

When Parasocial Relationships Turn Sour: Social Media Influencers, Eroded and Exploitative Intimacies, and Anti-Fan Communities

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Abstract

Whilst social media influencers (SMIs) excel at establishing positive parasocial relationships with their followers, they can also provoke intense *negative* responses, as evidenced by the prevalence of SMI-focused anti-fan communities. Prior research does not explain how consumers' parasocial relationships with SMIs become negatively charged, nor does it explain why this shift may fuel anti-fan community participation. Drawing from a netnographic study of two SMI anti-fan communities, we reveal that eroded reciprocal and disclosive intimacies, as well as exploitative commercial intimacies, can lead consumers' positive parasocial relationships with SMIs to become negatively charged. We demonstrate that anti-fan communities provide opportunities for consumers reluctant to sever ties with the SMI to sustain their negative parasocial relationship by rebuilding eroded intimacies whilst avoiding and/or retaliating against their exploitation.

Keywords: *Social media influencers, influencer marketing, parasocial relationships, intimacy, anti-fandom, anti-fan communities*

Summary statement of contribution: This paper extends theories of parasocial relationships with SMIs, and more broadly, by explaining how they can become negatively charged. Furthermore, it reveals how and why consumers experiencing negative parasocial relationships with a SMI may turn to anti-fan communities to sustain this relationship, rather than withdrawing from it as we might anticipate, providing new insights into the evolution of parasocial relationships and the appeal of anti-fan communities. We identify managerial implications and future research directions.

Introduction

Social media influencers (SMIs) – ordinary consumers who rise to fame by cultivating an online following on social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok (Abidin, 2015) – are rapidly outpacing traditional celebrities with regards to consumer attention, trust, and influence (Mediakix, 2019; Mintel, 2021). SMIs excel at establishing positive parasocial relationships with their followers (Ferchaud et al., 2018; Hwang and Zhang, 2018; Reinikainen et al., 2020; Yuan and Lou, 2020) – one-sided relationships whereby individuals feel that they intimately know a media persona (Horton and Wohl 1956). Consequently, many consumers describe perceiving SMIs as friends (Berryman and Kavka 2017; Reinikainen et al., 2020). However, SMIs can also provoke intense *negative* responses, as evidenced by the prevalence of online anti-fan communities dedicated to critiquing SMIs, such as GOMI (‘Get Off My Internets’), Guru Gossip, You Talk Trash, Gossip Bakery, Tattle Life and Reddit’s ‘Blogsnark’. These communities are growing in popularity (e.g., Reddit’s Blogsnark has over 120,000 members, whilst Guru Gossip has over 230,000) (Reddit, 2022; Guru Gossip, 2022), are highly active (e.g., over 2 million posts have been shared on Gossip Bakery, whilst over 12 million have been shared on Tattle Life) (Gossip Bakery, 2022; Tattle Life, 2022), and are rife with anti-fandom, defined by Gray (2005) as the vocal expression of dislike or hatred towards a given media text, genre, or personality. Our research is motivated by the observation that most participants within these anti-fan communities claim that they were, at one time, ardent fans of the SMIs they are now equally devoted to critiquing. Rather than disengaging from the now disliked or hated SMI by unfollowing their social media channels, these consumers choose instead to participate in anti-fan communities in ways that require continued engagement with the SMI’s content.

This phenomenon highlights a theoretical gap within our understanding of parasocial relationships with SMIs, and indeed parasocial relationships more broadly. Extant research on

parasocial relationships with SMIs within the marketing literature typically assumes that parasocial relationships are positive, equated with feelings of perceived friendship (e.g., Hwang and Zhang, 2018; Reinkainen et al., 2020; Yuan and Lou, 2020). Yet research in other fields has shown that negative parasocial relationships may also occur, characterised by antipathy (Hartmann et al., 2008; Jennings and Alper, 2016; Tian and Hoffner, 2010). Despite this acknowledgement of negative parasocial relationships, we have limited understanding of how positive parasocial relationships may subsequently become negatively charged. This theoretical gap becomes particularly salient in the case of SMIs, who we shall argue are particularly susceptible to such shifts due to the distinct nature of the intimacy they establish with their followers. Furthermore, despite acknowledgement that negative parasocial relationships with celebrities may lead to anti-fan behaviours (Claessens and Van den Bulck, 2014), extant literature does not explain whether the sustained engagement in anti-fan communities that has become prevalent in the context of SMIs is motivated by negative parasocial relationships, nor does it explain how anti-fan community participation may impact consumers' parasocial relationships with these SMIs. Our research therefore poses the following questions: How do positive parasocial relationships with SMIs become negatively charged? How and why do consumers experiencing negative parasocial relationships with SMIs participate in anti-fan communities devoted to discussing them? How does participation in SMI anti-fan communities contribute to consumers' evolving parasocial relationships with these SMIs?

Informed by literature from multiple disciplines, including marketing, branding, anthropology, media studies, and fan studies, we draw from a netnographic study of UK-based beauty and lifestyle SMIs and the anti-fan communities dedicated to discussing them. Our analysis reveals that consumers' engagement in these communities is often prompted by the erosion of reciprocal and disclosive intimacies, as well as exploitative commercial intimacies,

which can shift consumers' parasocial relationships with the SMI from positive to negative. We reveal how consumers use anti-fan communities to sustain their negative parasocial relationships with SMIs by rebuilding eroded disclosive and reciprocal intimacies, whilst simultaneously avoiding and/or retaliating against exploitative commercial intimacies. Our findings contribute to the recent yet growing body of marketing research on consumers' parasocial relationships with SMIs by highlighting previously unacknowledged variance and shifts in the nature of these relationships. Our study also extends wider theories of parasocial relationships by explaining how positive parasocial relationships turn negative and providing insights into the behaviours that these negative parasocial relationships can fuel. In demonstrating that consumers experiencing negative parasocial relationships with a SMI may turn to anti-fan communities to sustain this relationship, rather than withdrawing from it as we might anticipate, we provide new insights into the evolution of parasocial relationships, the appeal of anti-fan communities, and the anti-fan behaviours that emerge when SMIs are the focus of these communities.

We begin by providing a review of extant literature on the intimate parasocial relationships that SMIs cultivate amongst their followers, before highlighting limitations to our current understanding of the evolution of parasocial relationships and the anti-fan behaviours that may occur when these relationships turn sour. We then describe our netnographic method, before presenting our findings and discussing their theoretical and managerial implications. Finally, we discuss the limitations of our study and identify multiple avenues for future research.

Literature Review

Social media influencers, intimacy, and parasocial relationships

Horton and Wohl (1956) introduced the concept of 'parasocial relationships' to describe the familiar, intimate relationships that mass media personalities (e.g., celebrities, fictional

characters) cultivate with their audience. Through mass media, such as TV and radio, these personalities foster “intimacy at a distance”, whereby audience members feel they know them in an intimate and profound way, despite the relationship being one-sided and non-reciprocal (Horton and Wohl, 1956, p. 215). In TV production, for instance, strategies such as addressing the audience in a conversational, casual or responsive manner and arranging the set to feel more intimate are purposefully used to develop and sustain this “illusion of intimacy” (Horton and Wohl, 1956, p. 217). Recent studies demonstrate that SMIs cultivate feelings of intimacy (Abidin, 2015; Berryman and Kavka, 2017; Raun, 2018; Reade, 2021) that enable them to forge particularly strong parasocial relationships with their followers (Ferchaud et al., 2018; Hwang and Zhang, 2018; Reinikainen et al., 2020; Thelwall et al., 2022; Yuan and Lou, 2020). Akin to mass media personalities, SMIs cultivate feelings of intimacy using filming techniques (Ferchaud et al., 2018) and editing styles (Berryman and Kavka, 2017a) that evoke a sense of closeness and personal interaction. However, Abidin (2015) proposes that SMIs also mobilise additional intimacies with their followers: disclosive intimacies, reciprocal intimacies, interactive intimacies, and commercial intimacies.

SMIs develop *disclosive intimacies* (Abidin, 2015, p. 8) by documenting and sharing their everyday lives on social media, giving “followers the impression that they are privy to the private, usually inaccessible aspects of [their] lives.” SMIs frequently share their day-to-day lives in detail, including seemingly mundane, routine aspects (e.g., cooking, cleaning) as well as ‘behind-the-scenes’ glimpses of exclusive events (e.g., awards shows, magazine photoshoots) (Abidin, 2015; Berryman and Kavka, 2018). Furthermore, SMIs often engage in displays of emotional vulnerability (Raun, 2018), documenting their “tears, sobs and struggles” for their followers (Berryman and Kavka, 2018, p. 85; Mardon et al., 2018), posting unfiltered and unedited images of themselves on social media (Gannon and Prothero, 2016), and talking

about their struggles with mental health and body image (Reade, 2021), providing ‘backstage’ (Goffman, 1959) snippets that contribute to the illusion of intimacy (McRae, 2017).

In addition to disclosive intimacies, SMIs establish *reciprocal intimacies* (Abidin, 2015) by creating the illusion that the relationship is reciprocated by the SMI, rather than one-sided. In a departure from the parasocial relationships formed with mass media personalities that are characterised by a lack of reciprocity (Horton and Wohl, 1956), SMIs interact with their followers in ways that were not possible pre-social media (Abidin, 2015; Berryman and Kavka, 2017). For instance, SMIs may ‘like’ comments posted on their social media profiles, respond to these comments directly, respond to common questions or feedback within their subsequent social media content, or share followers’ content to their own social media profiles (Abidin, 2015; Berryman and Kavka, 2018; Lou, 2022). In doing so, SMIs create an “*illusion of mutual awareness*” (Dibble and Rosaen, 2011, p. 123; Hartmann, 2008) whereby followers feel seen and acknowledged by the SMI. Though Abidin (2015) treats *interactive intimacies* - SMIs interacting with their followers in physical settings (e.g., at face-to-face meet and greets, brand events, and social media conventions) - as distinct from reciprocal intimacies, we argue that this is simply an alternative means of establishing reciprocal intimacies, providing opportunities for followers to feel seen and acknowledged by the SMI, whether this be in a one-to-one interaction with the SMI, or in being addressed by the SMI as part of a larger audience at an event.

Both aforementioned intimacies – disclosive and reciprocal – can also be achieved, to some extent, by traditional celebrities who use social media to interact with their fans and share aspects of their personal lives (Bennett, 2014; Click et al., 2013), facilitating the formation of parasocial relationships (Chung and Cho, 2017; Kim and Kim, 2020). However, SMIs’ origins as ordinary consumers and their gradual rise to fame as a result of their social media content (Abidin, 2015) impacts the level of perceived intimacy that their followers experience. Unlike

traditional celebrities, SMIs' initial online presence is not mediated by management teams that carefully guide their disclosure. Consequently, SMIs tend to initially engage in a much higher level of intimate disclosure than traditional celebrities (Abidin, 2015), although this may change once they reach a level of fame that attracts management teams and/or raises privacy or safety concerns. Similarly, SMIs' gradual rise to fame enables them to initially establish significant reciprocal intimacies, often acknowledging or responding to a significant portion of audience interactions (Berryman and Kavka, 2018), although this becomes difficult to maintain as SMIs' audiences grow (McQuarrie et al., 2013). Thus, SMIs' gradual rise to fame on social media enables a high level of intimacy to be established with their followers, setting high expectations for future disclosive and reciprocal intimacies that can be difficult for SMIs to meet as their fame and audience grows. This presents an interesting dynamic that has yet to be explored; whilst prior research has acknowledged that the intimacy that SMIs create must be continually maintained (Raun, 2018; Mardon et al., 2018), we lack insight into the implications of failing to do so. Whilst research indicates that SMIs excel at fostering strong positive parasocial relationships (Ferchaud et al., 2018; Hwang and Zhang, 2018; Reinikainen et al., 2020; Yuan and Lou, 2020) by establishing high levels of disclosive and reciprocal intimacies (Abidin, 2015; Berryman and Kavka, 2017; Raun, 2018; Reade, 2021), we argue that these parasocial relationships may be more precarious than those established with other celebrities as the origins of their fame tends to create high levels of perceived intimacy that can be difficult for SMIs to sustain.

Both disclosive and reciprocal intimacies are a means for SMIs to achieve *commercial intimacies* (Abidin, 2015), also referred to as “commodification through intimacy” (Berryman and Kavka, 2017, p. 310), whereby the feelings of intimacy established between SMIs and their followers through disclosive and reciprocal intimacies contribute to the commercial success of the SMI. Berryman and Kavka (2017, p. 318) argue that this “intimacy largely contributes to,

sustains and monetizes the celebrity status these ‘ordinary’ individuals have recently come to possess.” Specifically, SMIs monetise the relationships that they have formed with their followers by engaging in influencer marketing activities, involving posting paid endorsements for brands on their various social media profiles (Abidin, 2015). The nature of SMIs’ relationships with their followers is attractive to brands as parasocial relationships have been found to increase various measures of endorsement effectiveness, including perceived endorser credibility (Munnukka et al., 2019), brand perceptions and purchase intentions (Chung and Cho, 2017).

Traditional celebrities may also engage in such influencer marketing activities. However, unlike traditional celebrities, who usually have other sources of fame and income, commercialising the intimacy they have established with their followers by participating in influencer marketing activities is typically SMIs’ primary, and often sole, source of income. SMIs’ reliance on their followers for income creates an ‘intimacy pact’ (Berryman and Kavka, 2017), whereby intimacy is exchanged for followers’ support in their commercial endeavours; in Abidin’s (2015) terminology, followers benefit from SMIs’ disclosive and reciprocal intimacies whilst SMIs benefit from the commercial intimacies facilitated by their resultant relationships with their followers. As a result of this intimacy pact, SMIs’ followers may feel entitled to continued intimacy with the SMI in exchange for the ongoing attention and support that contributes directly to SMIs’ commercial success. Indeed, research indicates that SMIs may be held to high standards by their followers when engaging in commercial activity, with followers responding negatively when SMIs allow commercial activity to dominate their social media content or fail to clearly disclose paid endorsements (Cocker et al., 2021). Thus, commercial intimacies require careful navigation of the intimacy pact established between SMIs and their followers. However, we have little insight into what happens when this pact is perceived to have been broken. When SMIs fail to uphold their side of the intimacy pact by

maintaining established disclosive and reciprocal intimacies, how might this impact consumers' established parasocial relationships with SMIs and their resultant behaviours?

In summary, SMIs' gradual rise to fame allows them to establish high levels of reciprocal and disclosive intimacies that can be difficult to maintain as their fame grows, whilst SMIs' reliance on commercial intimacies creates an intimacy pact that must be carefully navigated. However, we have little insight into how the distinct nature of the intimacies that SMIs establish with their followers may impact the evolution of consumers' parasocial relationships. With this in mind, we next turn to the literature on the dissolution and evolution of parasocial relationships.

The dissolution and evolution of parasocial relationships

Research on the dissolution of parasocial relationships with media figures, also referred to as 'parasocial breakups' (Cohen, 2003), has focused on instances in which the focal personality is no longer available for consumption (e.g., when a TV character leaves a show, a TV series ends, or a celebrity dies) (Cohen, 2003; Eyal and Cohen, 2006; Russell and Schau, 2014; Kretz, 2020). Prior research has examined fans' emotional and behavioural responses to such involuntary parasocial breakups. Emotionally, such parasocial breakups mirror the emotional distress of "real" breakups (Cohen, 2003; Cohen, 2004; Eyal and Cohen, 2006), with fans experiencing grief, disappointment, anger, and heartbreak (Cohen, 2003; Russell and Schau, 2014; Kretz, 2020), and often feeling as though they had lost a close friend (Cohen, 2003). Behaviourally, fans might seek out spoilers and fan theories to help them mentally prepare for a parasocial breakup (Ellithorpe and Brookes, 2018), or start to distance themselves from the characters of the show in advance of a series finale to ready themselves for an impending breakup (Russell and Schau, 2014). Alternatively, fans might attempt to continue the parasocial relationship by rewatching older content featuring the media figure (Cohen, 2003).

In contrast, few studies have examined instances where a consumer *voluntarily* ends a parasocial relationship, and consequently we have limited understanding of why or how they might do so. Hu (2016) proposes that consumers may initiate a parasocial breakup when the subject of that relationship is involved in a scandal, as evidenced by the reduced strength of participants' parasocial relationship with a focal media personality following exposure to a (fictional) scandalous news story, and the increased prominence of reactions associated with parasocial breakups (e.g., anger, sadness, disappointment). However, given the experimental design of Hu's (2016) study, and the fictional nature of the reported scandal, they do not provide insight into consumers' behavioural responses. Would consumers avoid future interactions with the media personality in such instances, thus initiating a voluntary parasocial breakup? Or would they continue to interact with the media personality, and if so how might their behaviour change?

We have little understanding of when and why parasocial relationships may evolve rather than cease entirely. Whilst most research on parasocial relationships focuses on those characterised by feelings of friendship, several scholars have acknowledged the potential for consumers to experience *negative* parasocial relationships characterised instead by antipathy (Dibble and Rosaen, 2011; Hartmann et al., 2008; Jennings and Alper, 2016; Tian and Hoffner, 2010). However, we have little insight into how a formerly positive parasocial relationship might evolve into a negative parasocial relationship, or vice versa, despite acknowledgement in studies of interpersonal relationships (Aumer et al. 2015; Aumer-Ryan and Hatfield, 2007) and brand relationships (Grégoire et al., 2009) that love and hate are often closely intertwined. An exception is Claessens and Van den Bulck's (2014) study of negative reader comments on online celebrity news websites. The authors propose that the intensity of some of the posts on news stories about Tiger Woods indicate that these posters may have initially had a positive parasocial relationship with the golfer, which had since soured due to his involvement in a

scandal. However, the authors do not explore in depth the reasons why a previously positive parasocial relationship may become negatively charged. Whilst the authors attribute this shift in consumers' parasocial relationships with celebrities to their involvement in high profile scandals, we argue that the distinct nature of the intimacy that underpins consumers' parasocial relationships with SMIs may reveal new causes for such shifts. Furthermore, Claessens and Van den Bulck (2014) do not explain why a consumer experiencing a negative parasocial relationship with a celebrity would choose to read and comment on new articles about this celebrity, and since they studied isolated negative comments about celebrities, their research sheds little light on the persistent discussion and critique of SMIs that is prevalent on a wide variety of gossip forums. We next turn to the literature on former fans, disappointed anti-fandom and anti-fan communities for insights into the behaviours that may occur when consumers turn on their idols.

Former fans, disappointed anti-fandom and anti-fan communities

Gray (2005, p. 814) defines an anti-fan as someone "who actively and vocally hates, or dislikes a given text, personality, or genre". Recognizing the nuance that exists within anti-fandom, Gray (2019) identifies four distinct types: *competitive anti-fandom*, *bad object anti-fandom*, *anti fans anti-fandom*, and *disappointed anti-fandom*.

Competitive anti-fandom emerges "when dislike (whether serious or playful) is directed at a perceived rival of one's beloved fan object" (Gray, 2019, p. 26). Similar modes of disliking have been discussed in the marketing literature in the form of anti-brand communities motivated by rivalry and oppositional brand loyalty (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Popp et al., 2016). Gray's (2019) bad object anti-fandom is characterised by "a general popular dislike" and is "based on a widespread agreement - whether moral, aesthetic, affective or political" concerning what is "bad" (pp. 28-29). For instance, in the fan studies literature, Harman and Jones (2013, p. 952) note that the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy is frequently denigrated as "bad

literature” and held up as the ultimate “hated text par excellence”, whilst marketing scholars have observed extreme and widespread negative consumer responses directed towards global corporate brands such as Apple, Nestle, Wal-Mart, Starbucks, and McDonald’s (Brandão and Popoli, 2022; Rodrigues et al. 2021; Hollenbeck and Zinkhan, 2010; Thompson and Arsel, 2004). A third type of anti-fandom identified by Gray (2019) is anti fans anti-fandom, where anti-fandom is directed towards the fans of a particular text, personality, or genre, rather than being directed at the (anti-)fan object itself. For instance, Twilight anti-fans have been found to direct their anti-fandom towards the franchise’s predominantly young female fans, positioning them as hysterical, obsessive, and out-of-control (Godwin, 2014). Of most relevance to our study, however, is Gray’s (2019) disappointed anti-fandom, or what Claessens and Van den Bulck (2014, p. 71) refer to as a “former fandom gone sour”, where fans come to feel a sense of anger, disappointment, frustration, or irritation towards the object of their fandom (Gray, 2019; Claessens and Van den Bulck, 2014). For instance, in the marketing and consumer research literature, Parmentier and Fischer (2015) describe how ardent fans of *America’s Next Top Model (ANTM)* became disenchanted as a result of changes made to the TV show, turning to online communities to express their dissatisfaction and frustration, directing attention to the show’s contradictions, and producing satirical and less than complementary fan art, behaviours which eventually contributed to the dissipation of the show’s wider audience and the overall demise of the ANTM brand.

It is widely acknowledged that there is significant overlap between fan and anti-fan behaviours; Gray (2005, p.845) has observed that “*Although pleasure and displeasure, or fandom and antifandom, could be positioned on opposite ends of a spectrum, they perhaps more accurately exist on a Mobius strip, with many fan and antifan behaviors and performances resembling, if not replicating each other.*” Indeed, anti-fans are often just as deeply engaged or immersed in the text/personality/genre as devoted fans (Gray, 2003, 2005

2019; Harman and Jones, 2013) and dedicate a considerable amount of time to their critiques (Gray, 2005; Parmentier and Fischer, 2015). For instance, anti-fans have been found to engage in practices such as hatewatching (Cohen et al., 2021; Gilbert, 2019), celebrity bashing (Liew, 2019), celebrity gossip (Claessens and Van den Bulck, 2014), snarky criticism, mocking and caustic commentary, and witty recaps of texts (Gray, 2005; Harman and Jones, 2013). These practices are often performed for others within anti-fan communities - online spaces where consumers can unite to discuss, critique, and express their dislike of media texts, genres, and personas - enabling community members to establish a strong sense of camaraderie amongst like-minded others (Duffy et al., 2020; Gilbert, 2019; Gray, 2005; McRae, 2017). Often these behaviours are attributed to consumers' desire to prompt remedial action, with anti-fan community members hoping that they will be heard by those involved in producing a media text (Burkhardt et al., 2021; Parmentier and Fischer, 2015). A related body of literature in the field of marketing has explored the capacity for negative consumer-brand relationships to fuel participation in anti-brand communities, with consumers continuing, rather than ending, their relationship with the brand out of a desire to punish the brand by engaging in anti-brand behaviours such as spreading negative word-of-mouth and complaining to third parties (Brandão and Popoli, 2022; Dessart et al., 2020; Dessart and Cova, 2021; Johnson et al., 2011; Rodrigues et al., 2021).

Research on anti-fan communities focuses primarily on anti-fandom directed towards media texts such as TV programmes or book series, rather than celebrities, whilst research on anti-brand communities does not explore anti-brand communities dedicated to celebrities as 'person-brands' (Fournier and Eckhardt, 2019). Consequently, whilst it appears likely that the anti-fans of media personalities hold an intense negative parasocial relationship with the object of their anti-fandom (Claessens and Van den Bulck 2014), we have limited insight into the relationship between parasocial relationships and anti-fan behaviours, leaving important

questions unanswered. For instance, in instances where parasocial relationships turn sour, why might consumers turn to anti-fan behaviours rather than simply distancing themselves from a media personality they dislike, or even hate? How might motivations for, and practices of, participating in anti-fan communities differ when the focus is a person, rather than a media text or brand? How does engaging in anti-fan communities contribute to consumers' parasocial relationships with the object of their anti-fandom?

In summary, our study seeks to understand what causes consumers' parasocial relationships with a SMI to shift from positive to negative, how and why consumers experiencing negative parasocial relationships participate in SMI anti-fan communities, and how these behaviours contribute to consumers' evolving parasocial relationships with SMIs.

Methodology

We combined immersive and investigative netnographic methods (Kozinets, 2020), immersing ourselves within the research context between 2016 and 2021, before collecting a more focused investigative dataset in 2021.

We began our study in 2016 by immersing ourselves in the YouTube beauty community, where SMIs were particularly prevalent and lucrative (see Bishop 2018; Cocker et al., 2021; Gannon and Prothero, 2018; Mardon et al., 2018), observing the YouTube videos of UK-based beauty YouTubers and their corresponding viewer comments. Over time, these YouTubers adopted other social media platforms, and the majority of leading beauty SMIs pivoted to become 'lifestyle' influencers, producing content surrounding a wider array of topics. Thus, what began initially as a study of beauty YouTubers evolved to become a study of cross-platform beauty and lifestyle SMIs. As these changes unfolded, we began to observe SMIs' interactions with their followers across multiple platforms, including on their blogs, Instagram accounts and, most recently, their TikTok accounts. As recommended by Kozinets (2020), we kept detailed immersion journals, enabling us to capture a rich and longitudinal

account of evolving interactions between SMIs and their followers. Our immersion within the world of beauty and lifestyle SMIs sensitised us to the existence of prominent online forums dedicated to anti-fan behaviour surrounding SMIs - emically termed “gossip forums”. Our initial observations of these SMI anti-fan communities during the immersive phase of our netnography revealed that posters frequently claimed to have previously been fans of the SMIs of which they were now so critical, motivating a subsequent phase of investigative netnography that sought to provide insight into consumers’ participation in these anti-fan communities.

Two anti-fan communities were selected for this investigative netnography using Kozinets’ (2020) criteria for choosing focal data sites: relevance, activity, interactivity, diversity, and richness. In addition to the forums’ relevance to our research questions, they were highly popular (both had approximately 200,000 members and over 4 million forum posts) and very active, with new posts and conversations appearing daily. Both forums contained diverse perspectives surrounding a wide range of SMIs and offered rich data, with many forum members posting in an expressive and detailed manner. Both forums were open to the public, with no registration or password login required. Selecting two data sites, as opposed to one, enabled us to identify recurring patterns across the sites. Given the large number of forum threads and posts on our two data sites, we focused on the threads pertaining to a sample of 11 of the UK’s most popular beauty and lifestyle SMIs. We selected SMIs that had dedicated forum threads on both data sites, to enable triangulation, and whose threads were particularly active, interactive and rich (Kozinets, 2020). We read all the threads posted about our focal SMIs between July 2018 and June 2021 (297 forum threads in total, each with approximately 1,000 replies). We chose not to include posts pre-dating July 2018, when the newest of our focal forums launched, as this enabled triangulation across the dataset. From this sample, we followed Kozinets’ (2020) guidance to generate a smaller, investigative dataset of posts pertaining to our research questions. Whilst reading through each of the threads, we

captured relevant posts as screen captures and collated them in a Word document, which was later imported into NVivo for analysis. The final investigative dataset consisted of 2,065 Word document pages. During this phase of investigative netnography we continued to contribute to our immersion journals, documenting our reflections on the forums studied, as well as observations from our continued immersion within the wider research context.

Data analysis began with initial, inductive, first-cycle coding methods, including descriptive coding (identifying the basic topic of a forum post), in vivo coding (using forum members' own language when assigning codes), and process coding (looking specifically at the reasons for the shift in parasocial relationships and the ways in which consumers' participation in the community contributed to their parasocial relationship with the SMI) (Saldaña, 2013). Our 5-year immersion provided context to our analysis of the investigative dataset, enabling us to link conversations within the forums to specific social media content posted by our focal SMIs, as well as wider shifts in SMIs' social media content and SMI-follower interactions. Second-cycle coding methods were then applied, with related first-order codes combined to create higher-order codes that enabled us to identify and explore recurring patterns in the data (Kozinets, 2020). In line with the hermeneutic approach widely adopted in sociocultural studies of consumption (Thompson et al., 1994; Kozinets, 2020), we repeatedly moved back-and-forth between the emergent codes, data, and extant literature in an iterative process of analysis and interpretation. As a research team, we held regular meetings throughout this process to discuss, evaluate and question our emergent interpretations, until we arrived at a final, holistic interpretation of our data.

Since our data includes critical and highly personal discussions of specific SMIs by forum members, we adopt a "high cloaking" approach when presenting our findings (Kozinets, 2020, p. 400). In line with other studies of anti-fan communities (e.g., Duffy et al., 2020), in addition to anonymising the forums studied and the forum posters themselves we have also

anonymised the SMIs discussed to avoid amplifying critical and potentially offensive commentary relating to specific individuals. As recommended by Kozinets (2020), we have ensured that any forum posts presented in our findings section cannot be ‘backtraced’ to the original online posts using a search engine, which involved making minor alterations to the spelling, wording or grammar of these posts whilst taking care not to change their meaning.

Findings

Our findings reveal how the erosion of reciprocal and disclosive intimacies, and the perception of exploitative commercial intimacies, can shift consumers’ parasocial relationships with SMIs from positive to negative, turning fans into anti-fans and motivating participation in anti-fan communities. We document the ways in which consumers used anti-fan communities to sustain their negative parasocial relationships with SMIs by rebuilding eroded disclosive and reciprocal intimacies whilst avoiding and retaliating against exploitative commercial intimacies.

Rebuilding eroded disclosive intimacies via anti-fan theorising and forensic anti-fandom

Whilst SMIs foster parasocial relationships by establishing disclosive intimacies, this is a carefully crafted illusion; SMIs select which aspects of their lives to document online, and which to keep private (Abidin, 2015). However, prior research provides little insight into what happens when this illusion breaks down and the intimacy pact established between SMIs and their followers is therefore broken. As discussed previously, SMIs are particularly at risk of eroded intimacies as their origins as ordinary consumers and their gradual rise to fame often leads SMIs to establish high levels of intimacy that they are expected to maintain. We found that consumers often joined the anti-fan communities studied when they perceived gaps in SMIs’ narratives, eroding disclosive intimacies. These gaps often occurred because SMIs tried to impose boundaries by keeping certain aspects of their lives private that were previously public (e.g., romantic relationships, friendships). For instance, in the following forum posts,

anti-fan community members expressed frustration when they sensed that a SMI was concealing the breakup of a romantic relationship that had previously been documented extensively online by the SMI.

The thing that kills me about [SMI] and other influencers is their attitude towards sharing. Everyone's entitled to a private life and to share what they're comfortable with, but she and [her ex-boyfriend] lived their lives online. You can't show your knickers to the world and then act annoyed when someone asks what colour you're wearing on a specific day. If you're open, people will expect you to continue to be so.

You can't share a relationship with your followers for the best part of 10 years then not properly address the break-up or the fact that you might be seeing someone [else]. She set the boundaries and level of privacy in her life. She can't just suddenly shift them and not expect a reaction from people. That's like a Kardashian complaining about the paparazzi.

Here, we see that the concealment of the breakup was perceived to be a violation of the established intimacy pact between SMIs and their followers. It is apparent from these posts that these consumers felt entitled to intimate details of the SMI's romantic relationships because such disclosive intimacies had been established as the norm. This relationship differs from that between traditional celebrities and their fans, where it is normative for the celebrity to withhold intimate details about their personal lives.

Frustrations also emerged when SMIs paused documenting their lives on social media, taking a few days, or in some cases a few weeks, away from their social media platforms, and therefore creating gaps in the narration of their lives:

Suddenly she's radio silent?! She's kept everyone updated about basically everything going on in her life these past few months, and even maintained interaction through family deaths. For her to be liking and commenting [on other SMIs' posts] but keeping her viewers in the dark, knowing that they're concerned

about her, is pretty despicable. She could have at least posted a couple of sentences, without going into detail.

Again, the intimacy pact is broken as the SMI fails to uphold the high levels of disclosive intimacies previously established (this SMI usually updated her followers daily via her various social media accounts), and it is apparent that the poster feels entitled to an update from the SMI.

SMIs' failure to maintain disclosive intimacies was deemed particularly problematic due to their reliance on commercial intimacies, as illustrated in the following forum posts discussing a SMI's decision not to explain the conspicuous absence of her pet dog from her recent social media content:

What annoys me is: Her whole living is made online. She chose to become a YouTube 'content creator'. Her job is to share her life. So it's illogical and downright weird to have a dog you loveeee one moment and then it disappears, with zero explanation. [SMIs] act as if they don't owe their followers an explanation - they do!!!

Reply: Exactly! These influencers behave like actors etc. who have become famous for a skill and can legitimately say they'd like to keep their lives private... that claim is much less valid when you have become famous for sharing every aspect of your life.

In these excerpts we see how anti-fan community members expressed frustration, anger and resentment at withheld information, which they deemed the SMI duty-bound to provide. The dog in question had featured frequently in the SMI's content over several years, including commercial content, and consequently its sudden and unexplained disappearance from the SMI's content was perceived as a violation of their established intimacy pact. However, these comments also illustrate how consumers felt entitled to this information not only due to previously established disclosive norms, but also because the SMI's fame and financial success

was the result of such disclosive intimacies. Thus, SMIs' high reliance on commercial intimacies can heighten their followers' sense of entitlement to ongoing intimate disclosure.

Such gaps in SMIs' narratives alerted community members to the selective nature of SMIs' disclosure, eroding disclosive intimacies and resulting in antipathy towards SMIs, who were often deemed lazy, uncaring, or ungrateful for failing to uphold their side of the intimacy pact with their followers. In the following posts, members of the anti-fan community reflect on the resultant shift in their relationships with SMIs:

I used to adore [SMI] 🙄

Reply: Same. I used to love watching her and I was actually influenced once or twice back in the day.

Reply: Like lots of you, I used to be a big [SMI] fan back in the day. [...] Like someone said earlier, it's disappointing see someone you used to really admire fall so far away from the qualities that drew people to her.

A lot of us are frustrated that after investing time in someone, we are now faced with an entirely different human who has become detached from us and isn't even delivering on their job description [uploading regular content]. [SMI] has become self-important and has gone from open to closed off in less than a year without even stopping to talk about why. [...] If you are trying to use me to earn money to pay for the expensive crap you want to buy, but I don't like what I'm getting from you in return, I'm going to tell you.

[SMI] doesn't care about her fans. She is lazy and useless [...] I liked [SMI] at first, but then I began looking more at her actions, which don't match her words.

Here, we see an example of how consumers may experience a change in their parasocial relationship with a SMI as a result of eroded disclosive intimacies; despite originating as fans, these posters now hold a negative parasocial relationship with the SMI and engage in anti-fan behaviours as a result. However, despite anti-fan community members' antipathy towards these SMIs, they did not cease to engage with them. Instead, anti-fan communities provided a means for them to rebuild eroded disclosive intimacies by collectively filling gaps in SMIs' narratives.

Prior research on fandom has found that fan communities collectively fill the narrative gaps that appear in their favourite media texts, such as TV series or literary worlds, via the collective development of fan theories - subjective interpretations or predictions based on narrative cues – within fan communities (Ellithorpe and Brookes 2018; Amo and Garcia-Roca 2021). Often this involves forensic fandom (Mittell, 2009), whereby fans adopt a detective mentality as they seek out clues and evidence to support their proposed fan theories (Mittell, 2009; Amo and Garcia-Roca, 2021). Whilst such theorising has been documented in the context of media texts, SMIs also create a narrative with consistent characters (e.g., the SMI’s friends, family, partners and colleagues) and plots, documented over a long period of time with a high level of textual detail, providing the appropriate conditions for such theorising. When characters are conspicuously absent, when the narrative stops due to breaks in the SMI’s content, or when other information is perceived to have been omitted, a narrative gap is created that SMIs’ followers are able to fill as they are equipped to imagine narrative possibilities beyond the material presented to them by the SMI. We found that members of the anti-fan communities studied collectively filled the narrative gaps created by SMIs’ partial and selective narratives by engaging in forensic anti-fandom to inform anti-fan theories, mirroring prior work on the activities of fan communities (Mittell, 2009; Amo and Garcia-Roca, 2021). It is not surprising to find that fans’ detective work and theorising is mirrored in anti-fan communities, as there is acknowledged to be significant overlap between fan and anti-fan behaviours and practices (Gray, 2005). However, we shall demonstrate that the motivations for engaging in anti-fan theorising and forensic anti-fandom, and the contribution of these practices to consumers’ evolving parasocial relationships, appear to be distinct.

Members of the anti-fan communities studied engaged in forensic anti-fandom by conducting extensive online research (emically referred to as “sleuthing” or “detective work”) that enabled them to fill narrative gaps with their own anti-fan theories. Online research

involved consuming the SMIs' own social media content (which was often consulted multiple times in search of 'clues') and the social media content of the SMI's friends and family members, as well as extensive research on other websites (e.g., The UK's Company's House website was used to reveal information on the SMI's financial circumstances and business ventures, whereas property websites Rightmove and Zoopla were used to reveal the SMI's home address, the property's value, and the rooms and features that had been 'hidden' in the SMI's social media content). This information was shared within the anti-fan communities, where community members drew from available evidence to inform collective speculation. For example, when the aforementioned dog suddenly disappeared from a SMI's content without explanation, community members formed their own theories as to its fate:

[Forum name] has some spectacular amateur detectives, so I'm shocked that we don't know more about what's happened to [SMI's dog]. The last Insta Stories [SMI] has with [the dog] was last November! Come on everyone, we can do this.

I've searched all the [dog breed] rescue places on Facebook and there's no sign of [SMI's dog]. [...] I've also discovered that [dog breed] are susceptible to pancreatitis - which can result in sudden death...

What I think happened is she got [dog's name] in the divorce and then developed resentment issues towards the dog because it was a constant reminder of her failed marriage and specifically [SMI's ex-husband]. That, with her pipe dream of moving to [another country] most likely prompted her to rehome [dog's name] without discussing it with anyone, especially [SMI's ex-husband]. [...] I would bet £1,000 on this theory.

In another example, one of the SMIs in our study took a sudden and unexplained break from social media, before posting a series of vague posts on Instagram, fuelling collective speculation of a breakup with her fiancé:

[SMI is] still posting vague hints. Did you see [SMI's] latest Instastory of the presents from her best friend (Vogue, chocolate, and a pillow spray)?

Reply: *Chocolate, pillow spray and magazines - all classic break-up presents, and still no sign of [SMI's fiancé].*

[SMI] *posted pictures on Instastories of some (strategically placed) books and it looks like one of them is a 'Heartbreak' one. It seems like it really is a breakup...?*

Reply: *Ooh good sleuthing!!!*

Reply: *Damn, that's excellent detective work.*

In these posts, we see community members identifying potential clues in the SMI's social media content, fuelling speculation on the parts of the narrative that are hinted at, but not fully disclosed.

This anti-fan theorising and forensic anti-fandom contributed to community members' evolving parasocial relationships with the SMIs discussed. Whilst extant literature sheds little light on the link between forensic anti-fandom and parasocial relationships, prior research has found that fan theorizing can help fans come to terms with an impending parasocial breakups with fictional characters when a TV show ends (Ellithorpe and Brookes 2018). In contrast, we found that the members of the anti-fan communities studied engaged in forensic anti-fandom and anti-fan theorising to rebuild eroded disclosive intimacies with SMIs. Community members excitedly congratulated each other when they filled in these narrative gaps, as highlighted in the previous forum posts where anti-fan community members complement one another on their 'sleuthing' and 'detective work'. These anti-fans were particularly delighted when their theories were proven correct, which was interpreted as confirmation of their intimate knowledge of the SMI, thus re-establishing disclosive intimacies. For example, having speculated for several weeks that a SMI was pregnant, based on 'clues' identified in her social media content, community members congratulated one another following the SMI's pregnancy announcement:

She's pregnant! She just uploaded a new Instagram reel

Reply: *We called it back in May!!! [Forum name] does it again 🤔 well done ladies*

Reply: *Well done Detective [nickname for forum users] 😊 if I ever go missing I want all of you on the case.*

Thus, whilst disclosive intimacies were eroded when narrative gaps emerged, anti-fan communities provided an opportunity for consumers to rebuild disclosive intimacies via forensic anti-fandom and the formation of anti-fan theories that fill these narrative gaps. It is important to note, however, that doing so appeared to sustain the consumer's negative parasocial relationship with the SMI rather than restoring their previously positive parasocial relationship. Forum members continued to express antipathy towards the SMI and indeed this antipathy informed their anti-fan theories, with SMIs often presented in a negative light in their speculations.

Rebuilding eroded reciprocal intimacies by recreating an illusion of mutual awareness

Whilst SMIs establish reciprocal intimacies by being highly responsive and attentive to their followers (Abidin, 2015), many SMIs fail to sustain these intimacies as their fame and commercial success grows. In line with previous research (McQuarrie et al., 2013), we found that our focal SMIs became less responsive to their followers as their audience grew; many stopped replying to follower comments altogether, whilst even those who attempted to maintain reciprocal intimacies typically replied to only a handful of follower comments per post despite each post typically receiving hundreds of comments. Members of the anti-fan communities studied described the frustration they felt as their favourite SMIs stopped responding to their followers:

She definitely doesn't want to interact with her followers. It seems half-hearted and an effort and [as though the SMI feels] the viewer should be grateful she's put a video up [...] I constantly see her asking questions on Twitter or Instagram and her followers give her really nice feedback or comments and even recommendations

and advice. She never replies, says thank you or even just acknowledges them with the little heart/ thumbs up button.

Here we see how the SMI is failing to acknowledge their fans in a way that sustains the ‘*illusion of mutual awareness*’ (Hartmann, 2008; Dibble and Rosaen, 2011, p. 123) that underpins reciprocal intimacies.

Furthermore, members of the anti-fan communities observed that many SMIs were not only increasingly ignoring their followers’ comments but were also preventing their followers from voicing their opinions altogether by deleting or blocking comments on their social media content. This censorship extended beyond the previously documented removal of comments expressing anger and contempt (Mardon et al., 2018) and included the censorship of constructive criticism posted by fans. Fan behaviours are rarely wholly positive, and fans may criticise aspects of the object of their fandom (Gray, 2005). Members of the anti-fan communities studied reflected that whilst they remained fans of the SMIs discussed, they had posted what they deemed to be polite but constructive feedback on the SMIs’ social media content (e.g., requesting less advertising content or suggesting changes to SMIs’ social media content, which they claimed had been deleted or blocked by the SMI) only to discover that their comments had been deleted or blocked by the SMI. They explained that as a result of this censorship they had felt increasingly ignored by these SMIs, eroding reciprocal intimacies, shifting their parasocial relationships with SMIs from positive to negative, and motivating their participation in anti-fan communities:

I used to love [SMI] [...] I don’t like how she is treating us as her followers differently now. The fact that she is deleting comments etc. makes me feel really sad and turned off her.

At one point the people making comments on this forum were [SMI’s] fans. We have come on here to vent about how she’s changed. We can’t vent on her Instagram or

YouTube videos because we either get blocked or shot down by [SMI]. When we try to offer constructive criticism, she gets annoyed and takes utter offence.

It's positive to see viewers have a space to share their thoughts, especially when the "influencer" is blocking any comment that goes beyond a string of heart emojis [...] I simply asked on Instagram if she could explain what she meant by the phrase "no single-use plastic was used" and if more details could be shared. No follow-up. Eventually, my comment got deleted. Some research around influencers deleting comments brought me here.

Thus, the erosion of reciprocal intimacies appeared to fuel participation in the anti-fan communities studied, which presented an uncensored space where they could share their thoughts and observations. However, as they participated in these anti-fan communities, consumers' constructive criticism gave way to increasingly critical, personal, no-holds-barred criticism of all aspects of SMIs' lives, fuelled by their newfound antipathy.

However, anti-fan communities not only presented a space to vent about eroded reciprocal intimacies, but also provided a means for anti-fan community members to rebuild this intimacy by recreating an 'illusion of mutual awareness' (Hartmann, 2008; Dibble and Rosaen, 2011: 123). They did so by perpetuating the belief that the SMIs discussed read their own forum threads and by interpreting SMIs' actions as attempts to address critiques or advice posted in the anti-fan communities. For instance:

She's failed to write AD on her latest YouTube video and has switched off comments

Reply: Boy, she must be constantly reading here - seconds later she updated the video and put AD!!

This was [SMI] addressing us again. Whenever she says people "send me comments", she's almost always referencing the comments on this forum. Nobody "sends" [SMI] comments telling her that her frequent house renovations "don't suit her home". They would post those comments in her YouTube comments section, but she can't reference

the comments because they have been deleted or blocked. [SMI] is referencing what she reads here...

Could she make it any more obvious that she's addressing everything that's discussed on here!

The widely held belief amongst anti-fan community members that SMIs read their forum posts prompted the posting of specific feedback and advice, with community members addressing the SMI directly in anticipation that they would see the post and potentially alter their behaviour.

[SMI], if you do read these comments, I wanted to offer a constructive overview of why so many of us used to watch your content, but no longer do. I'm not a catty person, so I have tried to explain as simply and constructively as I can, on a forum where my comment won't be deleted.

- You don't appropriately disclose many adverts, paid partnerships and (just as importantly) gifted content [...] this is really important information for your younger followers who don't have lots of spending money and need to invest wisely in things. Please start doing this [...] Just be transparent 😊 we all value honesty.*
- You've become, in many people's opinions, one dimensional. All you appear to be interested in (based on your content) is buying things. The endless stream of products has become impossible to relate to, or want to invest in, because every day it's something new. If you promoted and purchased fewer products, I am confident that we would take your recommendations more seriously. [...]*

I hope this is helpful in some way 😊 I used to follow but sadly haven't in a long time now...

In using the anti-fan community to provide constructive feedback to the SMI, these anti-fans exhibit hope that the SMI may acknowledge this feedback and alter their behaviour. Here we see parallels with extant work on anti-fan communities and anti-brand communities, where community members seek to motivate remedial action (Burkhardt et al., 2021; Parmentier and Fischer, 2015). However, this activity appeared to have an additional motivation. Whilst we do

not know whether SMIs actually read their gossip threads (many SMIs actively claim not to do so), it became apparent that for these consumers the anti-fan communities provided an opportunity to collectively create the illusion of mutual awareness that was missing in their interactions with the SMI on other platforms.

Avoiding & retaliating against exploitative commercial intimacies

Scholars attribute SMIs' success to the commercial intimacies that they have established with their followers (Abidin, 2015; Berryman and Kavka, 2017). Maintaining the reciprocal and disclosive intimacies that underpin these commercial intimacies is therefore imperative to SMIs' continued success. We found that their erosion made commercial intimacies appear exploitative to SMIs' followers:

I am not watching one second of her [sponsored YouTube video] - I cannot believe she has the audacity to post such half-assed, unauthentic sponsored content after 5 weeks away. She didn't even try to insert it within a longer vlog or anything – she is literally doing the bare minimum, just posting the advert.

She has stopped filming for YouTube, she hasn't tweeted in ages, and she barely interacts with her followers [...] If she wants to benefit from her followers then she needs to give them something - YouTube videos, Instagram posts, tweets...whatever [...] it's pretty unfair and hypocritical of her to give nothing to her followers, but still expect them to buy a stupid app.

These posts indicate that this commercial activity was deemed inappropriate and exploitative as the SMIs in question had failed to uphold their side of the intimacy pact by maintaining established disclosive and reciprocal intimacies. In particular, commercial intimacies were perceived as exploitative when SMIs' attempts to maintain reciprocal and/or disclosive intimacies appeared to be dictated or motivated solely by commercial intimacies, rather than a genuine desire to interact and share their lives with their followers. For instance, the following posts express frustration at SMIs who were perceived to only post social media content and/or interact with their followers when there was a direct commercial incentive to do so (e.g., they

had secured a paid brand endorsement for the content), failing to maintain disclosive and reciprocal intimacies in between such commercial content.

[SMI] had hundreds of questions to pick from, yet actively chose to answer only those questions that would allow her to promote her sponsors or shove yet more affiliate links down our throats. I'm so sick of the extreme consumerism - it's suffocating! Enough is enough. A Q&A should be an opportunity for her to actually discuss various topics with her viewers and actually interact with them for once, but that's not worth [SMI's] time! She managed to turn a Q&A into advertising! [...] [SMI is] such a sell out. No wonder her audience have completely lost interest.

Does anyone else find it blatantly obvious how much influencers treat their audience like they are stupid 😊 - [posting social media content] all through December not wanting to miss that ad sense [advertising revenue from YouTube, which tends to be higher in the run up to Christmas] etc. and pretending that they love their viewers and creating content. Then when 24th/ 25th December comes – poof! They're gone [...] Starting to see through them all now [...] [SMI] and co are fake and users in my opinion.

Here, we see how failure to sufficiently and authentically maintain the disclosive and reciprocal intimacies that underpin commercial intimacies can lead consumers to experience these commercial intimacies as exploitative, and to express antipathy indicative of a negative parasocial relationship.

However, the anti-fan communities studied provided a means for consumers to rebuild reciprocal and disclosive intimacies with SMIs whilst avoiding exploitative commercial intimacies. For instance, forum members shared the links to websites that enabled them to access SMIs' social media content whilst preventing the SMI from profiting from their engagement:

If you want to view [SMI's] Instagram stories without giving her a view you can use [website link] (not 100% sure, but I think it would work even if you've been blocked [by the SMI])

She still gets the view because [website name] has to call by YouTube to get the copy for you to watch, so YouTube registers the view regardless of which platform you watch on. The adverts don't play though, so your view wouldn't be adding money into her bank account.

Other community members expressed a desire to avoid consuming the disliked SMIs' social media content directly, preferring to consume the paratexts created by other community members (e.g., detailed written summaries - often witty recaps or comedic parodies - of the SMI's YouTube videos, screenshots of the SMI's social media content), who were often thanked profusely for this contribution to the community.

I don't want to watch it [SMI's YouTube video], but I'm curious to know whether people were calling her out for something? [...] [in a subsequent post, after receiving information on the video's contents from another poster] Thanks for responding (I didn't want to give her another view or any ad money by watching it 😊)

@ [Forum member's username] I just want to say thank you to you on behalf of all of us in the [SMI] community for your commitment to video recaps that save us so much time and frustration, even though it means you have to sit through [SMI's] shite videos without skipping.

Here, we see consumers responding to SMIs' perceived attempts to break the established intimacy pact by deliberately choosing not to uphold their own side of this pact, refusing to support SMIs' commercial activity. This use of avoidance tactics enabled anti-fan community members to rebuild disclosive intimacies whilst simultaneously preventing SMIs from exploiting them for commercial gain.

In line with prior research (Cocker et al., 2021), we also observed that SMIs' commercial activities could be perceived as exploitative when they were not clearly disclosed to the SMI's followers. Anti-fan community members interpreted this as an attempt by SMIs to take advantage of the intimate and trusting relationship they had established with their followers. We observed members of the anti-fan community retaliating against such

exploitative commercial intimacies by reporting the SMI to UK regulatory bodies such as the ASA (Advertising Standards Authority) and CMA (Competition and Markets Authority) for failing to appropriately disclose brand endorsements, in the hope that these organisations would force the SMI to comply with current regulations surrounding SMI endorsements, thus preventing future exploitation of commercial intimacies.

Re [SMI's] Ads not being declared in [the video] title or thumbnail: I reported her to the ASA the first time she did this and they replied that they had got in touch with her. When [SMI] did it again, I complained again, but they never got back to me! Is this the same for everyone else?

I reported her [brand name] post to the ASA because it had no #Ad disclosure. They investigated her and have now given her guidance on how to properly disclose paid work. Obviously, as it's her, she won't do it, and I won't hesitate to report her again. Hopefully the ASA will come down harder on her next time.

Some community members attempted to amplify this retaliation by educating other members of the anti-fan community on how to identify and report endorsements that violate the current ASA/CMA regulations. For instance, in the following post, a community member provides examples of insufficiently disclosed Instagram posts, and explains how others can determine for themselves whether a post is an undisclosed advertisement:

Examples of #Ad violations from [SMI's] Instagram

*She did not declare this as an ad, but the content indicates that it **definitely** is. It is a product shot, the brand has been tagged in the image, there is competitive separation (i.e., no other brands are tagged), the copy sounds like marketing jargon and the brand is tagged again in the copy by both account and hashtag.*

This is an example of something you would screenshot and report to the ASA. You can also check hashtag use around the same time and see whether other influencers are posting product shots with the exact same (or similar) language in the caption. If so, it is definitely an ad and you should screenshot it (both on the full feed view and the post itself) and report it to the ASA.

One community member even went to the effort of creating a detailed email template for members of the community to use when making a complaint to the CMA, which encouraged users to clearly state the publication date of the offending post, to explain precisely how the content breaches the current CMA regulations, and to attach appropriate evidence (e.g., screenshots, screen recordings). This template, and other advice on identifying and reporting SMIs, was intended to encourage more community members to make complaints, and to increase the impact of these complaints, thus amplifying the anti-fan community's attempts at retaliation.

In addition to contacting regulators, community members also retaliated against exploited commercial intimacies by contacting the brands that SMIs endorsed, either by commenting on the brand's social media posts or by emailing brand employees directly (e.g., members of the brand's marketing team). In their communications with brands, community members attempted to inform the brand of the SMI's perceived misdemeanours, expressed their disapproval of the brand working with the SMI, and often threatened to boycott the brand should they continue to work with the SMI:

I've contacted the brands saying I will be boycotting them unless they cut ties with [SMI]

Reply: She totally deserves to lose work and brand relationships because of this. Otherwise, there's no consequences for her behaviour [...] [SMI] has shown she has no respect for her followers - we're little cash cows that give her lovely opportunities but she doesn't want to hear from us and doesn't respect us enough to be truthful.

In these posts, we see how consumers perceived these actions as punishment for exploitative commercial intimacies. Community members expressed hope that their retaliation would have negative consequences for the SMI, reducing their future commercial opportunities and therefore prompting them to rethink their actions. Once again, community members shared advice and best practice for communicating with brands, in order to amplify their retaliation:

On one of the previous threads someone put together a guide on how to approach brands and PR agencies about [SMI]. I found this so so helpful. Is there a chance that we could compile a list for tracking the brands we've informed about [SMI] and how their response was?

Reply: I put the list of [SMI's endorsed/collaborating] brands that [another forum user] compiled on [SMI's] WIKI [a section of the forum that lists key information on each SMI]. I can annotate it [...] I can use an emoji for each....

No response - ✖ or 🙄

Generic response - ✓ or 🙄

Block - 🚫 or 🙄

Thoughts?

Reply: The amount of time you have spent on producing all of this on the Wiki page is laudable...Truly 🙄🙄

In these posts, we see examples of community members collaborating in their retaliation, requesting and providing advice and information and praising one another for their contribution. Community members recognised that they were stronger together, and that this collaboration was their best chance for successful retaliation. Here, we see parallels with prior research on both anti-fan communities and anti-brand communities, which suggests that community members unite as a means to retaliate against brands (Rodrigues et al., 2020; Brandão and Popoli, 2022; Popp et al., 2016) and/or incite change (Parmentier and Fischer, 2015).

Discussion

Theoretical implications

Our findings contribute to the growing body of research on consumers' parasocial relationships with SMIs by highlighting previously unexplored variance and shifts in these relationships. Despite recognition in other fields that parasocial relationships may be negatively charged

(Dibble and Rosaen, 2011; Hartmann et al., 2008; Jennings and Alper, 2016; Tian and Hoffner, 2010), research in marketing has focused solely on consumers' positive parasocial relationships with SMIs, characterised by feelings of friendship (Aw and Chuah 2021; Hwang and Zhang, 2018; Yuan and Lou, 2020; Reinikainen et al., 2020). However, our research shows that positive parasocial relationships with SMIs may evolve into negative parasocial relationships characterised by antipathy, with negative consequences for SMIs as anti-fan communities form, grow and collectively avoid and/or retaliate against their commercial activities. As such, we propose that future research on the role of parasocial relationships in mediating SMI endorsement outcomes must acknowledge such variance in parasocial relationships. For instance, prior research in marketing has shown that parasocial relationships with SMIs generate greater consumer interest in products endorsed by the SMI (Yuan and Lou, 2020), and can positively affect consumers' online word-of-mouth intentions (Hwang and Zhang, 2018), brand trust and purchase intentions (Reinikainen et al., 2020); do these relationships hold when parasocial relationships are negative?

More broadly, our study extends prior research on parasocial relationships by identifying new factors that may lead positive parasocial relationships to become negatively charged. Although such shifts in parasocial relationships have received little attention, research has indicated that parasocial relationships with celebrities can turn sour due to the celebrity's involvement in a scandal (Claessens and Van den Bulck, 2014). We have provided further insight into the potential causes of such shifts in parasocial relationships by turning our attention to the intimacies that underpin them. Whilst prior research has examined how SMIs cultivate and commercialise feelings of intimacy (Abidin, 2015; Berryman and Kavka, 2017; Raun, 2018; Reade, 2021) in order to forge strong parasocial relationships with their followers (Ferchaud et al., 2018; Hwang and Zhang, 2018; Reinikainen et al., 2020; Yuan and Lou, 2020), our research reveals the risks posed by these parasocial relationships when the

intimacies that underpin them are not sustained or are perceived to be exploited. We propose that SMIs' skill in cultivating disclosive and reciprocal intimacies can also be their downfall, as these intimacies can be difficult to maintain as SMIs grow and commercialise their online followings. We demonstrate that where these intimacies are eroded or perceived as exploitative, and the intimacy pact between SMIs and their followers is therefore perceived to have been broken, consumers' positive parasocial relationships with SMIs do not always simply dissolve but for some consumers may become negatively charged whilst maintaining their intensity. Thus, such shifts in parasocial relationships are not always caused by a significant, high-profile scandal (Claessens and Can den Bulck, 2014), but may also be caused by the gradual erosion of intimacies.

In providing insights into the ways in which both the disclosive and reciprocal intimacies underpinning parasocial relationships are eroded, we present several points of departure from prior research on SMIs in marketing and consumer research. For instance, whilst McQuarrie and colleagues (2013, p.146) found that fashion bloggers became less attentive and responsive to their followers as they became more successful, they found that these changing behaviours generated positive outcomes for the bloggers studied, who experienced continued audience growth, whilst "follower comments become more uniformly positive as the blogger ignores her followers more and more". In contrast, we found that this behavioural shift eroded the reciprocal intimacies that SMIs had worked hard to establish, shifting some followers' parasocial relationships with the SMI from positive to negative, and motivating a significant number to join and participate in anti-fan communities in an attempt to re-establish lost intimacies. Our findings present an alternative explanation for the increasingly positive comments observed by McQuarrie et al. (2013); we similarly observed that follower comments on our focal SMIs' social media content became increasingly positive over time, however our observation of the anti-fan communities indicated that this was due to

increasing censorship of comments by the SMI. Our findings echo Mardon et al. (2018), who found that the censorship of other-condemning emotions such as anger and contempt by SMIs leads these expressions of emotion to resurface in alternative online spaces. We extend this work by documenting how this censorship can lead positive parasocial relationships to become negatively charged, potentially fuelling anti-fan behaviours. Our findings also extend research on consumers' responses to SMIs' commercial activities. Prior research in marketing has identified instances where followers are critical of SMIs' commercial activities; for instance, when SMIs fail to clearly disclose brand endorsements to their followers (Cocker et al., 2021) or when the SMI has granted the endorsed brand too much control over their messaging and content (Martínez-Lopez et al., 2020). Our study extends this research by showing how the erosion of disclosive and reciprocal intimacies renders consumers more critical of SMIs' commercial intimacies, which they are more likely to experience as exploitative.

We also provide insight into the ways in which shifts in consumers' parasocial relationships may shape consumers' behaviours in relation to SMIs. Whilst extant literature has explored the end of parasocial relationships in voluntary and involuntary parasocial breakups (Cohen, 2003; Eyal and Cohen, 2006; Hu, 2016; Russell and Schau, 2014; Kretz, 2020), we provide insight into the evolution of parasocial relationships that persist even as friendship turns to antipathy. We found that some consumers are reluctant to commit to a voluntary parasocial breakup by disconnecting with the SMI, despite experiencing intense antipathy towards them, preferring instead to sustain a negative parasocial relationship with the SMI by participating in SMI anti-fan communities. Our analysis extends extant understandings of consumers' motivations for anti-fan community participation. Prior research suggests that participation in anti-fan communities may be driven by a desire to change or remedy a disliked text, with anti-fans sharing their frustrations online in the hope that the media text's writers or producers will take note and make positive changes (Parmentier and Fischer, 2015; Burkhardt

et al., 2021). Extant literature in marketing, on the other hand, has found that symbolic incongruity, ideological incompatibility, negative past experiences with the brand, brand inauthenticity, and oppositional brand loyalty can trigger brand hate, motivating participation in anti-brand communities (Rodrigues et al., 2020; Popp et al., 2016; Dessart et al. 2020). However, studies of anti-fan communities and anti-brand communities have primarily focused on media texts (i.e., books/ movies/ TV shows) and global corporate brands respectively, paying limited attention to anti-fan/ anti-brand communities that form around celebrities as person brands. The few studies that have focused on SMI anti-fan communities have attributed community participation to followers' frustration at SMIs' perceived inauthenticity (McRae, 2017) and perpetuation of unrealistic, gendered expectations of "having it all" (Duffy et al., 2022). Extending these streams of research, our study explores the motivations that fuel anti-fan community participation in the context of SMIs.

Consistent with prior research on anti-fan communities and anti-brand communities (e.g., Rodrigues et al., 2020; Dessart et al., 2020; Brandao and Popoli, 2022; Popp et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2011; Grégoire et al., 2009), we found that consumers used the anti-fan communities studied to motivate redressive action by, and to retaliate against, SMIs, often working collaboratively to maximise their impact. However, we also found that participation in these anti-fan communities was motivated by a deeper-rooted desire to keep a negative parasocial relationship with the SMI alive, with consumers engaging in distinct anti-fan behaviours in order to rebuild intimacies with the SMI. Whilst prior work on SMI anti-fan communities has explored the critiques leveraged at SMIs (McRae, 2017; Duffy et al., 2022), we provide insight into the precise ways in which consumers use SMI anti-fan communities to sustain negative parasocial relationships. Specifically, we show how consumers attempt to rebuild eroded intimacies with the SMI by engaging in forensic anti-fandom and fan theorising that fills narrative gaps left by the SMI, and by recreating an "illusion of mutual awareness"

(Hartmann, 2008; Dibble and Rosaen, 2011, p. 123) by perpetuating the belief that the SMI reads and responds to their forum posts. Whilst the fandom literature has found that fan theories can help consumers to come to terms with a parasocial breakup (Ellithorpe and Brookes, 2018), our findings alternatively reveal that fan theories and other forms of forensic anti-fandom can serve to rebuild eroded disclosive intimacies and sustain a negative parasocial relationship. Indeed, despite their antipathy towards the SMIs discussed, many of the anti-fan community members in our study had been posting for several years, indicating that active participation in anti-fan communities may sustain negative parasocial relationships, increasing their strength and longevity. Thus, we provide new insights into the ways in which anti-fan community participation contributes to consumers' evolving parasocial relationships.

Practical implications

Although the anti-fan behaviours documented take place in online forums that are separate from the SMI's own social media profiles and content, they nonetheless have the capacity to impact the SMI's reputation and commercial success. For instance, when the names of our 11 focal SMIs are entered into a search engine, one or both of the anti-fan communities studied appear on the first page of the search engine listings, rendering these critical discussions highly visible to those seeking to learn more about the SMI and thus potentially causing reputational damage. Indeed, many members revealed that this is how they first discovered the anti-fan communities. Furthermore, these anti-fan communities produce ways for consumers to access the SMI's content without benefitting them commercially, be this via alternative websites that block display advertising or via paratexts created by community members, thus depriving the SMI of potential revenue. Furthermore, and perhaps most concerning, as a collective, the anti-fan communities rallied together to retaliate against targeted SMIs, demanding that regulators punish the SMI for their perceived misdemeanours and inundating the brands that

they endorsed with negative comments and threats of brand boycotts in the hope of negatively impacting the SMI.

Given the potential negative consequences of these anti-fan communities, SMIs and their management teams should take measures to reduce the likelihood of the SMI becoming the subject of their critical commentary. Our findings show that consumers use anti-fan communities to sustain their negative parasocial relationships with SMIs, however we found no evidence of these relationships reverting to positive parasocial relationships when intimacies were rebuilt within the communities. Thus, it appears that prevention is better than cure; SMIs must avoid the erosion or perceived exploitation of intimacies in order to sustain positive parasocial relationships with their followers and prevent the negative parasocial relationships that fuel anti-fan communities. Our findings indicate that emerging SMIs should be mindful to establish a level of intimacy (i.e., levels and frequency of disclosure, types and amount of reciprocity) that can be sustained long-term, as their audience grows. Additionally, our research demonstrates the importance of consistency in maintaining these intimacies; consumers were sceptical when these intimacies were only cultivated when there was clear commercial intent. SMIs should ensure that they meet consumers' expectations surrounding disclosive and reciprocal intimacies even when there is no direct commercial gain in order to adhere to the intimacy pact they have formed with their followers.

Furthermore, our findings suggest that the censorship (i.e., deleting and/or blocking) of viewer comments on the SMI's social media content by SMIs and their management teams erodes reciprocal intimacies, which motivates participation in anti-fan communities as spaces free from censorship. We recommend that SMIs moderate their social media comments more liberally, allowing their followers to express some of their more reasonable and constructive critiques and concerns. Indeed, we suggest that SMIs reframe constructive criticism via a service recovery lens (Hart et al., 1990), attempting to resolve any dissatisfaction voiced by

their followers. Service recovery strategies, such as listening to individual or collective complaints, acknowledging the issues raised and apologising if appropriate, implementing appropriate changes, and following up, have been shown to promote customer satisfaction, commitment, and loyalty in other service contexts (e.g., Choi and Choi, 2014). Whilst such service recovery strategies may be more time-consuming than SMIs' current censorship approach, the service recovery paradox (Smith and Bolton, 1998) indicates that correct recovery efforts may strengthen the relationship between SMIs and their followers by restoring trust, increasing assurance and confidence, and fostering enduring loyalty. Our findings indicate that the more followers feel ignored and rebuffed by the SMI, the more negative parasocial relationships and resultant anti-fan behaviours are fuelled. Directly addressing constructive criticism voiced by SMIs' followers via service recovery strategies will enable SMIs to avoid escalations of negativity born from followers' frustration at seemingly being ignored and instead bolster reciprocal intimacies by showing their followers that their concerns have been listened to. Thus, whilst allowing critical comments may seem undesirable, we propose that reducing censorship and adopting a service recovery lens will enable SMIs to sustain a loyal fanbase by preventing fans from becoming anti-fans, thus reducing the likelihood of harsher and more persistent criticism emerging within anti-fan communities.

Limitations and directions for future research

Whilst our research offers insight into how positive parasocial relationships may become negative, we did not observe any instances of a reversal in this shift; the forum members studied maintained a negative parasocial relationship with the SMIs despite their sustained attempts to rebuild intimacy. However, this is not to say that negative parasocial relationships with SMIs cannot become positively charged once more. In the context of consumer-brand relationships, Grégoire et al. (2009) found that whilst consumers with strong relationships with brands are more likely to exhibit the most enduring unfavourable reactions (e.g., brand revenge, brand

avoidance) when brand love becomes brand hate, they are also the most amenable to recovery attempts. This suggests that the anti-fans studied may potentially be amenable to recovery attempts by SMIs, and future research should examine whether it is possible for parasocial relationships that have previously moved from positive to negative to become positive once again, identifying factors that may contribute to, or present barriers to, this shift. For instance, in line with prior research on anti-fandom (Gray, 2005), we found that members of the anti-fan communities studied took pleasure in community-participation and connection with likeminded others. Future studies might investigate the existence of a ‘tipping point’; is there a point at which an anti-fan can no longer be recovered because they derive more value and intimacy from the anti-fan community than they would from returning to the mainstream SMI fan community?

Furthermore, we perceive value in exploring the role of gender (both the consumer’s gender and that of the SMI) in shaping the evolution of parasocial relationships. We studied anti-fan community forum threads pertaining to 11 of the UK’s most popular beauty and lifestyle SMIs, all of whom were female. Though forum members posted anonymously, many posters explicitly referred to their gender in their posts, indicating an overwhelmingly female membership. Whilst this is a predictable consequence of our chosen content category, which is traditionally female-dominated, a broader inspection of both of the forums studied revealed that the overwhelming majority of threads related to female SMIs. This is in line with prior research on the SMI gossip forum GOMI, which observed that the site is “markedly gendered” focusing on “feminized genres of social media production (i.e., fashion/ beauty, parenting, lifestyle)” and “women influencers” (Duffy et al., 2022, p.1659). Media coverage similarly portrays SMI gossip sites’ membership as female-dominated (e.g., Manavis, 2021; Ross, 2021) – Tattle Life, for example, has been described as “the site where women discuss women” (Beaty, 2019).

Whilst existing evidence indicates that SMI anti-fan communities are female-dominated, extant literature on parasocial relationships and anti-fan communities does not explain why this might be. Though women tend to experience stronger parasocial relationships than men (Cohen, 1997; Eyal and Cohen, 2006), studies typically report no significant gender difference in post-breakup distress (Cohen, 2003; Lather and Moyer-Guse, 2011; Hu, 2016). Similarly, despite acknowledging that the criticisms voiced by anti-fans may be informed by gendered expectations (Duffy et al., 2022; Holladay and Click, 2019; Hills, 2012; Jones, 2015; Liew, 2019), literature on anti-fandom does not identify the gender of either consumers or celebrities as an important factor in influencing the frequency of anti-fan behaviours. Indeed, Claessens and Van Den Bulck (2014) propose that male and female celebrities in their study of news website comments were subjected to similar levels of anti-fan comments. We therefore lack an explanation as to why SMI anti-fan sites appear to be so dominated by women (both in terms of their membership and their target subjects). Do men develop weaker positive parasocial relationships with SMIs, and, if so, does this influence the evolution of their parasocial relationships as SMIs become more private, less responsive, and more commercially-oriented? Are male and female SMIs subject to different norms surrounding relationships, fame, and commercialisation, and does this influence the evolution of consumers' parasocial relationships and resultant consumer behaviours?

Another avenue for further exploration is the impact of SMIs' racial identity on consumers' evolving parasocial relationships and related behaviours. The world of SMIs is by no means free from racial privilege (Bishop, 2018; Sobande, 2017). Race-based pay disparities are widely acknowledged within the SMI industry (Bishop, 2018; Cochrane, 2020; Venegas, 2021), whilst both social media platforms themselves and the influencer management tools used by marketers to select influencers for campaigns have been accused of algorithmic discrimination that may contribute to racial inequality amongst SMIs (Bishop, 2018, 2019,

2021). Furthermore, prior research has documented the raced nature of the visibility labour and authenticity labour performed by SMIs, highlighting the distinct race-based norms and expectations that SMIs must navigate (Bishop, 2018). Whilst prior research has highlighted the impact of racial identities and related norms on SMIs' social media performances (e.g., Arthur, 2021; Bishop, 2018, 2019), we have a limited understanding of their impact on consumers' evolving parasocial relationships and resultant consumer behaviours, including anti-fan behaviours. The focal SMIs in our investigative netnography were predominantly white, and therefore our dataset does not enable a robust comparison of the impact of SMIs' racial identity on their treatment within anti-fan communities. We therefore call for further research on this topic.

We believe these to be fruitful avenues for future inquiry that will provide new insights into the ways in which parasocial relationships evolve, and thus how these relationships, and the consumer behaviours they provoke, can be effectively managed.

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