumption, where sense of belonging to an in-group is valued (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). However, beyond some expressions of sharing their grief and identity, much of the data suggests the social interactions of fans were more about saving face and achieving visibility and

legitimacy for one's own grief, than for seeking robust forms of community and belonging. This is consistent with "noncommunitarian forms of consumer sociality" where individuals rely on social media platforms to engage and discuss with like-minded others, but primarily as a means to manage personal strategies of self-presentation rather than collective action (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016, p.730). We see evidence of non-communitarian expressions of fan sociality with one of the interview participants, Lee (23), who upon hearing the news of Spacey's transgressions, turned to Twitter as a place to exorcize his grief:

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

Lee, a member of a Kevin Spacey online fan page and an avid follower of the actor on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, uses social media as a platform to outwardly project and perform his grief which, in cultural terms, is largely disenfranchised. Besides twice uttering the word 'shock' – the very fabric of loveshock – Lee, deploys the grief-stricken language we might associate with a breakup – feeling 'heartbroken', 'gutted' and 'let down'. Harju (2015, p.143) suggests grieving online is about "solidifying and "making real" the fandom". Lee's feelings are expressed through a Tweet and thus reified as a communicable construct allowing him to establish a degree of publicness for what might otherwise might go unseen and overlooked as an exclusively private fannish experience. Sharing their disappointment on the internet allows fans to maintain and manage their own strategies of self-presentation, prompting reactions and inviting exchanges with others.

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

> *"I tried to watch Se7en about three weeks ago now and it was hard… I'm really unsure about this, and whether I can still be a fan. It's hard to admit that you are*

a Kevin Spacey fan and I watched it my own, and at least I didn't have to justify watching it. You wouldn't admit that you have watched him in public."

The overriding imperative for Lee appears to be one of impression management rather than the expression of genuine emotion. Lee, who no longer identifies as a Spacey fan but nonetheless "tries" to maintain his enjoyment of *Se7en*, admits to watching the film privately so that he does not have to "justify watching it" to friends or family. This resonates with the lead author, who removed an autographed photo of Spacey he had displayed on his memo board in his home office. The signed photo (*see Figure 2*) had been gifted to the lead author back in 2004 after writing to Spacey to share how Spacey's performance in *American Beauty* (1999) had inspired him to make a major career change. Similar to Lee, the first author was cognisant of how his open fandom might appear to others.

Figure 2: Personalised, signed Kevin Spacey Photo.

Elsewhere, Simon (38) a collector of Kevin Spacey memorabilia who, prior to hearing the allegations, used to regularly binge-watch Spacey's movies, ponders how his

fan interest might be perceived by others. In other-directed fashion, his feelings are tied up in impression management rather than in the act of the transgression itself:

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

Simon, who owns a number of original Spacey movie posters and some cherished Spacey-related merchandise, such as a plastic toy figurine of "Hopper" (a character Spacey voiced in the 1998 animated Pixar movie *A Bug's Life*), balances loss and disappointment, not only for a loved one (Spacey), but also for his own fan identity. Simon aims to manage how he might be perceived for re-watching Spacey's work and his grief is calibrated in line with an acceptable presentation of himself. As Hills (2018, p.21) clarifies, "fandom has become not only an internal object (a highly valued and intensely personally felt self-experience) but also an external cultural object incessantly mediated back to the self". Moreover, perceived judgements from others can lead to more cautious displays of emotions (Gopaldas, 2014). Simon seeks to exhibit the "correct" emotional response and the prospect of causing offence to others shapes and influences his choices. Supressing his Spacey fandom, which is an important part of his identity, allows him to function without fear of public reprisal, when inside he admits to actually feeling "a bit gutted".

6.6.2 *Flagellation: Performing Self-Reproach*

The next emergent theme centres on fans' self-reproach in their performance of para-loveshock. Besides grief, Giddens (1992, p.103) suggests "blame" must be substantially dealt with before individuals become resigned to the break-up of any relationship. Our findings suggest that when a parasocial relationship dissolves due to transgression, fans

discursively negotiate their share of the blame for the break-up and search for some evidence of their culpability in the celebrity's missteps. Self-reproach following the breakdown of most kinds of relationships is typically non-productive, irrational and undesirable, yet within the illusory realm of a parasocial celebrity-fan relationship, acts of self-reproach help fans to reify their fandom by convincing themselves and others how much their commitment to celebrities mattered. We label this as *performative flagellation* which we define as consumers sharing culpability for a celebrity's transgression and engaging in self-reproach as a way to legitimize their fannish conceits and commitments. For fans, inserting themselves into a celebrity-brand's transgression helps them to validate their imagined relationship and negotiate the weight of its dissolution.

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

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

The first author's field notes suggests the possibility that fans are uncomfortable with seeing themselves as passive recipients of their idol's transgression. His musing that he is complicit in "creating a monster" functions as an attempt to establish importance in the celebrity's life rather than accept himself as a distant parasocial admirer. Importantly, that insight conflicts with existing accounts of brand transgression in the literature which assume consumers are motivated to put boundaries between themselves and the

transgression to avoid self-reproach (see Bhattacharjee et al., 2013). In our data, we see evidence that fans may be motivated to elide all boundaries between them and the transgressor, so as to claim importance in the transgressor's life. Such behaviour is consistent with accounts of "boundaryless" narcissistic identification, denoting "a preoccupation with the self which prevents the individual from establishing valid boundaries between self and external worlds" (Giddens, 1991, p.170). Following this logic, the transgressions of the celebrity – however distant or separate from a consumer's life they may be – are co-opted and conflated with the domain of the self as a way of legitimizing the emotions consumers attach to their fandom and its collapse.

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

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

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

Narcissistic expressions of self-reproach were also evident for Sue (58), who has for more than two decades considered Spacey to be her "go to" actor. She watched him perform live, playing Clarence Darrow and Richard III at The Old Vic (London) and was so mesmerised by his performance as Darrow, she watched the play a further four times.

Sue explains that she processes her break-up with Spacey by second-guessing her own judgements:

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

Sue's suggestion that *"I feel for the guy but I also feel for us"* is important because it highlights how porous the boundaries between the self and external world have become in her experience of para-loveshock. Her wilful elevation of the fans' subject position, "us", in Spacey's transgression suggests "an expression of narcissistic absorption" (Giddens, 1991, p.170) rather than genuine culpability. From this, we can surmise that one of the ways fans perform their para-loveshock – and thus have their feelings of heartbreak recognized by themselves and others – is through blurring the boundaries, however firm they may be, between transgressor and one's self.

6.6.3 *Sublation: Expressing Moral Indignation*

The final theme centres on how personal experiences of para-loveshock are validated through a process of sublation. In Hegelian philosophy, to sublate is to cancel and to preserve; or rather, to supersede while retaining some aspect of that which is superseded (Haigh, 2006; Spears & Amos, 2014). In the context of Spacey's transgression, sublation took the form of fans cancelling their personal disappointment with Spacey's de-celebrification, while preserving their feelings of pain through morally denouncing his wrongdoing. Participants understood that unless they adjusted how they expressed themselves, their feelings about Spacey's excommunication from popular culture risked being considered socially unacceptable by wider society. As Wohlfeil (2018) identifies,

society has a predilection for viewing the fan subject as "the weird, alienated, obsessive and fanatical loner" who, in situations of emotional turmoil, is perceived as having "*lost his marbles*" (pp.45-46). To avoid such criticisms of pathology, fans attribute their pain to moral issues rather than personal issues, thereby superseding any perceived shallowness of their experiences by non-fans.

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

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

The act Jhanvi refers to here was a Tweet made by Spacey to deny any recollection of wrongdoing. In that same Tweet, Spacey took the opportunity to come out as gay – an act that some read as a deliberate attempt to misdirect attention and circumvent the weight of the allegation (Mortensen & Kristensen, 2020). Jhanvi, who herself identifies as a straight cisgender woman, draws upon affronted others – 'LGBT activists and gay people' – to locate her feelings of betrayal. Furthermore, instead of fixating on how Spacey's removal from *HoC* hurt her personally, Jhanvi renders her heartbreak legitimate by aligning her arguments with institutionally legitimate actors that have publicly condemned Spacey:

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

be punished and absolutely not let him work. Actors are role models and Spacey has let us down."

Jhanvi, by citing a multi-billion-dollar media company and an academy award winning director who both dropped Spacey from their projects, establishes evidence that it is fair and just to be upset with Spacey. "Sublation processes", Spears and Amos (2014, p.442) suggest, "work to preserve or forward a culturally prevalent viewpoint while reducing or cancelling less prevalent ideas". Jhanvi cancels her status as a "let down" fan but preserves her pain by channelling it into a wider and more prevalent moral stance – what she calls a "principled stand". In doing so, she turns her relationship with a fallen idol into one with a "folk devil", an "unambiguously unfavourable symbol" (Cohen, 1972, p.41). A similar expression of sublation can be found with Camila (32) who reduces her status as a disappointed Spacey fan and claims legitimacy for her feelings by drawing parallels with other celebrity transgressors, Louis CK and Woody Allen. In doing so, she supplants personal disappointment but preserves its affect by situating her arguments within normative realms of acceptable grievance such as men abusing positions of power:

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

By allowing consumers to assemble a discourse that absolves a celebrity-brand of being the sole perpetrator of a transgression, sublation draws critical attention to the market- or industry-wide conditions that are conducive to immorality. Here, Camila, who used to adorn the walls of her study with posters and prints from Spacey's films, emphasizes that

the roots of her heartbreak lie not with Spacey alone but with systemic male abuses in the entertainment industry. Also, Camila suggests the actions undertaken by a mainstream legitimate actor (Netflix) makes *'it easier for the fans to disown him'*. The fact that such a major institution with its own "marketplace sentiments" (Gopaldas, 2014) had condemned Spacey confirms for Camila that something truly bad has happened here, thus validating her heartbreak and insulating her emotional labour from devaluation.

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

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

> *"For the past few days I've been thinking about Spacey a great deal and I wanted to talk [with others] about having watched The Usual Suspects. It's hard to publicly say I watched Suspects. You go through so many thoughts – people's concerns are for the victims, rightly, and my frustrations are trivial in comparison, but actually they are important. I've put so much into following [Spacey], and I have so many good memories of this film. It rewarded me with cultural capital at college, it helped me ace an interview for a job at a local cinema, and it was a film that I watched repeatedly with my older brother, giving*

us something to share and enjoy together. If I repeated this, people would say 'get a grip!' I know that. I tried a different tact and I crowbarred him into a conversation with friends from my walking club. We were talking about the TV series, Mindhunter on Netflix, and I mentioned that I was surprised that Netflix still had Spacey films on their platform, and would anyone watch one? This opened up a conversation about whether Netflix were right to sack him and an interesting discussion around the #MeToo Movement. […] It gave me an audience to share things with. I condemned him too, and that was the prevailing mood in the group. They were particularly disappointed with how he conflated his apology with coming out – we agreed it was appalling." (Researchers field notes, 17/12/17).

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

6.7 DISCUSSION

This research approached how consumers come to terms with celebrity-brand misbehaviour from a socio-cultural perspective, in contrast with the more psychologically-grounded studies in the literature (Bhattacharjee et al. 2013). In doing so, our research intersects with calls for more research on the social and intersubjective ways that consumers address critical junctures in their brand relationships (Russell & Schau, 2014). Where Russell and Schau focussed on how consumers cope with the loss

of a relationship partner in the context of narrative brands coming to a conclusion – such as a TV show ending – we explored the dynamics of a relationship ending due to celebrity-brand misdeeds. Brand breakups without perceived wrongdoing, such as those outlined by Russell and Schau (2014), are processed differently to those when the brand is perceived as having expressly transgressed. By exploring how self-identifying fans engage in processes of externalization, flagellation, and sublation as part of their shared experience of para-loveshock, we revealed the importance of "performing" a celebrity-brand break-up within the wider social currents of cancel culture. Our conceptualization makes two contributions to business research.

First, while others have highlighted the willingness of consumers to reconstrue and overturn a brand's missteps when it aggrieves them (Parmentier & Fischer, 2015; Weijo et al., 2019), our work reveals that consumers retain and invoke their grief in performative ways when motivated to break up with a brand. Previously, Weijo et al. (2019) reported that "consumer coping efforts usually take a more active approach and seek to realign the brand relationship by overturning perceived transgressions" (p.129). Parmentier and Fischer (2015) suggested consumers who engage in various coping practices do so in the hope that they can "attract the attention of, and help correct, perceived missteps made by managers of a brand they have greatly enjoyed" (p.1247). Although consumers' efforts to cope with and overturn brand transgressions provide important insights for researchers, we must not lose sight of consumers' actions when they do not seek resolution, or offer forgiveness, for wrongdoing. In the contemporary climate of cancel culture, with its zeal for ideological purity and blanket intolerance for all misconduct, maintaining one's identification as a fan becomes less tenable and requires careful negotiation following celebrity transgression. In this paper, we have explored how love-shocked fans see the wrongdoing of a celebrity-brand as an opportunity for self-expression, self-understanding and a re-writing of their identity.

Giddens (1992: 103) mentions "becoming resigned to the break...bidding goodbye" as a crucial predicate to the experience of loveshock. With our study, we see fans operationalize this resignation at a parasocial level through the withdrawal of their support from a celebrity-brand rather than some ethos to redeem it. Moreover, our findings can be read as fans "playing up", "playing to" or "playing with" how much their withdrawal of support hurts as a means to tacitly legitimize, enfranchise and ultimately reify the dissolution of their imaginary relationships. Fans' handling of parasocial trauma

might thus be understood as expressive rather than palliative as it signals the significance of their fandom and its erasure to both themselves and others.

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

Beyond the role that physical pain can play in reminding consumers of the realness of their corporeality, our lesson for business research is that emotional pain serves the function of convincing consumers of the realness of their fantasies. Consumers might turn to physically painful experiences offered by market intermediaries, such as CrossFit or Tough Mudder when seeking a dose of unfiltered corporal reality (Scott et al. 2017). However, when seeking to sustain or revise a coherent, albeit fictive, narrative (such as fandom), emotionally painful events in the marketplace like celebrity-brand transgression offer consumers a social drama to participate in, negotiate with, and integrate to their projects of identity making and breaking.

Our thinking in these respects is also consistent with nascent work in consumer research that identifies emotions as rhetorically oriented, discursive categories that can be drawn upon to perform social actions in the marketplace (Gopaldas, 2014; Valor et al., 2021). Following Gopaldas' (2014, p.1000) identification of broad sentiments that can exist in the marketplace like "contempt for villains" or "concern for victims" and Valor et al.'s (2021, p.638) calls that we pay closer attention to how these "broad marketplace sentiments operate downstream", we identify the expressive functions of emotional pain at the level of the individual. It is at this point of lived experience that we can begin to clearly unpick the performative dimensions of emotions when consumers face celebrity-brand transgressions in their day-to-day lives.

6.8 CONCLUSION & IMPLICATIONS

With the ongoing acceleration of scrutiny, boycotting, and cancel culture, understanding how fan identities are maintained, rejected, or altered following celebrity transgression remains a crucial but overlooked area of consideration for business research and celebrity management studies. Our research has shown that consumers who identify strongly as fans engage in a number of tactics – externalization, flagellation, and sublation – to negotiate their feelings about celebrity transgressors amongst a wider culture of cancellation. Just as feelings of adoration are crucial to their parasocial attachment to celebrities, arguably so too are fans' feelings of heartbreak or betrayal during times of transgression. Recognizing how consumers perform and legitimize these feelings helps to sensitize managers in charge of celebrity-brands to the importance of fans' identity work. A key lesson for management is that fans need space to perform their grief and heartbreak following their celebrity's transgressions as this helps them to preserve the illusion of their parasocial relationship with the celebrity.

Another lesson is that committed fans might not seek resolution or forgiveness for the transgressor but will accept relationship dissolution as an opportunity for self-expression, self-understanding, and re-writing of their identities. Management of celebrity transgression should thus not be directed solely to rehabilitating the celebrity-brand's image but should enable fans to exercise their grief which helps to preserve the illusion of closeness in their retroactive relationship with the celebrity and his or her work. Furthermore, the act of sublation where fans allow their personal feelings about a specific

transgressor to be abstracted and superseded by conversations about wider moral topics has broader market ramifications that managers should be aware of. By querying whether immoral behaviours are unique to a particular celebrity-brand, fans draw critical attention to the market- or industry-wide conditions that are conducive to immorality. The lesson for managers is that fans' efforts to negotiate and sublate their feelings about the transgression of one celebrity-brand might result in attention being drawn to the crisis-provoking events of others in the celebrity business, creating a domino effect. Future research is required to understand how celebrity managers develop crisis management and damage control strategies from fans' break-ups within a wider culture of cancelation.

Future research is also required to determine whether fans' break-ups with a celebrity transgressor are permanent or whether factors such as time elapsed or changes in judgements and sentiments will alter how fans feel. Consumer culture already witnessed one high-profile celebrity-brand comeback in the age of #MeToo: comedian Louis CK returned to stand-up comedy less than one year after admitting to sexually harassing a number of women in 2017. More research is required to determine fans' responses and reactions to such cases of celebrity resurgence after their excommunication. Further work, we argue, is needed if fans had previously and performatively expressed their emotional pain in the separation process with a celebrity.

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6.10 Summary and Reflections to Chapter 6

Article 4 (Chapter 6) moved from exploring binge-watchers who engage with a story world for an escape to focus on the fan relationship with an actor starring in a bingeable TV show. The article explores how fan relations with a celebrity-brand can be unsettled by threats to consumer's fandom. An actor's performance in the portrayal of a character on screen and adoring the same actor off screen has contributed to consumers enjoyment and escapism of *HoC*. Changes to this relationship, caused when the admired actor committed a violation altered the desire to binge-watch and escape into the world of *HoC*.

It transpired from the first stage of the data collection process that many of the participants were first drawn to watching *HoC* because of the presence of the Oscar Award winning actor, Kevin Spacey. The participants had already watched seasons 1–3 of *HoC* (2013-15) before this study commenced and many of the participants were Spacey fans when I first started collecting the data in 2016. A number of the participants spoke of undergoing a gradual transition over the course of bingeing *HoC* that started from having an initial interest in the actor to becoming fully fledged fans and subsequently sought out Spacey's back catalogue of films and purchased associated film memorabilia. Their Spacey interest extended beyond simply admiring his acting performances and they were interested in Spacey himself, the real person. A theme of article 1 (Chapter 3) was combatting the post-binge blues when a season finishes, and during this interim, waiting for a new season of *HoC* to 'drop', participants spoke of discovering more about Spacey. This included reading and joining Spacey fan-related pages to contribute to discussions about his performances in his various films and *HoC*.

Fandom literature has focused on consumers' specific devotion and attachment to certain texts or celebrities (Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 1992) and Hills (2005) suggests attention is needed to investigate how fans "find" their favoured fan object. Binge-watching and spending almost 13 hours of each season watching and revelling in a particular actor's art is conducive to "becoming a fan". Hills (2005) suggests that when someone is listening to a certain band, or watching a movie, something can just "click" with the audience at any given moment and sometimes there is no mystical or romantic discourse on how someone becomes a fan, it is simply that "one day… it just clicked" (p.812). Many of the participants experienced that "just clicked" moment and they frequently referenced Spacey's monologues direct to camera in *HoC* as a time that they were so enthralled by

Spacey, they became fans. Remaining dedicated to *HoC* and watching him intently enabled a conversion process for a number of participants, from viewer into fan. His performances in *HoC* has a double-loop effect and his presence and performances in the show itself made it even more binge-worthy and a reason to watch.

A large number of participants felt like they knew Spacey and had developed an emotional attachment with him, despite having never met him in person. Drawing on article 3, the research revealed how unexpected events can disrupt the schemas we use to make sense of things, and this thinking was extended to a disruptive event, such as transgression. A wrong-doing can upset and unsettle fans' relationship with a celebrity-brand. Experiencing para-loveshock and falling out of love with a celebrity-brand has implications for escapism. Article 4 acknowledges that fans want a complete separation from Spacey. The real, private person underneath the performer can elicit emotional responses such as disgust, hurt and disappointment and the stronger these emotions are felt, there is less of a desire to engage with and escape through a narrative text in which they star. Fans in my study are either cautious, or completely rule out engaging with his texts. Suspension of disbelief may be challenged if consumers do engage with texts starring Spacey and an inability or failure to overlook Spacey's transgressions may result in the viewer being drawn out of the narrative world. Instead they are thinking more about Spacey's allegations and the ability to immerse oneself fully and mentally into the narrative world is significantly disrupted.

Chapter 7 Discussion

This chapter provides a summary of the findings of the four articles and overall contribution of the thesis, followed by a discussion of the additional contributions of this study. I then consider the societal implications, followed by limitations of the study as well as avenues for future research. Thereafter, I make brief concluding remarks in the final section.

7.1 Summary of Publications and Overall Contribution

Overall, the thesis set out to deepen and extend our contextualisation of escapism within consumer research. Many previous accounts of consumer escapism have located escapist experiences within temporary, discrete and most typically extraordinary pockets of the marketplace that sit outside of the humdrum of everyday life (Belk and Costa, 1998; Canniford and Shankar, 2013; Celsi et al., 1993; Scott et al, 2017). Cova et al. (2018), in providing a review and interpretation of the consumer escapism literature, conclude that ultimately, the common denominator amongst various escapist experiences is our desire "to yank ourselves out of this world" (p.459). This thesis has departed from that view to show how the escapes that consumers undertake are not entirely solid or secure enough to function as total abandonment of the ordinary world. Escapism has been shown to be integrated into and interactive with the everyday lives and environments we occupy, taking place intimately within contexts we ordinarily find ourselves in, while also being influenced by remote circumstances or events that are not necessarily felt or encountered by consumers in any local sense.

The first two papers of the thesis deepen the contextualisation of escapism in consumer research by delving further into the idiosyncrasies of individual consumers' life-worlds that motivate, impede and facilitate their efforts to "get lost" in a narrative world. The latter two papers of the thesis extend our contextualisation of escapism by moving beyond the personal horizon of the consumer to account for the importance of wider conditions that need to be in place for a consumer to "become lost". Those wider conditions conducive to escapism can include the social and political fabric that make up one's lived reality, or the celebrities that sustain the identity-investments of one's lived reality. Article 3 (Chapter 5) explored how the breakdown of a taken-for-granted

liberal status quo since 2016 (with the election of Donald Trump as US President and the victory of the Leave contingent in the UK's EU referendum) challenged the stability and knowability of the world from which consumers would previously escape from. Subsequently, article 4 (Chapter 6) explored how the breakdown of fandom (caused by a celebrity misdemeanour) challenged the foci of interest and commitment that must pre-exist for escapism to take place. Altogether, external threats to consumer's fandom, real-world events, and personal circumstances can impact upon escapism and anxiety can arise before, during and after an escapist experience.

Research on escapism has tended to focus on what happens during the escape (Kerrigan et al., 2014; Kozinets, et al., 2004; Kuo et al., 2016) whereas this thesis has also paid attention to what happens before, after, and around the escape. The thesis has demonstrated how escapism does not function as an arbitrary or acontextual pursuit under the total volition of individuals or groups. Rather, the more contextualised focus of the thesis reveals that an escape may operate differently to what has gone before, or what consumers may expect depending on a suite of conditions. Article 3 (Chapter 5) demonstrated that in advance of an escape, consumers are anxious about what the escape might be about and start to consider and factor in the possibility that an escape can deliver unexpected outcomes or effects. This can be an unsettling process as consumers realise they are not fully in control of their escapes. Both articles 2 and 3 (Chapters 4 and 5) illustrate how unease and worry can emerge after an escape and a return to reality can prompt a coming togetherness by consumers to probe and problematize the effects of an escape.

Furthermore, while previous research has positioned escapism through TV consumption as a fairly trivial activity, "passive" (Kuo et al., 2016), undemanding and "mindless" (Russell et al., 2004) and "mundane" (Cova et al., 2018), this thesis has shown how an activity as humdrum as binge-watching, requires significant mental effort on the part of the consumer to enact an escape. An escape can be mentally strenuous and challenging and can be loaded with tension and anxieties stemming from personal and wider world concerns. In extraordinary experiences that offer an escape - such as surfing the ocean's waves (Canniford and Shankar, 2013) or enduring obstacle challenges (Scott et al., 2017) - attention is directed to the visceral intensity and the physicality of the settings. These extraordinary experiences are typically more corporal with active bodily participation and flow taking precedence (Arnould and Price, 1993;

Celsi et al., 1993), over the reception of discourse, images, and stories. This has created a dichotomy between what Cova and colleagues (2018) describe as a more physical, *warlike* escape and more *mundane* forms of escapism. In mundane forms of escape, physicality is not considered significant, and mental absorption and stimulation is much greater. This thesis posits that the serious cognitive effort that is called upon to escape into a story world, and the summoning of mental and cognitive energy is not necessarily something that is routine, taken-for-granted, or easily achieved. An individual consumer may not necessarily be mentally capable of bracketing away personal trauma, emotional upset and concerns about more remote issues that are occurring in the wider world when they seek escape. Accordingly, this thesis posits that escapism is more complex and extensive than previously theorised.

Overall, this study has made an important theoretical contribution, showing how the worlds that consumers seek to escape into are porous and unstable leading to a heterogeneity of emotional and cognitive consequences. The places consumers escape to are not hermetically sealed domains, protected from events and situations occurring in the real world, and nor do they consistently operate in the same way as they may have done on previous occasions. Even the most unreal, utopian or fantasy worlds used for an escape (Kozinets, 2001; Seregina and Weijo, 2017) can engage with real-world dilemmas and problems, and inevitably an escape can highlight features of one's original world that are more problematic. Previous research has revealed how an escape into other worlds is considered a retreat into safe and static environments, pleasurable dream-lands (Cova et al., 2018) that are non-threatening in comparison to the real-world (Nell, 2002). These supposed safe environs have been conceptualised as a haven where worries faced in everyday life can temporarily disappear (Cova et al., 2018). This thesis posits that consumers can carry worries and anxieties with them on their escapades, shaping their experience of escapism in unpredictable ways and catalysing immediate and delayed effects that may be unintended and consequential. No matter how determined consumers might be to immerse themselves into an escapist experience, that experience is by itself determined by what consumers seek to escape. Escapism cannot always erect total boundaries between its own sites of play and the reality they offer respite from. First, a political drama such as *HoC*, no matter how enthralling its plotlines may be, there will forever be tethers between the show and the politics of the real world. Second, regardless of how captivating an on-screen character may be, he or

she is still hostage to the imperfections of the real-world actor who personifies it. Third, no matter the joys achieved from escaping reality through the screen, a consumer must still contend with the hard truth that they cannot absolutely and permanently escape through that medium. The things they seek shelter from are still there when they return from a binge. Escapism is not negated by these deadlocks but very much integrates and assimilates with them, creating a complex tapestry of social and emotional effects.

Previous accounts in consumer escapism have placed an overemphasis on dualities (Kerrigan, 2018) including, real *versus* unreal, present *versus* future, known *versus* unknown, structure *versus* anti-structure. My thesis has contributed to understanding that escapism is more granular than these distinct dualities suggest, and shows how consumers navigate a continuum between these dichotomies. Consumers will draw on what they have experienced in reality, even if they escape into an idealised future for example. An escape is couched in reality and escapism can help us better understand our present circumstances as we seek ways to orientate or navigate ourselves in a world that consumers must return to after an escape. This study suggests that sometimes tensions and anxiety can arise from an inability to completely forget reality, despite really wanting to. Tensions are also evident because consumers may not be able to wholly access a fully-fledged escapist experience like they used too, and they are caught between reality and escapist worlds and the dualities previously theorised are less apparent.

Each of the four articles have outlined their individual contributions to the escapist and fan literature, and the following section outlines the additional contribution of this thesis.

7.2 Additional Contributions

This thesis has made additional contributions that firstly relate to how time spent binge-watching and escaping is experienced. This thesis contributes that the measurement of time itself is something consumers seek an escape from (Section 7.2.1) and finally this thesis makes an additional contribution on the importance and interlinked nature of fandom (Section 7.2.2).

7.2.1 Contribution to ‘time’ Literature

This study provides a renewed understanding of the role of time in an escapist experience and makes the contribution that an escape can lead to distortions of time and more specifically an abandonment of conventional measurements of time (hours and minutes). An escape provides an opportunity to step away from conventional measures of time that govern and structure consumers' everyday lives to instead experience time based on the consumption activity under scope that provides an escape. For example, in the case of binge-watching, time is less about hours spent watching a TV season, and time is considered in terms of the number of episodes watched and through technological consumption, consumers are able to shape their experience of time (Robinson et al., 2021). Canniford and Shankar (2013) revealed how the experience of time is shaped by the temporal logic in which the consumer is immersed, and binge-watching, has been positioned as a speedy activity (Feiereisen et al., 2020; Woolley and Sharif, 2019), often consumed at pace, watching multiple episodes in succession, fast-forwarding credits and consuming an entire season in a relatively short time period. Consumers can alter their temporal rhythms (Woermann and Rokka, 2015) and during a binge, consumers may decide to watch at a slower of faster pace. Article 1 (Chapter 3) revealed that consumers prefer to savour the last couple of episodes to avoid post-binge *malaise* and adopt deceleration practices. By slowing down and decelerating their viewing patterns, viewers are able to take the show's intricate details, that they may otherwise miss when caught up in the mode of binging of continual episodes. Rather than it being an experience of time passing more slowly (Husemann and Eckhardt, 2019) deceleration is a slowing down of the number of episodes watched and spacing out the viewing of episodes. Article 1 (Chapter 3) specifically reveals how a binge is not necessarily considered lengthy, despite consumers sitting and watching a screen for almost 13 hours. Deep immersion into a continuing story world distorts and relegates time into the background, and in the article we posit that time almost seems not to exist.

In article 2 (Chapter 4) losing track of time occurs and time itself is up for scrutiny, as conventional modes of time are replaced and understood by the number of episodes watched and an escape can entail a forgetting or a release from time itself. This logic can be applied to other contexts, for example, replacing time with distance ran or travelled on a Fitbit, time spent is considered in terms of trophies won on a videogame, and a night out is measured by the number glasses of wine consumed at a bar. This is important, particularly as so much of our daily lives is structured around time (working

9-5, your package will be delivered in the next hour, your queue times is 50 minutes). It is a logical assertion that consumers who seek an escape from their burdens and roles in everyday life, also desire an escape from time itself which is so closely intertwined with, and structures many of consumers' responsibilities.

7.2.2 Contribution to Fandom Literature

In the same way that a viewers increased exposure to a TV personality can lead to the development of a parasocial relationship (Horton and Wohl, 1956), binge-watching can be a gateway to fandom. Watching particular actors in a TV show for sustained periods of time can lead to a viewer becoming a fan of an actor (Shim and Kim, 2018). Binge-watching can be a means to satisfy fandom desires too, and fandom interests formed with an actor provide a compelling reason to binge a particular TV show. However, the reverse is also apparent and a violation by an actor, or a celebrity-brand provides a compelling reason not to watch and engage with an actor's work, and fans seek to publicly perform this. The thesis has contributed to fandom literature with the finding that fans of a celebrity-brand use a transgression of a beloved celebrity to prove and legitimise the extent of their fandom. Previous consumer research has explored the special emotional bond that fans form, build and experience with an admired subject of their fandom, and is a way of distinguishing fans from non-fans (O'Guinn, 1991; Wohlfeil et al., 2019). Fans are keen to exhibit their fan interest and admiration of a celebrity-brand to others, as a way of showing they are genuine, real fans (Caldwell and Henry, 2009; Kozinets, 2001). This thesis posits that when a celebrity-brand loses their star appeal, status, power and legitimacy to inhabit a public role, as a result of a violation or transgression, fans enrol themselves in this drama as a way of proving they are genuine, legitimate fans. Their enactment or role in the descent of a celebrity-brand provides a way for fans to prove the extent of their fandom. In contrast to previous research that has approached fans as "victims" and recipients of a celebrity-brand wrongdoing, this thesis positions fans as active participants who are willing to participate in, and even indulge in, the demise of an admired celebrity-brand for the sake of maintaining and protecting one's identity investment.

7.3 Societal Implications

Binge-watching is a relatively new practice and is largely attributable to technological advances and possibilities of the last two decades. VOD and streaming has been positioned as the democratisation of access and culture (Hills, 2013; Jenner 2016), when previously consumers were beholden to the physical access of films and TV shows on DVD and video after their initial cinema release. The idea of giving consumers greater access to content and choice is something Netflix and other VOD providers have used to position themselves as being progressive and being able to entertain ourselves for hours is marketized as being something that is meaningful in our otherwise mundane lives (Cronin and Fitchett, 2021). Ultimately, VOD providers are creating content and experiences to keep viewers binge-watching on their platform for longer. As reported in *The Guardian* (2017) when asked who Netflix saw as their biggest competitor, Chief Executive, Reed Hastings responded, "you know, think about it, when you watch a show from Netflix and you get addicted to it, you stay up late at night. We're competing with sleep" (Hern, 2017). Under a capitalist liquid society, anything can be commoditised, including someplace where we go to rest, which for Netflix, sleep is audaciously benchmarked as a competitor. In the current liquid state of consumer culture, escape becomes fully (if not exclusively) realisable through the marketplace (Hewer, 2020). The prospect of escape, if it was not before, is with the ubiquity and pathology of VOD usage now firmly cemented into the fabric of consumerism and consumption logic.

Binge-watching speaks to a throwaway culture, a liquid approach to consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017: 583) that is "ephemeral, access based and dematerialized" and this is facilitated by the rise of technology and digital based practices where choice, immediacy, use, and ease of access are highly prized attributes by consumers. However, as Hewer (2020) suggests, the idea of consumer choice and control is a mere illusion, a new marketised opportunity in a world where paradoxically choice and control are constantly under threat. Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) argue that liquidity is not always beneficial for consumers and it risks diluting our relationships and attachments with brands and communities as we don't own things or create long lasting links with brands and others. In relation to binge-watching consumers are encouraged to binge a show, forget about it and move onto the next one and a new TV season is promoted even before the final credits have rolled. This is not particularly

positive and risks creating a sense of amnesia, whereby nothing is remembered. We exist in a contemporary culture that has a fetish for always doing something and wants us to be involved in an incessant activity of entertainment. Myohanen and Hietanen (2013) in their videography, '*Entertained to Excess*' make the insightful point that consumers are like rats, trained to run all the time, but because of this we fall more deeply into feelings of boredom and emptiness, a point partly explored in article 2 (Chapter 4). Contrast this fast and rather forgetful consumption approach, with HBO's universally acclaimed, police procedural TV series, *The Wire* (2002-2008). *The Wire* rewards viewers for their patience, paying attention to intricate details, watching relationships being teased out, and observing the slow and careful building of character arcs across five seasons is part of the show's appeal (Parker, 2014). This helps to create an experience that is rewarding, enriching and memorable (Holt and Zundel, 2014) and speaks to a more deaccelerated approach to consumption (see Husemann and Eckhardt, 2019) and binge-watching.

Article 1 (Chapter 3) of this thesis and the accompanying videography documents consumers as they sit bleary-eyed, wrapped snugly on their sofa, content that they possess the flexibility and agency to watch a seventh consecutive episode of *HoC at* 2.00am in the morning. On reflection, I am guilty of fetishizing and giving precedence to an agentic consumer, who is rationalised and is at least, apparently, in full control of his or her consumption behaviours and desires. The medium and distribution of television services itself, however, has constraining power over consumer agency. As suggested by Hietanen and Andehn (2018), a text and the way in which it is distributed — in this case Netflix producing and releasing an entire season of *HoC* — is something that has been carefully commodified to produce an expected experience. The consumer has a willing desire to go along with this, as it "provides the frame of possibilities of our unconscious desire" (Heitanen and Andehn, 2018: 544). We must recognise that the pursuit of pleasures and the heightened, positive experiences associated with bingeing a favourite show, are not necessarily innocent practices, but are carefully orchestrated and commodified by Netflix to reflect our desires and to help alleviate our concerns. Feeling lonely? Binge *HoC* for hours to form imaginary friendships and deep fandom with Kevin Spacey. Worried about the state of the real-world? Don't worry we will remind you of sensible politics and governance in *HoC*. Falling out of love with Spacey after his transgressions? We will remove him for you, and this will help you to sublate your

feelings. The power and mechanisms that Netflix employ risk creating dependencies for consumers.

As was explored in article 2 (Chapter 4), a further societal implication is that binge-watching encourages consumers to retreat into a viewing world. A binge retreat can acts as a form of insulation and invites viewers to turn away from communal ties and feelings of interpersonal connectedness, towards leading increasingly privatised consumer lifestyles and this can have implications for social anxiety (Sun and Chang, 2021). Sun and Chang (2021) suggest that on one hand adults with anxiety are likely to spend more time binge-watching, and on the other-hand, binge-watching excessively can lead to social interaction anxiety and symptoms of loneliness. This has led me to consider, what is being sacrificed from prolonged bouts of binge-watching? Binge-watching is done at the expense of what else? In article 2 (Chapter 4), a theme is the existential emptiness that comes from committing to a binge. A further societal implication is that binge-watching is designed in such a way to deviate consumers away from opportunities to truly live their lives, although this is not necessarily a new concern. TV has long been considered as "gum for eyes" and an "idiot box" (Spigel, 1992: 53) that colonizes people's minds and leisure time. Notwithstanding, there are potential risks to mental health in reducing socialisation and foregoing real genuine human relations, and consumers need to be cautious and critical when the next "binge-worthy" show drops that we are informed is worthy of our attention.

7.4 Limitations

A main limitation of this study lies in the context-dependent nature of the research inquiry, namely the choice of TV shows used to explore escapism. *HoC* is a show that is premised on the US politic brand of capitalist liberal democracy and the show is dominated by a predominantly white middle class elite who are typically characterised as power hungry, meritocratic, and cutthroat individualists. Privilege, vying for positions of power, radical self-reliance, and the wheeling and dealing of legislative processes are familiar tropes throughout the entire six seasons. Article 2 (Chapter 4) documents how the TV show *Mad Men* was watched for an escape between seasons of *HoC* but, at its core, it shares many of the pressed-suit aesthetics and power-fetishizing, upwardly mobile white masculinist fantasies as *HoC*. At a more

cinematographic level, both are intentionally very stylish, executed with a vision to artistically impress. The rise of so-called *quality television series*, or the new golden era of TV (Jenner, 2016) has increased the cultural legitimacy of TV (McCracken, 2013) and shows like *Mad Men* and *HoC* have been compared to "highbrow art" (De Keere et al., 2020: 631). In content and execution, one might reasonably infer that these shows centre around a particular fantasy of the upper middle classes *for* middle-class audiences and are, accordingly, somewhat exclusionary. Somebody watching these shows from a different socio-economic background may have a totally different consumption experience to the intended middle-class cadre of fans. If a consumer is unable to connect with and relate to the characters and plot points, what does this mean for escapism? An exploration of different genres of TV shows for different audiences of different backgrounds may have provided critical and important insights into escapism.

Following those points, another limitation is that the participants in this study all had access and relative freedom to indulge in binge-watching and greater consideration could have been given to those consumers without the privileges that enable binge-watching such as that described in this research. This limitation was amplified by snowball sampling methods (see Chapter 2, section 2.4.1) whereby the majority of the informants are all middle-class, largely live alone and do not have young children. Furthermore, the sample were all able to afford the technology and VOD subscription prices to facilitate a binge, and they had the flexibility and time to immerse themselves into narrative worlds. This was highlighted in articles 1 and 2, where participants committed to a binge for long time periods, able to exercise the freedom to stay up late to binge-watch a few more episodes. A more diverse sample of participants may have shed light on what happens to a category of consumers that do not have access to VOD services, and it will be interesting to look at other contexts and forms of escape for consumers without access to technology and subscription services. The voices of marginalised and working-class consumers are missing from this study, and when consumers are working long hours, juggling responsibilities and do not possess the luxury of free, personal time this may result in different types of escape being sought out and desired. A more representative account of binge-watching across diverse socio-economic backgrounds and lifestyle commitments may have turned up alternative insights.

My own background as a fan of both *HoC* and Kevin Spacey has played a role in this study. It is possible that the data collection procedures, context as well as the analysis procedures have been influenced by my subject positioning. My own position of the scholar-fan, or aca-fan where the researcher is simultaneously an academic and a fan (Jenkins, 2002) may be limiting. However, Cristofari and Guitton (2017) suggest aca-fan refers to an academic that is studying a specific fan community, such as internet chat rooms and fan forums, or taking an active part in the fan convention scene (Kozinets, 2001; Sandvoss, 2005). I was not studying a fan community *per se*, I was researching discrete fans, but nonetheless I tried to remain somewhat distant to my participants in relation to sharing my fan thoughts and feelings. Although I mentioned that I was going to watch *HoC*, and I was a Spacey fan in the various stages of data collection, I was conscious of trying to mute my own fan thoughts and personal feelings during the data collection processes. Although I cannot proclaim to have conducted this research in an entirely objective vacuum, disconnected from my own fan interests and personal biography, I tried to limit my own personal influences, concerning my fan positioning, and my supervisors also analysed the data that was collected.

7.5 Avenues for Future Research

Based on the research findings and research limitations, there are several potential avenues for future research. The particularism of doing a micro-ethnography is that this thesis explored and captured binge-watching of a particular show, at a particular moment in time, and the binges largely took place in a domestic environment. Naturally, the ways consumers binge-watch and the shows they elect to watch will continue to evolve and change over time and binge-watching and escapism might be experienced differently in the future. Future studies may want to explore binge-watchers as they go between bingeing on different shows, rather than being fixated on dedication to a singular text, such has been the focus of this thesis. Do consumers use different shows for different types of escape? How do consumers manage their parasocial relations and fan admirations with actors and characters when they are consuming multiple different shows at any given period? Is an escape experienced any differently when a consumer squeezes in an episode on a busy commute?

Articles 1 and 2 (Chapters 3 and 4) approached binge-watching as something profoundly exciting, granting consumers the opportunity to become lost in story worlds for much greater periods than once thought possible. The articles highlight the anticipation and thrill of a binge-watch experience and future research might seek to investigate what happens to escapism through binge-watching, if the phenomena of binge-watching is no longer consider to be novel? What happens if binge-watching becomes more of a normalised part of consumer culture? Rather than seeking to explore excesses and heightened, positive experiences, consumer researchers might explore what it means for escapism if this once distinctive mode of consumption becomes contingent, quotidian, and quite simply normal?

As mentioned in the previous section, more attention could be paid to different socio-economic groups, demographics and status of informants to understand what an escape means for these different groups of consumers. The importance of class, gender, ethnicity, race, religion, occupation and education could be further examined. The research has tended to focus on individuals who watch alone, and future studies could be expended to focus on couples and families that binge together to investigate how a collective approach to bingeing is undertaken and managed alongside family duties and responsibilities that are ongoing in their lives.

Articles 3 and 4 (Chapters 5 and 6) explored the unintended consequences of consumer experiences caused by changing conditions that shape consumers' reality. For viewers in the UK bingeing on *HoC*, the US election of Donald Trump and the UK's decision to leave the European Union in 2016 provided moments of dislocation that had the potential to alter the escapist experience. Given the recent impact of Covid-19 there are further questions concerning how unpredictable and extreme changes that will continue to occur in the world can affect an escapist experience. It will be theoretically interesting to explore how different changing conditions can plague and alter the escapist experience. Consideration should be given to where in the world the audience are watching a show and how might changing conditions influence how they interpret a text for escapism purposes. Further research into different socio-economic groups, who escape with different TV shows in different contexts would be interesting. Whilst this study focused on a specific TV show (*HoC*) other genres and shows could be explored to delve deeper into the issue of changing conditions on the escapist experience. I propose that future research into the unintended effects of an escape should consider

further catalysts such as when circumstances in the wider world have the potential to change the outcomes of an escape. Future work could explore whether the powers of escapism might start to fade if worrying realities emerge and exist in the real world, particularly if real world concerns start to infringe and impact on texts used for an escape.

There is a considerable amount of work in consumer research that draws on embodied theory (Hewer and Hamilton, 2010; Goulding et al., 2009; Scott et al., 2017) and focuses on how consumers use their bodies to learn how to be in the world (perform functions, learn skills, routines, suffering). A future avenue for consumer escapism research could be the exploration and role of an embodied experience in escapism. Escapism literature has given more significance to the mental, cognitive processes and emotions of an escape over bodily ones (Kuo et al., 2016; Molesworth, 2009; Russell et al., 2004). Articles 1 and 2 (Chapters 3 and 4) revealed that an escape is set up before it occurs, and consumers drag their quilts into the living room to hunker down with dimmed lights and curtains drawn to create a space that supports an escape and allows consumer to physically relax their bodies and chill. This thesis has shown some embodied experiences, in particular (as shown in articles 1 and 2 (Chapters 3 and 4)) the ways that consumers resist sleep and push their tired minds and bodies into watching just one more episode. Events in a show can cause an embodied reaction, for example, laughter, crying or literally feeling so tense, that we are physically on the edge of our seats and a future direction of research could seek to understand why consumers feel like this and explore what this might mean for consumer escapism. Future research studies could explore how escapism into story worlds has both mental and embodied dimensions.

Furthermore, some of the participants spoke of post-binge feelings such as guilt from binge-watching excessively and article 2 (Chapter 4) explores how a disproportionate amount of binge-watching can be melancholic and lead to feelings of emptiness and anxiety. Some of the participants mentioned that they occasionally felt unable to control themselves and not always able to limit their binge-watching behaviour and patterns. Although it was never the focus of this thesis to study the potential addictive behaviours that might manifest and be encouraged by binge-watching, future research could explore ways consumers might seek to stabilise or curtail their binge-watching practices, if they start to feel it is getting out of control.

7.6 Concluding Remarks

This thesis has explored consumer escapism to better understand how escapism is integrated into consumers' everyday lives and is impacted upon by personal and more macro, wider world concerns. The timing of the undertaking this thesis was hugely significant, and when I started the first round of data collection in early 2016, slow, accumulating worries around Trump being elected and Brexit happening were on the periphery of my participants' consciousness. As the research and study progressed, concerns turned into realities. Upheaval and disruption started to impinge on their understanding of how they thought the world should operate. This disruption was a constant, worrisome background noise and whilst many of these events may appear distant to consumers everyday lives, they eventually entered the sanctuary of their living rooms and ultimately altered the effects of escapism. It would most likely be difficult to replicate this study to capture the specific and surreal geo-politics that occurred at the particular time that this research was conducted, notwithstanding the interwoven nature of a celebrity transgression with a huge social movement against sexual abuse and sexual harassment. These unique, unexpected circumstances altered how escapism was felt and experienced by participants.

By unpacking so closely the myriad and unintended effects of a form of escapism previously considered to be mundane, the aim of the thesis was never to diminish the important effects that an extraordinary experience can provide consumers (see Belk and Costa, 1998; Canniford and Shankar, 2013; Scott et al., 2017). However, it has been an objective of the thesis to expand and deepen our understanding of escapist experiences that closer interact with our everyday lived experiences and operate alongside the rhythms of our daily existence. In particular, escapes are not necessarily experienced in such distant dualities as previously theorised (reality *versus* unreality) and there are no certainties as to what an escape will provide for consumers. I would like to offer a caveat to the discussion by acknowledging that, because of personal experiences and subjective readings of macro-conditions, it is likely that people may have very different escape experiences, even when ostensibly they are subject to the same source consumption experience. We all bring different things into our viewership and our escapes. This thesis has made a case for providing a better understanding of

this, and to consider how escapism interacts with many aspects of consumers' personal lives, whether this is through fandom interests, aspirations, political views, imaginations, sensitivities and relationships. All four articles contain dimensions of these aspects, to show how various interests and personal touchpoints form the make-up of an escape.

Finally, I hope through this thesis to provide inspiration for others to explore and extend our understanding of consumer escapism, and that researchers feel inspired to continue to pursue the use of alternative formats to disseminate research in consumer escapism.

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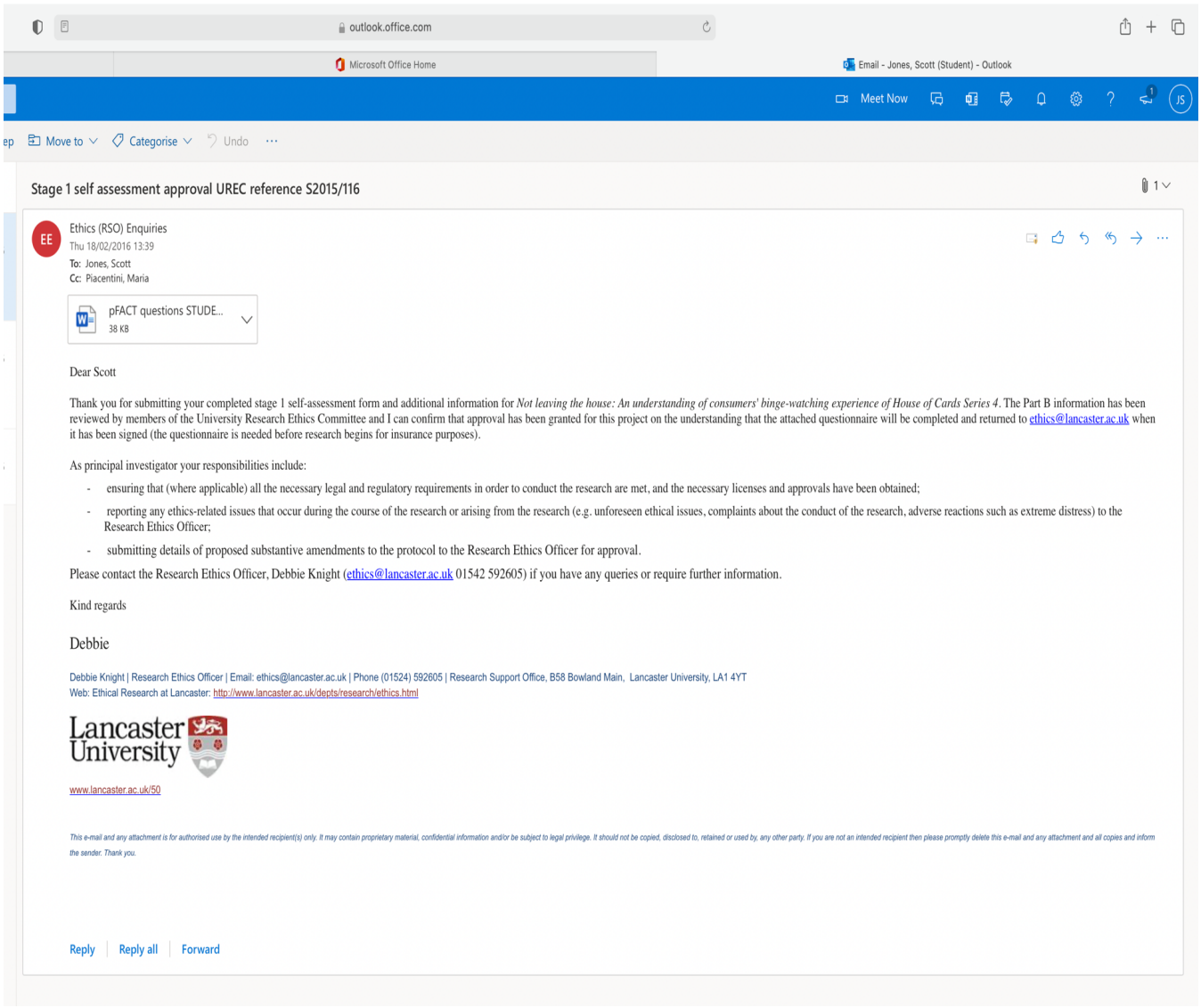
9.0 Appendices

Appendix 1: Ethics Approval



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Stage 1 self assessment approval UREC reference S2015/116

EE Ethics (RSO) Enquiries
Thu 18/02/2016 13:39
To: Jones, Scott
Cc: Piacentini, Maria

pFACT questions STUDE...
38 KB

Dear Scott

Thank you for submitting your completed stage 1 self-assessment form and additional information for *Not leaving the house: An understanding of consumers' binge-watching experience of House of Cards Series 4*. The Part B information has been reviewed by members of the University Research Ethics Committee and I can confirm that approval has been granted for this project on the understanding that the attached questionnaire will be completed and returned to ethics@lancaster.ac.uk when it has been signed (the questionnaire is needed before research begins for insurance purposes).

As principal investigator your responsibilities include:

- ensuring that (where applicable) all the necessary legal and regulatory requirements in order to conduct the research are met, and the necessary licenses and approvals have been obtained;
- reporting any ethics-related issues that occur during the course of the research or arising from the research (e.g. unforeseen ethical issues, complaints about the conduct of the research, adverse reactions such as extreme distress) to the Research Ethics Officer;
- submitting details of proposed substantive amendments to the protocol to the Research Ethics Officer for approval.

Please contact the Research Ethics Officer, Debbie Knight (ethics@lancaster.ac.uk 01542 592605) if you have any queries or require further information.

Kind regards

Debbie

Debbie Knight | Research Ethics Officer | Email: ethics@lancaster.ac.uk | Phone (01524) 592605 | Research Support Office, B58 Bowland Main, Lancaster University, LA1 4YT
Web: Ethical Research at Lancaster: http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/depts/research/ethics.html

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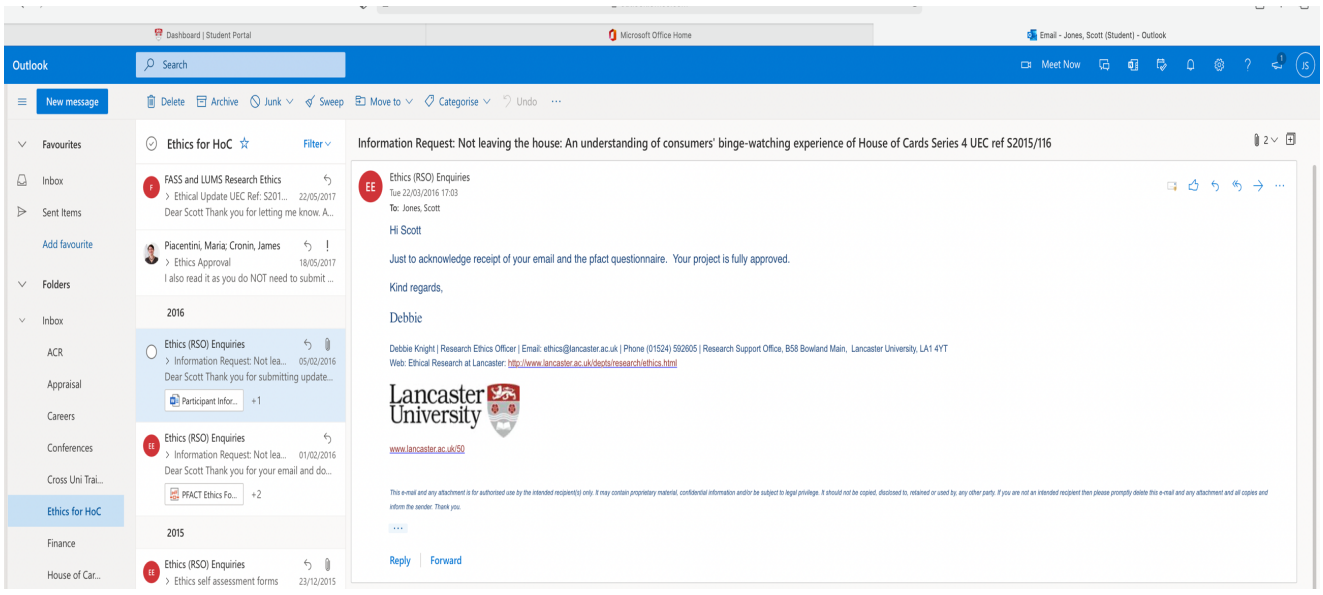

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New message

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Conferences
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Ethics for HoC
Finance
House of Car...

Ethics for HoC

FASS and LUMS Research Ethics — Ethical Update UEC Ref: S201... 22/05/2017
Dear Scott Thank you for letting me know. A...

Piacentini, Maria; Cronin, James — Ethics Approval 18/05/2017
I also read it as you do NOT need to submit ...

2016

Ethics (RSO) Enquiries — Information Request: Not lea... 05/02/2016
Dear Scott Thank you for submitting update...
Participant Infor... +1

Ethics (RSO) Enquiries — Information Request: Not lea... 01/02/2016
Dear Scott Thank you for your email and do...
PFACT Ethics Fo... +2

2015

Ethics (RSO) Enquiries — Ethics self assessment forms 23/12/2015

Information Request: Not leaving the house: An understanding of consumers' binge-watching experience of House of Cards Series 4 UEC ref S2015/116

EE Ethics (RSO) Enquiries
Tue 22/03/2016 17:03
To: Jones, Scott

Hi Scott

Just to acknowledge receipt of your email and the pfact questionnaire. Your project is fully approved.

Kind regards,

Debbie

Debbie Knight | Research Ethics Officer | Email: ethics@lancaster.ac.uk | Phone (01524) 592605 | Research Support Office, B58 Bowland Main, Lancaster University, LA1 4YT
Web: Ethical Research at Lancaster: http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/depts/research/ethics.html

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Reply | Forward

Appendix 2: Participant information sheet

Participant Information Sheet

An exploration of consumers' binge-watching: Not leaving the house: An understanding of consumers' binge-watching patterns and experience of House of Cards. You are invited to take part in this research study. Before you decide to participant, it is important you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Therefore, please take time to carefully read the following information carefully. Please do not hesitate to contact me on the details provided at the end of this document if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like further information.

What is the purpose of the study?

This study forms part of a PhD research project. The study is focused on exploring consumers' planned binge-watching patterns and their experience of binge-watching House of Cards. The study is particularly concerned with the experiences consumers have before the binge-watch, during the binge-watch and after the binge-watch.

Do I qualify to take part?

All participants must be aged 18 or over and be planning to binge-watch House of Cards season four on Netflix on or around the release date of the series. A binge-watch is classified as watching two or more consecutive episodes of the same series in succession (Collins Dictionary, 2015). Participants need access to House of Cards season four on Netflix and a television or viewing device (phone, tablet or computer). If you do not have this equipment please contact the researcher to discuss further options.

What does the study involve?

If you choose to take part in the study you will be asked to participate in an interview before the binge-watch occurs and you will consider why you have planned to binge-watch House of Cards season four. The second in-depth interview with the researcher will take place as immediately as possible, after the binge-watch. Participant

observation may also take place as the researcher observes your binge-watch experience and photographs and video may be taken. Asynchronous text communication may also be used to share your binge-viewing experience. Interviews will be audio recorded (possibility of video recording some interviews) and transcribed by the interviewer following the researcher. If you take part you will be provided with a copy of the interview transcripts and photographs to check they are accurate and you can't be identified from the information provided.

How often will I have to take part, and for how long?

The interview prior to the binge-watch should last for approximately 1 – 1.5 hours. The final part of the study is a post-binge interview will also last for approximately 1 hour. It is envisaged the total time will last approximately 3 hours. Research participants will receive an Amazon gift voucher, to the value of £20. All participants will receive a £20 Amazon gift voucher, and if participants subsequently withdraw having received their voucher they will not be asked to return it.

Where will the study take place?

The location of the interviews will be at a place of your convenience which allows for privacy. The interviews (pre and post binge-watch) will take place at a mutually convenient time. The participant observation will take place at your location of the binge-watch of House of Cards Series four.

If you have any concerns about the study who do I contact?

If you have any concerns or complaints about any aspect of this study, you should ask to speak with the researcher (Scott Jones) who will endeavour to answer your questions or resolve your concerns (contact information below). Any complaints and concerns can also be addressed to the Head of the Department (Marketing): Professor Maria Piacentini, Lancaster University Management School, Lancaster University, Bailrigg, Lancaster, Lancashire, LA1 4YX. Telephone: +44 (0)1524 510686 E-mail: m.piacentini@lancaster.ac.uk

If I participate will any information I disclose be kept confidential?

Once uploaded onto the researchers' computer, audio recordings and photographs will be kept in a password protected file. The information from the interviews will be transcribed, with all identifiable information such as all names (using fictitious names) to ensure you are not identified from the information that you provide, including participant, family, friend, colleague names and specific job titles. At the end of the study you will be emailed a copy of the transcripts and if you have any concerns over others being able to identify you from this information you can contact the researcher as soon as possible to resolve this. The signed consent form will be scanned and kept in a separate folder to the information that you provide as part of the interview, a hard copy will be kept in a locked cabinet and disposed of confidentially once the research project is finished.

How will the information that I provide be used?

The information provided will be used as part of a PhD doctoral thesis that will be publicly available. The findings may also be used and made available in presentations, newspapers and academic journal publications.

Will I have the opportunity to discuss my participation?

Yes. If you have any questions or concerns during the interviews please raise them as soon as possible. Where your concerns occur outside of the interviews or after the study has finished please contact the researcher directly using the details on the last page of the participant information sheet.

Who will have access to the information provided?

The researcher (Scott Jones) will ensure that the information is kept securely. Audio recording from the interviews will be kept in a password protected file that only the researcher has access to. The audio recording will only be listened to by the researcher

and researchers' supervisory team. By signing the consent form, you are agreeing that you are happy with this.

Who is organising and funding the research?

The researcher, Scott Jones is the Chief Investigator and organiser of the study. The study is self-funded and supported by Lancaster University.

Do I have to take part?

No. Participation is voluntary. It is entirely your decision whether to take part or not. If you do take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and asked to sign a consent form. You will be free to withdraw at any time during the study, without providing a reason and without consequence. If you decide that you would rather not participate in this study, please do not respond and no further contact will be made with you regarding this study.

What if I change my mind or want to opt out of taking part during the study?

You are free to withdraw/opt-out of the study at any time, including in the middle of the study, such as during the interview, however, information collected up to the point of withdrawal may still be used in the research. To opt out please just inform the researcher (Scott Jones) as soon as possible.

What happens now?

If you are interested in taking part in the study please complete the participation consent form. A convenient time and location will then be arranged for the first interview.

Thank you for considering taking part in the study and taking time to read this information sheet. If you have any questions or concerns regarding the study, please contact the researcher, Scott Jones using the contact details below.

Contact Details:

Scott Jones

PhD Marketing student

Lancaster University, Lancaster University Management School

Bailrigg, Lancaster, Lancashire , LA1 4YX

Email: s.jones14@lancaster.ac.uk Telephone: 07787552831

Supervisor Details:

Professor Maria Piacentini

Lancaster University, Lancaster University Management School

Office: D43, D - Floor, Charles Carter Building

Tel: +44 (0)1524 510686 m.piacentini@lancaster.ac.uk

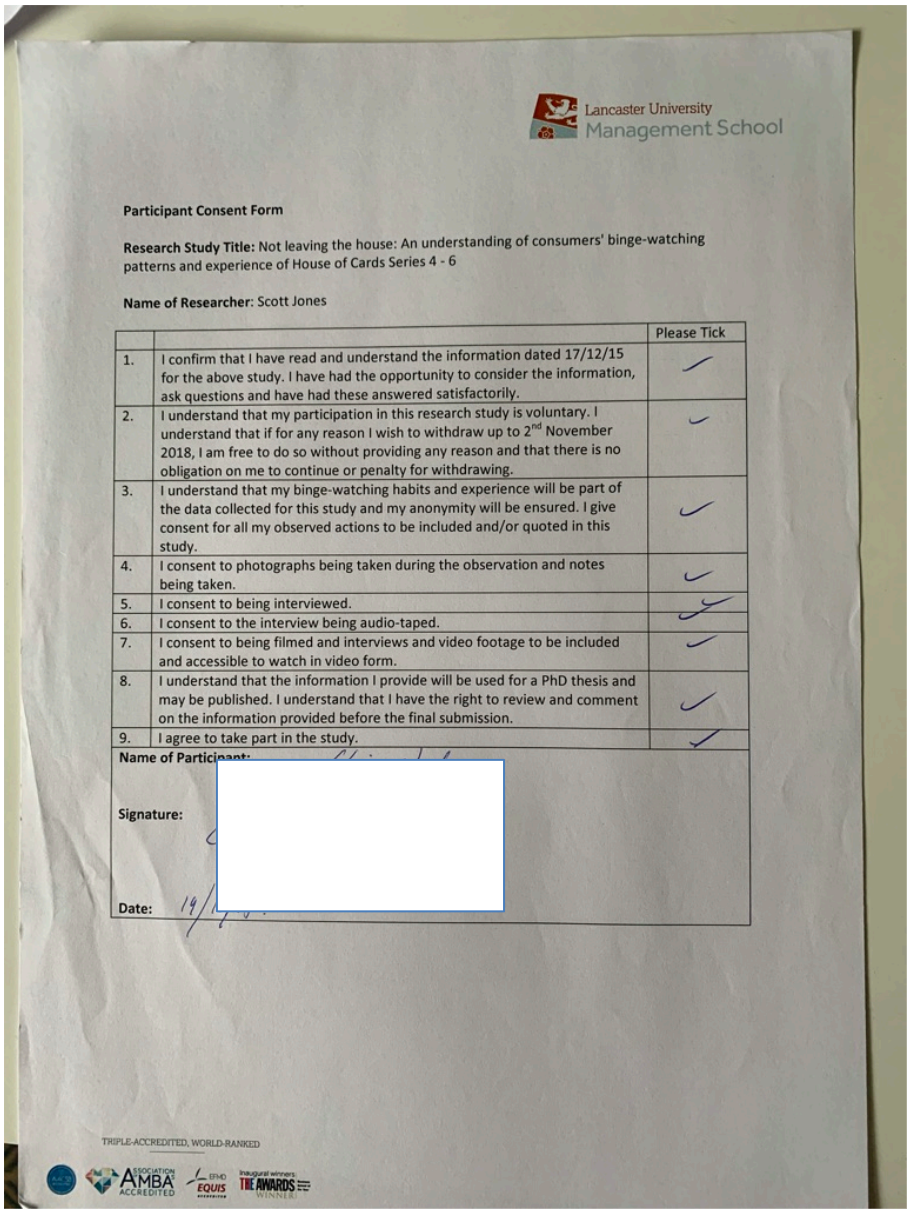
Dr James Cronin

Lancaster University, Lancaster University Management School

Office: D, D - Floor, Charles Carter Building

Tel: +44 (0)1524 510663 j.cronin@lancaster.ac.uk

Appendix 3: Participant consent form



Lancaster University
Management School

Participant Consent Form

Research Study Title: Not leaving the house: An understanding of consumers' binge-watching patterns and experience of House of Cards Series 4 - 6

Name of Researcher: Scott Jones

		Please Tick
1.	I confirm that I have read and understand the information dated 17/12/15 for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	✓
2.	I understand that my participation in this research study is voluntary. I understand that if for any reason I wish to withdraw up to 2nd November 2018, I am free to do so without providing any reason and that there is no obligation on me to continue or penalty for withdrawing.	✓
3.	I understand that my binge-watching habits and experience will be part of the data collected for this study and my anonymity will be ensured. I give consent for all my observed actions to be included and/or quoted in this study.	✓
4.	I consent to photographs being taken during the observation and notes being taken.	✓
5.	I consent to being interviewed.	✓
6.	I consent to the interview being audio-taped.	✓
7.	I consent to being filmed and interviews and video footage to be included and accessible to watch in video form.	✓
8.	I understand that the information I provide will be used for a PhD thesis and may be published. I understand that I have the right to review and comment on the information provided before the final submission.	✓
9.	I agree to take part in the study.	✓

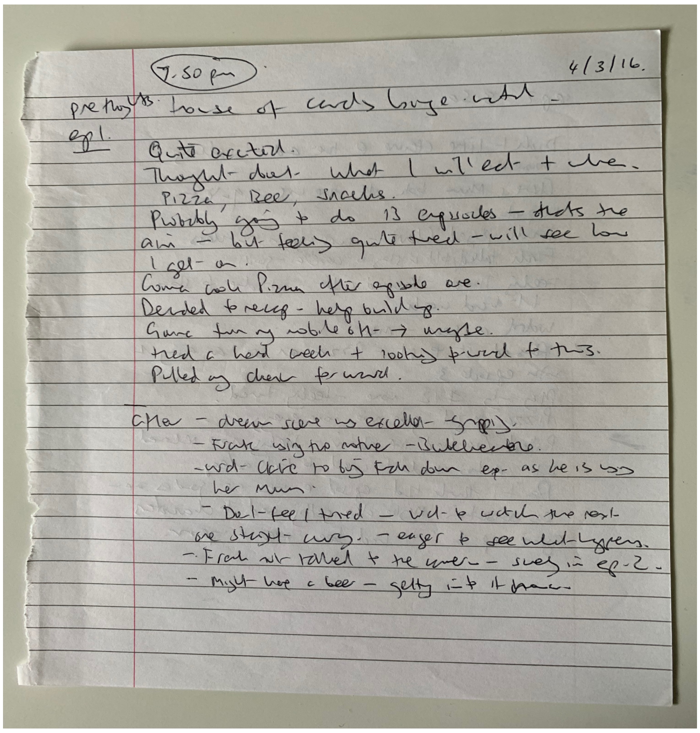
Name of Participant:

Signature:

Date: 19/12/15

TRIPLE-ACCREDITED, WORLD-RANKED

Appendix 4: Sample of Researcher Diary Notes Binge-watch diary notes of HoC



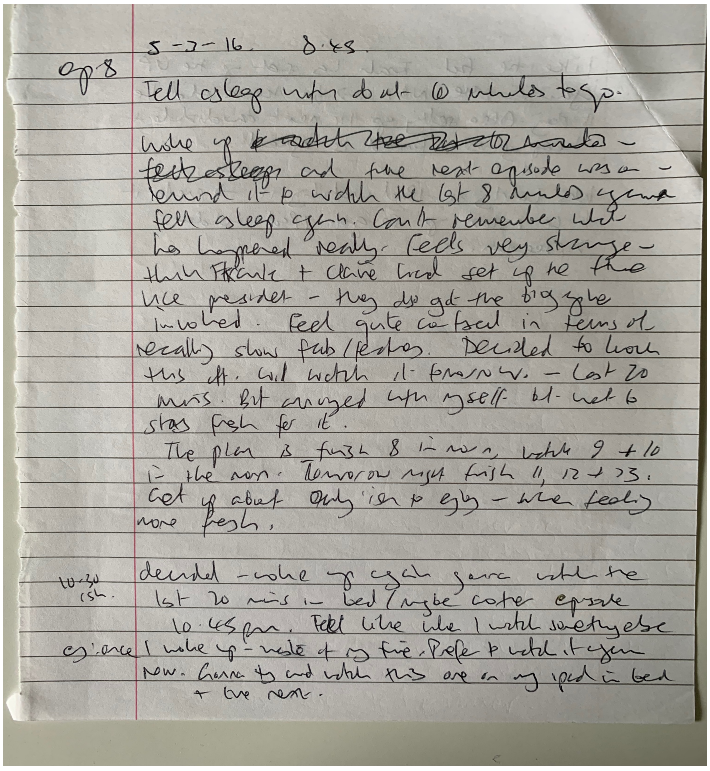
7.50 pm 4/3/16.

pre thoughts. house of cards binge watch –

ep1.

Quite excited.
Thought about what I will eat + drink.
Pizza, Beer, snacks.
Probably going to do 13 episodes – that's the aim – but feeling quite tired – will see how I get on.
Gonna cook Pizza after episode one.
Decided to recap – help building.
Gonna turn my mobile off → airplane.
tried a hard week + looking forward to this.
Pulled my chair forward.

after – dream scene was excellent – gripping.
– Frank using no mother – Butcher...
– want Claire to bring Frank down ep. as he is ... her Mum.
– Don't feel tired – want to watch the next one straight away. – eager to see what happens.
– Frank not talked to the viewer – surely in ep. 2.
– Might have a beer – getting into it more.



5-3-16. 8.45.

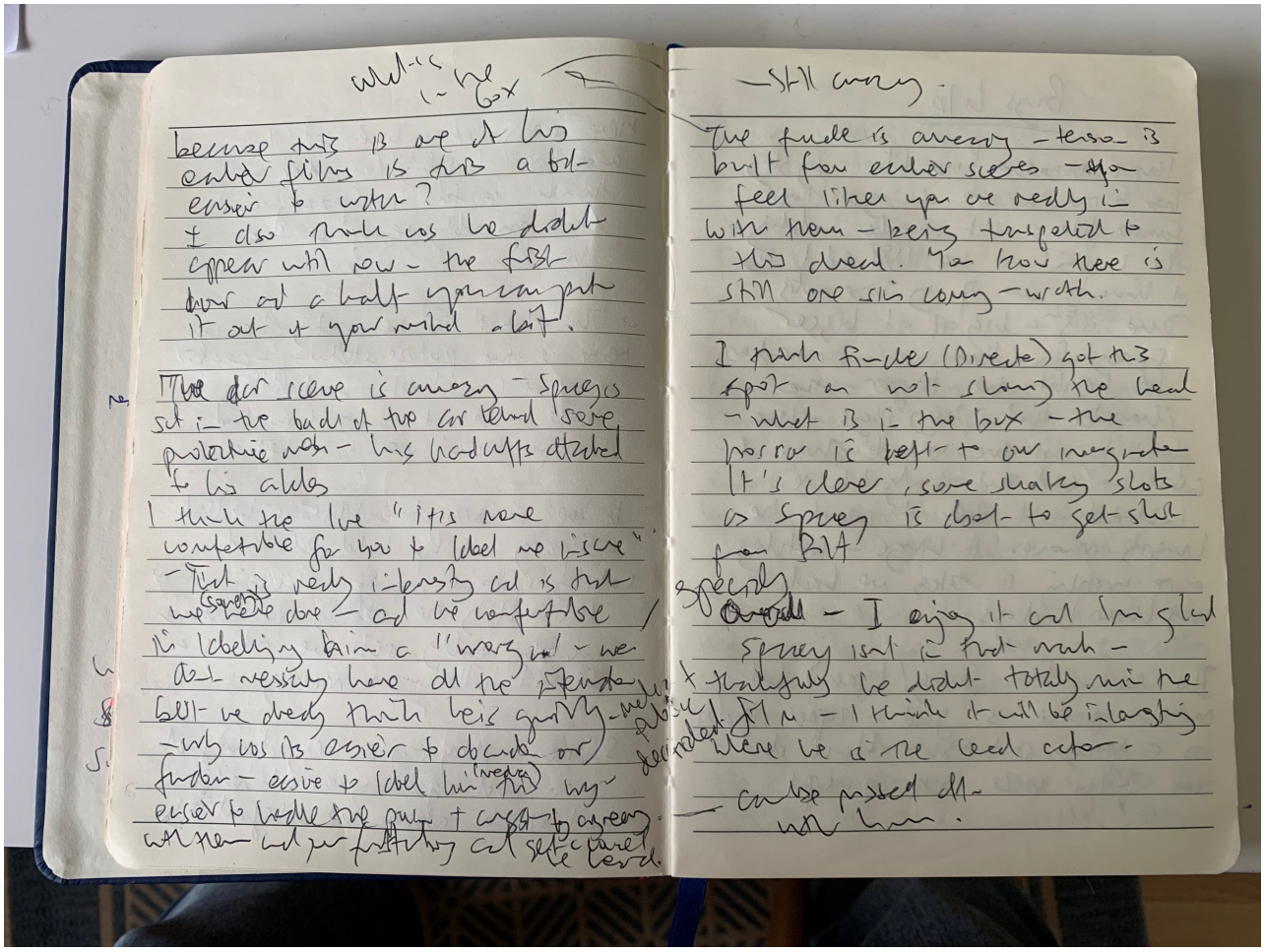
ep 8

Fell asleep with about 10 minutes to go.

Woke up ~~...~~ –
~~fell asleep~~ and the next episode was on – rewind it to watch the last 8 minutes again fell asleep again. Can't remember what has happened really. Feels very strange – think Frank + Claire tried set up the vice president – they do get the big ... involved. Feel quite confused in terms of recalling show facts/details. Decided to leave this off. Will watch it tomorrow. – Last 20 mins. But annoyed with myself. but want to stay fresh for it.
The plan is finish 8 in morn, watch 9 + 10 in the morn. Tomorrow night finish 11, 12 + 13. Get up about 8ish to enjoy – when feeling more fresh.

10.30 ish. decided – woke up again gonna watch the last 20 mins in bed / maybe another episode
10.45pm. Feel like like I watch something else
as once I woke up – wasted of my time. Prefer to watch it again now. Gonna try and watch this one on my ipad in bed + the next.

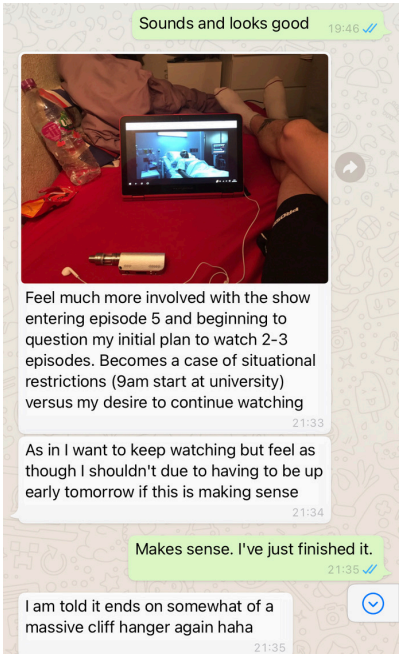
Reconsuming the film Se7en (starring Kevin Spacey). Diary notes, December 2017.



Appendix 5: Sample of Researcher Visual Ethnographic Data (SPI). March, 2016.

Appendix 6: Sample of Participants' Telephonic Communications (text and visual)

Sample of participant telephonic communications– sent during a binge-watch.



Sample of participant telephonic communications– taken after a binge-watch.

Sample of participant telephonic communications– taken after a binge-watch.

Sample of participant telephonic communications – taken during a binge-watch.

Appendix 7: Extract/Sample of Introspective Essay - The Usual Suspects (1995).

17/12.2017

"The greatest trick the devil ever played…"

I was troubled, before I had even inserted the DVD into the player, it felts a bit creepy. This was the movie that ignited my Spacey fandom and this was going to be the first time I had watched it, since the allegations broke. I actually quite nervous and the film is now tarnished in so many ways.

Firstly, there was the sexual abuse allegations made against Spacey, which was a troubling effect on the re-consumption of his work. Secondly, I recently read an interview in the Sunday Times with the actor Gabriel Byrne (starred alongside Spacey in the film, The Usual Suspects) and he mentioned how production of Suspects had to be shut down for two days due to Spacey's predatory behaviour - allegedly he made advances to a young actor on set. When I think about this, and how long the victims of Spacey have probably been silenced - now to have the courage to share their stories and voices is so brave. It is a bit selfish and annoying that I can't watch Spacey with the same zeal and delight like I used too, and I'm really annoyed with him, particularly how he has single handily damaged his best film for the fans - The Usual Suspects. However, you have to reflect and think how the Me-Too Movement has enabled conversations around unwanted sexual advances, and abuse of power to come to light. For Hollywood to silence a young boy for over 20 years as Byrne suggested is absolutely shocking. As a fan, you have to recognise and put that first. There is a hierarchy of victims – firstly the young men he has assaulted and then the fan.

Appendix 8: *Interpretive Consumer Research* (ICR) Workshop, Stockholm, April 2017. Jones, S., Cronin, J., and Piacentini, M.G. (2017). House of Cards and the Surrealist Disruption: What happens when consumers' fantastical pursuits are Trumped by reality.

House of Cards and the Surrealist Disruption:

What happens when consumers' fantastical pursuits are *Trumped* by reality.

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Introduction

"Binge-watching House of Cards is like having a little holiday, entering a kind of bubble, and getting away, but the timing of this series made it feel quite different… House of Cards ignited my interest a lot more in American politics, especially with the US election and Trump. He doesn't seem very Presidential (Trump), not like Frank Underwood (House of Cards, Series 4) and he's more brash than Frank, which is quite disturbing. Television had artistic licence to create fantasy, but when you look outside of it now, real life seems worse."

House of Cards fan, March 15th 2016

Interpretative consumer research continues to affirm the prominence of fantasy, escapism and emancipatory, restorative pursuits in the marketplace and the importance of these activities to consumers' lives (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Belk and Costa, 1998; Lanier and Arnould, 2006; Penaloza, 2001; Kozinets et al. 2004). At first glance fantasy

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is that which overturns and operates outside of reality, however many of consumer culture's ostensible play areas captured in previous research have been modelled in accordance with the secular, empirical rules of the very world they seek to escape. Media texts, like movies, could not be understood, let alone enjoyed, if the fantasy they deliver truly stretched beyond all commonly understood aesthetics, narratives, or concepts – rather they are consumed for their depiction of characters, myths, and situations which audiences can relate with and make connections to their own real lived experiences (Wohlfeil and Whelan, 2011). Similarly, fantastical roleplays, such as the mountain men rendezvous, are not constructed on the basis of otherworldly or unreal expectations, but are "nostalgically rendered" *sub*-worlds of our own which are constructed through quasi-realist adherence to historical accuracy, semi-mythical traditions and an imagined version of a previous orders (Belk and Costa, 1998, p.218). Such realist mechanics which hinge tenuously on representing or catering to a known and objective reality – whether in the present or past – lend themselves to accessibility, comprehension, sense making and, ultimately, the suspension of disbelief. What happens however when reality becomes less known and demonstrably less objective?

Fantasy, we argue, when consumed under "surreal" conditions may become altered, displaced or even challenged for its futility in trying to represent or hinge upon the impossibility of the real world. The informant quote that we use to open our paper helps illustrate how attempts at realism in fantasy – such as the Netflix series *House of Cards* (*HoC* hereafter) – are undermined by the dynamism and unpredictability of lived reality. While realist fiction like *HoC* operate upon principles of closely representing and mirroring what its producers consider to be credible reality, the ongoing and unprecedented socio-political events that consumers must live through in the real world have destabilised the assumptions that such fiction's depictions are based upon, and arguably have outpaced them in terms of incredulity, fancy and aberrance.

Borrowing from aspects of Andre Breton's (1924) *Surrealist Manifesto* and drawing upon narrative transportation theory (Green and Brock, 2000) we introduce the concept of "the surrealist disruption" which depicts the transformative effect incurred by fantastical pursuits when consumed under conditions of surreality. To develop a theoretical understanding of the surrealist disturbance, this paper draws upon an empirical investigation of consumers' experiences of binge-watching *HoC* season four (Netflix, 2016) in the wake of real-world events that displaced reason and order (such as the 45th

US Presidential election and the UK Brexit decision). Our research raises important questions about the expectations consumers have when seeking out fantasy through resources that are bedded heavily to realism in today's postmodern, "post-truth", late capitalist world. Our work demonstrates tensions between fantastical products and the real life world they are consumed within. The contributions of this study are as follows. First, we contribute with the assertion that fantastical pursuits, based on realist principles, may no longer be appreciated or consumed in the ways they once were when contextualised within an everyday surreality. We argue this has altered, disrupted or even prevented consumers' fantastical experiences when consuming narrative meaning. Here, we unpack how transportation to narrative worlds is an ever more perplexing journey when the spaces for escape feel less surreal than the everyday. This demands that we reconceptualise the purposes of narrative transportation theory beyond "a strong desire to be entertained…to activate his or her imagination, and experience suspended reality (i.e., escapism)" (Van Laer et al. 2014, p.804). Further, we contribute that the nature of escapism may become inverted under the surrealist disruption – that consumers no longer aim to escape the ordered world for wild worlds to be amused and entertained, rather they may feel they no longer live in an ordered world and look to fiction for guidance and sense making and seek a retreat to a more credible, and sombre world.

THEORETICAL UNDER PINNINGS

Realism & the Conditions of Surreality: Understanding Surrealist Disruption

Realism denotes the philosophy of replicating the appearance of "objective reality" whereby subject matter is organised and grounded to the foundations of what people consider to be knowable, identifiable and truthful. Soap operas for example operate under realist principles to "reflect real-life" (Castello et al. 2009, p.467), videogames draw on 'representational realisticness' to "deliver visceral experiences to connect the gamer to the lived realities of an outside world" (Payne, 2012, p.309) and TV dramas, such as *The Wire* offer something that "feels as complicated and thick as the world I see when I turn away from the screen" (Parker, 2012, p.23). The ideas of suspended disbelief, empathy and comprehension are central to realism as the viewer or consumer, who exists within the real world, will naturally draw upon what they have directly experienced as real and, indirectly, what has been reported to them as real to make sense of and judge the merit of

what they consume. Bilandzic and Busselle (2008) argue that credulity is the default mode of consuming fiction, and audiences typically create belief in fiction instead of actively disbelieving. This line of thinking is also consistent with stories and characters (Rapp et al. 2001) and arguably with consumers' ludic encounters with marketised spectacles on a grander experiential scale (Kozinets et al. 2004). Here, spaces like the ESPN zone are made credible because they are based on realist "cues" or *themes* such as sports, which speak to discernible structure and order - the fantasy is knowable, has a "world-like quality"', is therefore "instantly decodable" and "direct[s] [consumers'] awe in a sports-specific manner" (Kozinets, 2004, p. 661). However, consumption experiences which have been modelled on the logic of the real world to facilitate the suspension of disbelief might be destabilised when *surreality* replaces the objective reality that cues are based upon.

Surreality (from the French *sur réalité* meaning above our reality, or *on* our reality, but not *within* it) can be best thought of the destabilisation of both the ontology and legitimacy that enables realism to work – it transcends the real-unreal dichotomy and the hallmarks of objective reality (Dell'Aversano, 2008). The godfather of the concept, Breton (1924), suggests that surreality challenges rationalistic and monolithic attempts toward metanarrative, truthful representation and continuation of known historic reality. Breton imagined the "marvellous" through uniting the conscious and unconscious realms of experience with the real lived experiences of the everyday rational world, where dreams (or nightmares) and reality combine – "I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality" (p.14). The most popular context of the tenets of Breton's manifesto is associated with political or social critiques through art but surreality can perhaps also be spoken about as a *condition*. Tentatively speaking, surreal conditions are those that exist outside of known probability, open to all possibilities, however strange, unconditioned, and unlimited (Breton, 1924). Breton refers to a "*fabric of adorable improbabilities*" that becomes the norm and it is here we suggest a disturbance is created whereby works of realism become destabilised in their representation and can no longer be consumed as a de facto window into reality. Rather reality outpaces its representations in terms of "the unusual, chance, and the taste for things extravagant" (Breton, 1924, p.17) creating topsy-turvy conditions that historically could not be used to garner credulity. The triumph of adorable improbabilities raises questions about consumers' ability to suspend

their disbelief when consuming realist fantasy disrupted by surreality and upends assumptions about what these consumers now hope to achieve from their consumption. To consider these issues, we first visit narrative transportation theory.

Narrative transportation

Narrative transportation theory was originally developed to assist in understanding the processes of absorption that consumers experience when electing to "escape" through fictional literature (Gerrig, 1993) or, rather, to explain the phenomenon of 'getting lost in a book'. This was extended to media enjoyment, specifically films (Green and Brock, 2000) and continues to use the metaphor of travel or *getting lost* to evoke being temporarily taken away from one's everyday life, to visit the lives of some *other*, to connect empathically with imaginable stories, and emotionally with credible characters therein. The extent of these connections may relate to one's own personal life experiences (Wohlfeil and Whelan, 2011) and, here, an important tenet of narrative transportation is that, like one's homecoming from a real journey to some other place, a consumer will likely return "*changed"* with somewhat broadened horizons and an understanding of where they fit in the broader world (Wohlfeil and Whelan, 2011, p.291). This phenomenon of narrative transportation can only be achieved however when specific contextual and personal preconditions are adequately met. Here, we contend that when the realism that underpins the text is not compatible with the world it documents, and the narrative and the characters within struggle to adequately reflect the absurdity of the real world, the plausibility of fiction to foster connections with reality (Cho et al. 2014) feels stretched and strained for consumers. Rather, if we are to maintain Gerrig's travel metaphor, *how can consumers allow themselves to get lost in narrative if they are already lost in reality?* Transportation as a process of detachment from the world of origin might still exist phenomenologically but this, under our conception of surrealist disruption, we posit may likely be altered for the traveller in terms of lived experience, purpose, or both. Thus, our work sets out to investigate how narrative transportation is impacted by unprecedented challenges to realism from the world of origin and how the role of fantasy in consumers' lives is altered.

Methodological Overview

The empirical work for this paper is derived from a larger micro-ethnographic project concerned with the functions that are fulfilled by consumers' binge-watching experiences. The micro-ethnography has allowed us to explore consumers' consumption of fiction within a specific time and place marked by unprecedented changes in their reality. I interviewed and observed consumers' binge-watching experiences of *HoC* season four over the course of the real world American Presidential election, from February to October 2016. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in various locations, including informants' homes and on campus. Fifteen British consumers, who self-profess to be binge-watchers, predominantly, but not exclusively, fans of *HoC* were recruited through snowball sampling for interviewing. Participants with whom initial contact had already been established, used their social networks to refer the researcher to other people who could participate in the study. The data as a whole included non-participant observations, photographs, diaries, interviews, and a videography production. The data pool was examined in an iterative, part-to-whole strategy of constant-comparison with the literature (Spiggle, 1994).

Emergent Findings

One of the core thematic areas to emerge from our data is that rather than being transported to fantasy worlds for personal enjoyment alone (Van Laer et al. 2014; Green et al. 2004), our participants seek out a "knowable" space with its own discernible structure and internal logic for sense-making, to anatomise their fears and to generate hope. The irony is that while *HoC* was originally conceived as a darker chiaroscuro version of a real landscape, it has become for some of our sample a less improbable, more familiar world – an almost simplistic and naïve refraction of what is really going on. Our consumers draw on the credible, but now far from real, narrative world of HoC as a *platform* to compare their displaced reality with and to figure out their real-world concerns. Our consumers are not necessarily seeking an accurate mirror of politics, but assurances of how they assume institutions like government once functioned or may in the future function again.

In closing, our emergent work tells us that narrative worlds that are constructed in a realist manner become, under surreal conditions, consumed as counterfactual. Here narrative transportation has not been expunged but rather deepened in terms of its

cognitive and critical demands of viewers. We find the realist-constructed world that one travels to and becomes lost within operates according to what Foucault might consider a "crisis heterotopia", a space of *otherness* that is reserved for individuals who are experiencing a state of crisis in relation to the world in which they must live. "Getting lost" under surrealist disruption thus becomes less of an escape from reality or an opportunity to broaden one's horizons (as per conventional narrative transportation theory), but rather it facilitates a *search* for lost reality and a chance to *reorient* one's horizons. As a consequence, we submit that while the narrative transportation that one derives from consuming realist media cannot be expected to operate with the same credibility and edifying returns, under surreality, there are nonetheless emergent functions that can theorised from watching shows like *HoC* at the current moment.

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Appendix 9: *European Marketing Academy Conference* (EMAC), Glasgow, May 2018. Jones, S., Cronin, J., and Piacentini, M.G. (2018) Mapping the Extended Frontiers of Escapism: binge-watching and hyperdiegetic exploration.

Mapping the Extended Frontiers of Escapism:

Binge-watching and Hyperdiegetic Exploration

Length of film: 19.58

Production date of the film: September 2017

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Presenting author: Scott Jones

Video link: https://vimeo.com/231742345 Password: JMM

Declaration:

The presenting author will register, attend and present the videography at any time between Wednesday May 30 at 9:00 and June 1 at 17:30.

Short teaser abstract

The videography, seeks to explore the contemporary practice of “binge-watching” and unpack the nature of the escapism that is sought through watching episode after episode of a TV series in one sitting. To get close to this screen-based escapism, a screen-based form of representation, proves more than apt for this. Within consumer research there has hitherto been a distinction between active and passive escapism. In the videography, we complicate firm categorisations of escapism and suggest the boundaries between passive and active forms of escape are more porous than previously imagined. We document how binge-watching TV episodes, for sustained periods of time enables consumers to prolong and extend “the frontiers” of what might have previously been considered passive escapism in ways that involve participation as *more* than an observer.

Extended abstract of the videography

The concept of escapism – or the self-selected separation of oneself from one's immediate reality – through the consumption of media resources, or *texts,* such as television, music, games and movies has long been an important subject of consumer culture studies (Batat & Wohlfeil, 2009; Giddings, 2009).

The videographic research centres not just on a solitary text as a resource for escapism, but is attentive to the complete temporal, spatial and cognitive commitment consumers make to this resource. Specifically, we account for the alchemy of space, narrative involvement, personal time, and imagination captured within "binge-watching" which we define as the marathon-consumption of serialised content from the same TV show for an extended period of time. While previous work has explored the liberatory dividends consumers as escapists can enjoy from short-term engagements with characters and stories in texts through theories such as narrative transportation (Batat & Wohlfeil 2009; Green & Brock 2000), immersion (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2010) and parasocial interaction (Giles, 2002), we suggest new concepts are needed to interrogate the wider existential nature and character of escaping through narratives over longer, more sustained periods.

We draw upon the potential of binge watching to extend beyond the frontiers of a "passive" or observational form of escapism, and induct escapists into the more active arena of what Matt Hills (2002) refers to as "hyperdiegesis", i.e. the potential for playful intervention and ideation with a narrative. In short, we contend with the ability of consumers to *actively* fill in gaps and secure answers within the TV narrative itself but also within their own life-worlds throughout and around the time spent binge-watching. We classify this state of thinking about and engaging with a text over and beyond the core site of consumption (i.e. beyond the point of actual watching/observation) as the "extended frontiers" of escapism.

Through a micro-ethnographic engagement with consumers' binge-watching experiences of the Netflix series *House of Card*s (*HoC* here after), our videography problematises invoking clear distinctions between "active" and "passive" categorisations of escapism (see Kokho & Birch, 2014; Kuo *et al*. 2016). In total, our research is guided by the following question: how, under certain conditions, might

forms of escapism which are traditionally considered passive exhibit aspects of an active character and what does this ambiguity mean for our understanding of consumers' use of escapists texts?

The value of videography

The decision to conduct our research using a videographic design rather than more conventional modes of representation was largely galvanized by nascent conversations that center on the belief that videographic work can and must have an explicitly critical orientation (Hietenan & Andéhn, 2017). The graphic nature of film, we felt, provides a suitable canvas to theorise the ambivalence between both the passivity and activity of escapism as it is lived and might otherwise lose its communicative impact in more conventional, textual forms of representation. Videography makes visible what otherwise might never be seen or remain unsaid (Belk & Kozinets, 2005) and, in our study, allows for the passing of time and the changing of space to be captured as they occur rather than retrospectively summarized in the static, introspective accounts of traditional interview-based work.

In-depth interviews were conducted with each participant (fifteen participants in total) to ascertain their binge-watch motivations, their thoughts on the narrative worlds of *HoC* to date, and to gain an a priori understanding of the role of the binge as a resource and medium for escapism. A number of these interviews were video-recorded and a collaborative approach between the first author and participants was nurtured to produce videographic images of the material settings (Belk & Kozinets, 2005), chiefly consumers' living rooms, kitchens and bedrooms over long periods, sometimes late into the evening, capturing what binge-viewers do in a relatable and accessible way.

Over the course of the videography, we document three areas of interest. First, we found consumers "project" their concerns into the TV shows that they spend so long with. *HoC* becomes something that they can use to figure out their real-life world. Second, we observed the displacement of time passes differently during a sustained binge-watch than to regular life. Finally, our film captures the various ways that consumers try to overcome their anguish when their binge is over.

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