Introduction: Nonconsensual fame

Public shaming is an ancient punishment that has been given new life through online forms of interaction. In the past, practices like branding and the pillory worked not only through bodily harm, but also through visibly othering the criminal transgressor. These acts isolate and shun the disgraced from normal society, causing them to become a strong visual symbol on what kinds of people that The State judges to be deviants...
How to survive a public faming: Understanding "The Spiciest Memelord" via the temporal dynamics of involuntary celebrification

(Spatz, 2002). Although these punishments have largely been retired from penal systems, the rise of the Internet has led to similar shame-based techniques of norm enforcement to arise. Rather than grand spectacles orchestrated by The State to enforce criminal behavior as non-normal behavior, public shaming online is instead enforced by individuals and subcultures. Anyone with a social media account can attempt to publicly shame someone by drawing attention to their behavior and explaining how it violates the norms of a community. If successful, this call for attention will snowball into more and more people making similar posts vilifying the shamed person’s behavior, causing the shamed to avoid doing similar behavior again or discourage them from participating in the community again. The violence of online public shaming, thus, becomes less about state-enacted corporeal violence, but instead of reputational damage within a specific environment (Solove, 2007; Ronson, 2015).

Public shaming offers a powerful way to understand how non-normative behavior is regulated through community action. However, there is nothing within these mechanics that require a negative transgression; the framework of bringing mass attention to unusual behavior does not require that behavior to necessarily violate the community’s values. So what if the public gaze turns to behavior that is considered positive or praiseworthy? We call this process “public faming”, the process by which ordinary people can suddenly be propelled to an unsought ephemeral fame as a nominal reward for behavior that aligns with group expectations.

One clear case of public faming can be seen through “Alex From Target” (https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/alex-from-target-alexfromtarget). In 2014, 14-year-old Alex LaBeouf was working at Target when a customer non-consensually took his photo because she thought he was physically attractive. When this picture was uploaded to Twitter, it quickly catapulted Alex to viral fame as hundreds of thousands of teenage girls retweeted his image and mobbed the store where he worked. From this process, Alex enjoyed many traditional aspects of fame, such as being interviewed by large U.S. media outlets and gaining a massive Twitter following overnight. However, Alex also suffered harmful social consequences as he and his family were doxxed [1] and received death threats, forcing Alex to temporarily drop out of school (Bilton, 2014). These dramatic personal attacks are usually associated with public shaming, but instead, they came about because Alex positively embodies conventional teenage beauty standards. From this short example, we see that studying public faming cases can help us better understand public shaming. It’s not the transgression that causes personal harm from public shaming; there is something inherently harmful about unasked-for public attention.

Much like public shaming, cases of public faming have become more common through online networked cultures with similar consequences. The reader has probably never heard of Ken Bone or “plane bae” [2], but they all shared similar arcs with Alex: sudden unsought fame, brief yet extreme public scrutiny, and significant personal backlash. The infinitely fractal nature of the Internet cause these stories of public faming/shaming to repeat endlessly across increasingly specific subcultures and communities (Stanfill, 2020). But where is the academic analysis to help contextualize these stories into a larger framework?

Traditional celebrity studies would describe these cases as “celetoids” or “event celebrities”, a distraction from actual “celebrities” who have longer lasting renown and fame (Rojek, 2001). Celetoids and event celebrities are merely defined in terms of their circumstances, such as reality TV participants or bystanders to a newsworthy event, and are little described in the literature other than as not “real” celebrities (Turner, 2004; Wilcox, 2010). Often, these groups’ 15 minutes of fame are treated as not worthy of study, or even legal protection (Hunt, 2000; Rooney, 2013). Although this focus has changed somewhat with the advent of microcelebrity studies, academic interest has still remained focused on those microcelebrities who are successfully able to self-brand and maintain an audience’s interest over time, such as Instagram influencers and YouTubers (Senft, 2013; Duffy and Pooley, 2017; Abidin and Brown, 2018).

While it may have been safe to academically ignore the effects of fame on celetoids and event celebrities in the past, the increased chance for anyone to be suddenly and non-consensually elevated to public scrutiny makes it imperative that we better understand how public faming occurs and its effects on its unwilling victims. Just as how the increased focus on microcelebrity studies has allowed us to better understand
celebrity not as a single binary status, but as a continuously negotiated process of “celebrification” (Marwick and boyd, 2011; van de Rijt, et al., 2013; Jerslev, 2016), unpacking the concept of public faming will allow us to better understand celebrification beyond just a slow climb to public recognition. Indeed, public faming cases highlight the blind spots in the traditional conceptualization of public and private spheres. Victims of public faming blur the lines between the two spheres, questioning the very notion of what a “public figure” should be. Indeed, as Kadri and Klonick note in their discussion of U.S. free speech laws, which operate more strictly on public figures than private ones:

“It is hard to argue that Alex from Target, a global celebrity with hundreds of thousands of social-media followers, is merely a private figure. Similarly, it is hard to argue that he is a voluntary public figure who thrust himself into the vortex of a public controversy by bagging groceries.” [3]

Part of the difficulty in studying the publicly famed lies in their inherent ephemerality. Since each individual is only in the public gaze for such a short amount of time, no particular individual seems worthy of the time and energy needed to contact them, especially since many researchers already have difficulty accessing more established microcelebrities (Mavroudis and Milne, 2016). However, this lack of cultural staying power/fame is precisely what makes these cases so important to study. As Abidin notes in her taxonomy of Internet celebrity, unlike influencers or other types of meme personalities, there’s a certain kind of pain for local news interviewees who get Internet famous:

“There is little aftercare for eyewitness viral stars; their celebrity is anchored upon the milestone interview rather than any long-term investment in their public persona or personal well-being. Instead, traditional media gatekeepers reduce them into conveyable stereotypes, and they thus have limited agency to control their spiraling fame, image rights, and public perception during the cycle of virality on social media. As they are thrust into the limelight to harness viewer traffic for news networks, journalists seldom take responsibility for the instant visibility of the overnight stars they have created.” [4]

Although Abidin specifically focused on people who became famous through a television interview, we see how their experiences align with Alex from Target’s experience. In all of these cases, they faced a sudden non-consensual appropriation of their image into the public sphere, which they were often ill-equipped to fight or manage for themselves. This becomes particularly pernicious when this image serves to reinforce racial and gender stereotypes, as Abidin notes that black trauma and language often becomes turned into a joke through these interviews (Abidin, 2018b). Therefore, it becomes critical for there to be some academic understanding of what it’s like to be publicly famed and how to regain control of the narrative for both public faming and public shaming victims alike.

To provide this understanding, this paper seeks to understand the general structure behind a public faming — large-scale public actions performed involuntarily on one’s private identity in a nominally positive light — and unpack the effects that this unsought fame has on the individual being famed.

On the theoretical level, this paper extends Jerslev’s concept of celebrity temporalities to introduce a more dynamic understanding of celebritification. Rather than the mostly monotonic progression of microcelebrity’s “temporality of plenty” to traditional celebrity’s “temporality of scarcity” (Jerslev, 2016), we enable a more dynamic interplay by introducing the language of “crashing”, the idea that these two temporalities can suddenly and violently intersect in unplanned ways. This new framing highlights how one’s celebrity identity can be violently re-defined by strangers and better elucidates Abidin’s taxonomy of Internet celebrity, connecting her previously disparate groups of “eyewitness viral stars”, “meme personalities”. and “unwilling memes” under one umbrella of public faming (Abidin, 2018a, 2018b).
After establishing this theoretical framework, we demonstrate its utility for understanding and aiding victims of public faming by using the author’s own experiences as a case study. The author, Lilly Chin, won the 2017 College Championship of the popular American game show, Jeopardy!, with the Internet-savvy final answer of “Who is the Spiciest Memelord?” (Figure 1). This led to a simultaneous combination of extremely fleeting mainstream televised fame and viral Internet fame which suddenly transformed Chin’s identity into a media object. As her image became subject to corporate appropriation from large institutions like Sony Pictures and MIT, her identity simultaneously became up for public commentary from strangers that she found difficult to oppose. We will demonstrate how reading Chin’s situation as a crash between drastically different celebrity temporalities allowed us to better situate her struggles into a larger narrative of public faming and develop the tool of “radical reciprocity” as a way for the individual to reclaim her identity against large cultural forces. Using the tools developed in this piece, we demonstrate how Chin became able to resist being claimed as a blank cultural canvas and re-assert her own narrative by turning media temporalities back against the shamers/famers.

![Figure 1](image)

**Figure 1:** Still of the author’s Final Jeopardy answer of the 2017 Jeopardy College Championship, which resulted in her public faming [5].

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**Background: Adding dynamics to celebrity studies**
The idea of ephemeral fame forced onto ordinary people is not a new concept in celebrity studies; however, the agency and importance of these short-lived stars has largely been ignored until recently. Boorstin’s classic tautological definition of a celebrity being only “known for [their] well-knownness” is borne from his lamentation of “pseudo-events” that are solely constructed for publicity purposes [6]. This sense of unworthiness for the publicly famed is carried forward through later generations of celebrity studies, such as in Rojek’s descriptions of celeoids — “social types who command media attention one day, and are forgotten the other” [7]. Defining them only to distinguish them from celebrities, Rojek constantly discusses celeoids with disdain, ignoring their humanity and calling them mere accessories and artifacts of larger cultural phenomenon. Although he walks back on some of this characterization in later works, recognizing that social media has allowed different avenues to fame such as celebrity memes, he still denigrates celeoids, remarking with constant surprise that these people with “no discernible talents” and “impudent ordinariness” are able to achieve any amount of renown [8]. Given this blinding contempt, it is unsurprising that there is relatively little academic literature investigating the experience of living through a public faming.

This began to shift in the early 2000s, with Turner’s concept of the “demotic turn”, which describes how the rise of reality TV shows was creating more “ordinary celebrities” (Turner, 2004). While the “ordinary” had previously only been understood as a binary opposition to the extraordinary “celebrity”, the demotic turn made the possibility of stardom seem accessible to everyone, adding a pseudo-democratic twist to Rojek’s idea of “celebrification”, the process by which people become celebrities (Turner, 2006). This idea gained more traction with the rise of microcelebrities. Scholars recognized that the networked nature of the Internet liberated the power of “elevating the ordinary” away from traditional media gatekeepers (Marwick and boyd, 2011). The idea of self-branding moved beyond reality television into a more public realm, where whoever could successfully manage their identity like a corporate brand would be able to promote themselves (Hearn, 2008; Marwick, 2015). While not directly addressing the concerns of the publicly famed (who did not consent to this branding of their identity), the establishment of microcelebrity studies helped frame the “ordinary person” as worthy of study, as the lines between public and private spheres became more negotiable (Senft, 2013).

Anne Jerslev makes this negotiation more explicit by redefining celebrification in terms of temporalities of celebrity. She pushes back on the idea of there being a single moment where one turns from an average person to a celebrity, but instead realizes that celebrity formation is a continuous negotiation process between the scarcity and exclusivity of traditional celebrity with the frequent updates and accessibility of microcelebrity. The tension between these two types of temporality allows Jerslev to encapsulate existing tensions of celebrity logics into one complete theory, ranging from the staged photographs of Golden Age Hollywood stars’ “private” lives to the fallout microcelebrity Zoella encountered as she became more traditionally famous (Jerslev, 2016).

However, a critical flaw in Jerslev’s temporality model is the assumption that the celebrity subject has considerable agency in deciding how to engage with both temporalities. Jerslev notes that after Zoella is criticized for becoming too inauthentic for engaging too much with the scarcity temporality, Zoella returns to the temporality of frequent updates in order to maintain her microcelebrity appeal. In other words, Zoella is able to intentionally narrow or widen the gap between her and her fans, depending on her desired form of celebrity temporality. Yet, as Abidin notes in her critique of microcelebrity studies, this assumption of agency is a privilege not accessible to all Internet celebrities, especially those who are already marginalized by race, gender, or cultural exoticism (Abidin, 2018b).

Inspired by the descriptive success of Jerslev’s model and Abidin’s call to action, we seek to expand the temporality framework of celebrification to include publicly famed individuals by unpacking the non-consensual interplay between temporalities. Rather than Jerslev’s “negotiation” of temporalities, we focus on the “crash” of temporalities. By directly evoking the imagery of car accidents and other disasters, we emphasize the sudden violent effect faming can have on a person as their identity is squashed between all of the different pressures that exemplify celebrity logics: ordinary vs. extraordinary, private vs. public,
The language of “crash” also highlights how ephemeral this position of public faming is. A crash is a single sharp moment that must settle down to a more stable, long-tail resting state. Whether this state is a recovery from the crash or a fatal accident depends on the resources of the person before the event, their ability to do the “right” thing in the brief violent instance, and their coping strategies once the disaster has passed. This helps us understand how Abidin’s taxonomic examples of non-consenting Internet celebrities’ outcomes can differ so wildly. While white victims of public faming like Alex from Target may be able to use their privilege to access more codified avenues of fame, the chiefly black “eyewitness viral stars” are unable to command the same resources to turn their public faming beyond a single exploitative event (Abidin, 2018a, 2018b).

Case study and methods: “The Spiciest Memelord”

To demonstrate the utility of our new framework, we proceed with our case study: an autoethnographic study of the author’s own experience being publicly famed after delivering a viral answer of “Who is the Spiciest Memelord?” on the American trivia game show, Jeopardy! Not only does this event directly crash broadcast television’s temporality of scarcity against the Internet’s temporality of plenty as Jerslev describes, but the author’s experience also cuts across several of Abidin’s taxons of Internet celebrity. Specifically, this experience combines the objectification faced by “meme personalities” with the commercial exploitation without proper compensation endured by “eyewitness viral stars” (Abidin, 2018b). The author would like to recognize that this case study does not address Abidin’s concern about Global North perspectives being over-represented in microcelebrity research, although she hopes that her identity as an Asian-American woman with a gender non-conforming appearance helps diversify the current studied cases in the literature.

Case study background and description

Jeopardy! is an American trivia game show that has aired in its current form for over 35 years. Three players play against each other in two rounds of normal trivia questions and a final round where players bet any amount of their current score on their performance of a final question. Although Jeopardy! is regarded as a show for older people, nearly every American is familiar with the show’s name, format, and theme song, largely due to the authoritative demeanor of its late host, Alex Trebek. Since the host is usually the only constant between shows, the majority of Jeopardy! contestants are not widely recognized unless they have a long winning streak (Friedman and Garron, 2018).

Chin participated in a special college version of Jeopardy!, where 15 college students were invited to compete in a tournament bracket version of the show. The viral moment of public faming came at the finals of this tournament on 24 February 2017, where Chin had enough of a lead against her opponents to ensure winning the entire tournament no matter what she bet. It is an unofficial practice for some contestants to put joke answers down for the final round since the host will have to read the response (Lavin, 2016). Chin put down “Who is the spiciest memelord?”, a conjugation of the term “spicy meme” (https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/spicy-memes) to refer to good Internet content (Figure 1). The incongruity of this very Internet-savvy answer on a television show that is typically associated with an older demographic led to rapid Internet fame, in addition to the more mainstream fame that winning a televised game show would normally provide. The viral interest in Chin’s answer was so great that it is possible to pinpoint the air date of the Jeopardy! episode simply by viewing the Google Trends graph for the term “memelord” (Figure 2).

Chin remained involved with Jeopardy! after this event, participating in the 2017 Tournament of Champions, calling in for B-roll footage for the 2018 College Championship, and serving as an alternate for
the 2019 All-Stars Tournament. However, for the purposes of this paper, analysis will be limited to her 2017 College Championship performance to understand the faming moment of “the spiciest memelord”. This period ranges from October 2016 — June 2017, encompassing show tryouts, filming, airing, and aftermath.

Figure 2: Google Trends graph from 2004–2020, displaying clear spike in February 2017, the date of the author’s public faming moment.

Explanation of methods

The field site of this research is a bit unusual, since unlike traditional autoethnographies, the author did not intentionally plan to use her experiences on Jeopardy! as a case study for investigating public faming. There was no way for the author to have known that she would become either conventionally famous or Internet famous from her Jeopardy! experience because she did not know if she was going to win the tournament, let alone become publicly famed. Although this site was not intentionally chosen, the author still kept meticulous contemporary notes about the experience because of her training as a media scholar in undergraduate studies. These notes provided a solid foundation for autoethnographic research to be conducted after the fact, even though the author did not plan to write a paper about her experiences in the first place [9].

Although this fieldwork would be difficult to replicate, it is perhaps the only way to truly understand the tension of identity created through a public shaming/faming event. Since these events are generally extremely ephemeral, it becomes even more critical to have access to as many primary documents as possible — an access that would be difficult to achieve without the involvement of the researcher herself (Mavroudis and Milne, 2016). External analysis can often only focus on the outcomes without understanding the intentions behind the actions, a critical failing of earlier celebrity studies research on celeloids. While the public eye (and academic interest) can forget about the public faming victim, the victim must forever live with the consequences of their one-shot fame. The rare serendipity of having a media scholar be able to report in situ provides a unique opportunity to understanding how identity can
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The chief field notes used for this study were (1) the 2017 Jeopardy College Championship episodes themselves; (2) contemporary blog posts (https://litchin.wordpress.com/category/jeopardy/) that Chin wrote on her personal blog about her Jeopardy! experience; (3) contemporary and retrospective press mentions and interviews (https://lillych.in/press/index.html) with Chin; (4) compiled lists of public comments from Twitter, Reddit, 4chan, Jeopardy! specific fan sites, and others; and, (5) compiled lists of personal correspondence to Chin from Facebook, Reddit, e-mail, and physical mail.

Since this paper is concerned with the differences between internal personal identity conception and external non-consensual identity creation, the author will engage in a bit of non-standard writing practice and mix writing perspectives. To try and maintain consistency, from this point on, the author will use “I/me/my” for her internal conception of her identity, “Chin/she/hers” for external objectification for her identity and “we/the author/her” to refer to research-based decisions. This is a reflection of the difficulty that I have to conceptualize my Jeopardy! performance as truly myself without some self-distancing from my objectification.

Becoming a fleeting media object

It was never my goal to become famous through Jeopardy!, no matter how briefly. I auditioned for the show because my dorm’s resident advisor had been on briefly and advertised the opportunity. As someone good at trivia, it seemed like a fun way to maybe make some money based on otherwise useless skills. Thus, the viral appeal of the “spiciest memelord” comment blindsided me completely, as I mainly directed the comment as a shout-out to my friends back home, forgetting that by hailing them, I was also hailing a subculture of Internet-savvy people who knew what a memelord was while simultaneously being on a game show that was largely watched by 60-year-olds. Although it was not my intention, the entire setup of my “spiciest memelord” comment exemplified the structure of “temporality crash” outlined earlier, forcing a distinctly strange mix of online microcelebrity within a larger traditional celebrity framework.

This experience challenges Jerslev’s framing of a steady transition between microcelebrity to celebrity temporalities. Throughout my Jeopardy! experience, I was forced to work within television’s temporality of scarcity, exclusivity and slowness. Two days of filming in January 2017 were stretched out to become two weeks of television in February 2017 — filming that was only possible due to having tryouts three months prior (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1vraab8YLOU). This slower time scale is an inevitable result of the filming production process, as months are needed to shoot the footage, advertise the event, and edit the final broadcast. This is what leads to Jerslev’s observation that temporalities of scarcity create an air of inaccessible/exclusive celebrity. However, within this larger traditional celebrity framework, I was able to use my limited agency of answering trivia questions on the show to insert a bit of microcelebrity temporal logics through the answer “Who is the spiciest memelord?”. This caused the television show’s temporality to briefly crash into the Internet-based temporalties that I was personally more familiar with.

Rather than giving me a little more control over my situation, this small act of defiance against the dominant temporality quickly became adopted by Jeopardy! itself as a way to promote itself across uncommon temporalities. Immediately after I won my final game, I was asked to provide B-roll footage (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cW817vuD0kc) explaining exactly what “the spiciest memelord” meant to an assumed elderly audience. In this video and in other promotional materials, Jeopardy! took several liberties with my appearance, including editing various icons over my face referencing older memes like Doge (https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/doge), Double Rainbow (https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/double-rainbow), and “Deal With It” sunglasses (https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/deal-with-it) (Figure 3). The Jeopardy! producers recognized that the temporality crash I had inadvertently provided gave them an opportunity to market to a more lucrative
younger age demographic and did all that they could to exploit this unexpected engagement with microcelebrity temporalities. Notably though, since the temporality of scarcity was their dominant form, they were only able to interact with this temporality of newness through incredibly outdated memes. All of the memes referenced in their 2017 promotional materials date from 2010–2013, an age gap which led many Reddit commenters to feel that this was “lame inter-generational pandering” [10].

Figure 3: Snapchat filter and Instagram ad made by Jeopardy! production staff using the Spiciest Memelord tagline.

Though Jeopardy! was able to use their considerable resources to try and navigate both types of temporalities, I was left largely adrift. I never received media training from Jeopardy! beyond threats to not talk about my episode until it airs, using my prize money as a way to ensure my silence. I was thus given no guidance or preparation for how to operate on television’s slower temporality, leading to anxiety as exemplified by this 11 February 2017 blog post:

“The suspense of knowing that I’m going to be a national figure AND famous on the Internet thanks to the ‘spiciest memelord’ AND probably doxxed in some fashion is kind of nervewracking.” [11]
Like a slow-motion car crash, my blog post shows that I was very aware of how the public faming was going to happen but feeling helpless to prepare for it. Furthermore, the time delay made me no longer sure what my actual memories of the event were, forcing me to rely on the packaged edited version of history that Jeopardy! provided to me. Upon first viewing myself on TV, I found that I had actually whited out from sheer adrenaline and had no memory of most of the trivia questions, leading me to just yell at the Lilly Chin on the screen for the entire episode. As further time passes, I have even less clear understanding of what happened, allowing for Jeopardy! to codify more and more of the official narrative. With access to so many publishing channels, Jeopardy! was able to ascribe whatever valences they wanted to my behavior, whether on TV, printed books or B-roll footage on YouTube. Most jarring to me was the official Jeopardy! book framing my audition as me “coming out of my shell”, when I was actually perfectly calm and comfortable [12]. Without access to any resources to combat these messages — and even losing faith in my own memory’s accuracy. I was helpless to conform to whatever narrative Jeopardy! wanted to fit me into.

When the “spiciest memelord” episode dropped, the temporality of newness only added to the anxiety I felt from the temporality of scarcity. I had been carefully collating all of the comments and press coverage I received during my tournament run, but the sheer volume of responses I got on 24 February were so overwhelming that I was unable to process all of the feedback. Rather than not having the tools to act appropriately in the temporality of scarcity, I was now forced to act in the moment against a huge aggregation of responses that were impossible to fully address. Individually, each of these two modes of celebrity temporality were hectic to manage as a single person, but the crash of the two made the task nearly impossible.

Even worse however were the ways that these two forms of fame intersected with one another. Contrary to Jerslev’s framing, where Zoella could engage different sects of her audiences with different temporalities, I had no such agency to control how people saw me. Mainstream television gave me the temporality of exclusivity, but my Internet-hailing response gave me the temporality of approachable authenticity — the combination of which meant many people thought Lilly Chin was fair game to contact. The confusion between these two temporal logics was compounded by Jeopardy! essentially doxxing me — giving out my last name, my hometown, and my age out to any stranger watching. As an old television show, this level of information may have been fine due to the temporality of scarcity providing enough of a social shield to prevent people from contacting me, but given the current era’s temporality of plenty, no such protection was to be found. I received so many messages directly to my personal e-mail, Facebook, Reddit, and phone number that even my friends and family were caught in the crossfire (Figure 4). My similarly-named friend Lily Chen had to make a public post on Facebook asking people to not message her, while my parents received fan mail for me at their home address and phone number — something that neither I nor Jeopardy! ever made public.

In these messages, the audience tried to claim Lilly Chin’s identity for themselves, compounding the damage being done by Jeopardy!’s own narrative claiming. According to Senft, one part of microcelebrity logics is that “Identity, once believed to be the property of the bearer, now belongs to the perceiver” [13]. This bore out in the many private and public messages I received as people claimed that Chin was a Trump supporter because of her use of memes, that Chin was a powerful symbol of American immigrant excellence, or that Chin was a dirty foreigner stealing spots on an American game show (Figure 5). Not only did people want to use Chin as a blank symbol to paint their political perspectives onto — the typical way that exclusively “newsworthy” events are commented on in the public sphere, but in a microcelebrity twist, the audience also wanted to inform me what identity they had decided to give Chin. This external identity construction also played out in the gender sphere. My gender non-conforming appearance meant that I received the whole range of gender-based harassment. If Chin was perceived as a woman, I received ratings of my sexual attractiveness, dick pics, and threats of panty stealing. If Chin was perceived as a man or transgender, I would receive transphobic remarks, dissecting my name, voice and hairstyle to determine my “real” gender (Figure 6). Although Jeopardy! itself, again, did not provide any support against these harassers, I was able to find support through the unofficial former contestant groups, which provided links to anti-doxxing resources as well as provide solidarity by sharing their stories, whether privately or in public articles (Lavin, 2016).
Figure 4: Sample of comments sent directly to the author’s e-mail and personal Facebook.

Figure 5: Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit comments non-consensually using Chin as a symbol for various political ideologies.

Overall, the experience left me deeply uncomfortable about how the world perceived Lilly Chin. As an up-and-coming Ph.D. student, I wanted to be known as a researcher on my own terms, but I kept getting invited to exclusive conferences and speaking engagements based on my Jeopardy! fame. Even my own advisor introduced me to sponsors as a Jeopardy! champion first before describing my research, leading me to reluctantly buy in more and more with the narrative set for me by the large institutions. Meanwhile, I
became hesitant interacting with strangers in daily life, knowing anyone of them could’ve been a person sending me harassment in my inbox. With a complete lack of media training to handle either interview requests or harassment, I was forced to act as an incompetent PR firm for a self-brand that I did not believe in nor want.

And yet, at the same time that I was failing at pretending to be a microcelebrity brand, the actual corporations were spinning aspects of my personality into commodities: constructing Lilly Chin’s identity to match their own goals. In a near match of how Abidin describes the exploitation of eyewitness viral stars, both Jeopardy! and MIT reproduced Chin’s image across their broadcast channels in order to further their own goals without considering how this would affect my identity down the line. Both MIT and Jeopardy! wanted my fluency with the temporality of plenty to enhance their pre-existing dominance with the temporality of scarcity. MIT did so by uploading Chin’s image as official MIT GIPHY gifs (https://giphy.com/gifs/mit-jeopardy-memelord-1cPUTMzlNlbiY), while Jeopardy! emulated the creepy Photoshop jobs from Reddit (Figure 7) in their own viral marketing (Figure 3). The photo edits made me feel particularly uncomfortable; even though Jeopardy!’s edits were nowhere near as intrusive as Reddit’s, the idea that my image could be so easily played with disturbed me. When my sense of reality has already been fragmented by not knowing whether my memories are more accurate than Jeopardy!’s tapes, seeing myself be digitally groped by celebrities accused of sexual assault or given fake sunglasses reminded me of the agency I had lost over my image.

In short, my public famed made it nearly impossible for me to completely set the tone of my own narrative. To engage well with the temporality of scarcity, I needed to maintain a certain amount of distance from myself and the public. To engage well with the temporality of plenty, I needed to be able to pick and choose the individual aspects of myself to promote. Neither of these options were, however, available to me since I was publicly famed, leaving me unable to choose which temporality I wanted to pursue. Instead, the image of Lilly Chin became free for everyone to remix at will; any choice that Jeopardy! or MIT or Internet photo editors performed on my image would reflect back on Lilly Chin which I could no longer jettison to save other aspects of myself, like “burgeoning researcher” or “non-cringey human”. Much like the “unwilling celebrities” cited by Abidin, the small resources of the individual were no match for an appealing narrative. Although the Internet made it easier for me to get my counter-narrative out, I had nowhere near the resources of a full advertising agency to change the narrative for me.
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Figure 6: Twitter and Reddit comments discussing the author’s gender.

Figure 7: Reddit users’ Photoshops of the Spiciest Memelord moment, forcing Chin’s image into sexual
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assault and body horror scenarios.

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**Fighting back through radical reciprocity**

While it is difficult for an individual to reclaim their agency completely against these large scale non-consensual identity creations, we can still offer a small amount of hope to take control of some amount of the narrative. By using whatever privilege one had before the crash of public faming, one can possibly manage the aftermath of the event by flipping the logics of the celebrity temporalities back on itself. We define this as “radical reciprocity”, the practice of reducing the impact of public faming by (1) contextualizing individual faming actions within a larger platform; (2) recognizing what affordances this platform has; and, (3) putting the spotlight back onto the famers by using the reverse direction of those affordances. In other words, radical reciprocity works by helping one to critically separate ones image from one’s identity, understand how the image is being attacked and use those same methods of attack against the attacker. We will analyze how radical reciprocity looks for our case study along the temporality of scarcity and plenty.

Reclaiming a narrative through the temporality of scarcity is by far the more common approach. By recognizing that one is a celebrity now, no matter how minor, one can use their small fame as a platform to claim their own narrative. This practice can sometimes be seen in viral tweets, where people market their SoundCloud or social justice efforts under their main tweet. Initially, this was how I sought to manage my Jeopardy! experience, taking part in semi-codified celebrity behaviors like conducting interview with radio outlets or hosting an Ask Me Anything Q&A session on the Jeopardy! subreddit. This allowed me to at least ensure that my narrative was out there and that some audience, no matter how small, would be able to hear my point of view un-mediated by Jeopardy! or other large institutions. Later, this turned into more celebrity activism style behaviors, like using my on-campus fame at MIT as a platform for protest (https://twitter.com/crystaljjlee/status/1172623840901554178), calling for change in the MIT senior administration for treating women of color like myself as disposable. This approach of radical reciprocity has the obvious issue that non-celebrities have with activism: whether or not people listen is dependent on already having the privilege to be heard before the public faming occurred. Since relying on the temporality of scarcity requires treating the fame given through public faming as legitimate, this method often entrenches existing power structures and declares that public faming is a positive un-traumatic experience.

Reclaiming a narrative through the temporality of plenty offers a more subversive approach. Since networked communication is much newer than broadcast media, there is less understanding of what affordances are available to reverse on these newer platforms. Under temporality of scarcity, the only difference between platforms is the size of the audience you speak to. Fighting large institutions on these slower, exclusive temporalities seems like a losing proposition just by sheer differences in resources. Instead, taking ideas from microcelebrity temporalities can give us new ways to subvert these power structures by forcing them to participate in faster-paced temporalities, which they already know they are ill-equipped to respond to. This is reflected in Jeopardy! and MIT’s eagerness to use Chin’s image for their own brands as they tried to fill some hole for a new mastery.

I was inspired to try this approach from a 2016 Jeopardy! College Champion finalist Niki Peters, who combatted trolls by retweeting all of the hateful comments about her into a single Twitter account (@ubaroqueitbuyit [https://twitter.com/ubaroqueitbuyit]). Peters recognized that the platform of Twitter meant that she didn’t have to let her harassers set the pace; instead, by retweeting comments on her own feed, Peters removes agency from them by sending their messages on her own timescale. Even though Peters does not provide any commentary to the attacks, this simple act of curation suddenly highlights the systems that led to her public faming in the first place, dulling the blow of any one specific remark. Once
these comments seem to follow a formulaic pattern, it becomes significantly easier to dismiss their actions in aggregate. Indeed, when I made my own comment compilation, the remarks soon felt petty and even hilarious. When racist remarks are in the same space as complaints about bad trivia gameplay, it becomes a lot harder to take the former as seriously. Even though Twitter did not intend for one’s personal Twitter profile to be used as an archive of other people’s bad comments, using the technology in this way helps subvert the original content of personal attacks.

I used this same technique of reversing the temporality of plenty against a serial sexual harasser in my Facebook inbox. A stranger who had seen me on Jeopardy! repeatedly sexually propositioned me, despite me muting and ignoring him, which ultimately resulted in an unwanted dick pic. Rather than block him, I went to his Facebook page and let his friends and family know that he was sexually harassing me with proof. Much like my public faming, my harasser suddenly was confronted with how the very same search functionality that led him to reach out to me could be used against him. Reversing the temporality of plenty onto him made him realize that he was just as much of an accessible microcelebrity as I was. Although his family members did not believe my claims of sexual harassment, he ultimately blocked me and no longer bothers me.

It’s important to note that all of the ways that I personally used radical reciprocity could be viewed as cases of public shaming/cyber-bullying. Using my Jeopardy! fame as a platform to call out MIT on its poor treatment of minorities or embarrassing my sexual harasser to his family are all aggressive behaviors that rely on declaring a behavior deviant and worthy of scorn. This suggests that, without some level of moderation, applying radical reciprocity as a default solution could result in a dangerous cycle of non-consensual identity creation. It is also unclear how much larger institutions can be forced into a crisis of the temporality of plenty, considering how comfortable they are in the temporality of scarcity. Nevertheless, considering how limited the resources of the publicly famed can be, the author hopes that this framework helps give new ways to reclaim narratives to the dispossessed and cast fault on those who have the resources to handle it.

Conclusion

In this paper, we laid out the groundwork for understanding sudden acts of non-consensual identity creation beyond just public shaming. By adding more theory to the previously ignored categories of celetoids/event celerities, we were able to come up with a classification of “public faming” events that also helped merge Abidin’s existing taxons of Internet celebrity as well. We did this by expanding on the idea of Jerslev’s “celebrity temporalities”, emphasizing how these temporalities can crash into one another and not just smoothly transition, especially in cases where the famed has little agency over which temporality they engage with. We demonstrated the versatility of this theory by unpacking the author’s own case study of viral fame through a television show, providing a theoretical way to understand both her loss of identity as well as provide her with the tool of “radical reciprocity” to attempt to reclaim the narrative.

One of the tools that this paper provides is how contextualizing individual actions into a broader framework can serve as a powerful tool to cope with identity gain or loss. Whether it’s re-defining celebrity as a negotiation between temporal logics or weakening the blow of identity-based attacks by fitting them into a larger pattern, being able to personally track the systemic forces gives us the basic foundation to begin pushing back against them. Although I am still deeply ambivalent about the digital reputation my brief Jeopardy!-based public faming has given me, writing this paper and grappling with what societal forces cause this faming has helped me move on from the experience and recognize that attention alone is not necessarily a net positive or negative. I sincerely hope that this analysis will not only help academics better value the lives of the publicly famed/shamed, but also give solace to those grappling with unwanted attention and its aftermath.
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Notes

1. Doxxing refers to broadcasting personally identifying information online, often to aid in harassment.

2. Ken Bone was a man who asked a question in a 2016 U.S. presidential town hall debate, becoming viral due to his appearance ([https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/ken-bone](https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/ken-bone)). “Plane Bae” was a couple that met in 2018 on an airplane who had their meeting (nonconsensually) live tweeted through the entire flight ([https://www.theverge.com/2018/7/9/17544354/plane-bae-rosey-beeme-euan-holden-sousveillance-livetweeting](https://www.theverge.com/2018/7/9/17544354/plane-bae-rosey-beeme-euan-holden-sousveillance-livetweeting)).


4. Abidin, 2018a, p. 46.


7. Rojek, 2001, p. 21


10. Sidebar description on /r/FellowKids, where the Instagram ad was posted: [https://www.reddit.com/r/FellowKids/comments/73sh18/ad_for_me_on_instagram_i_physically_cringed/](https://www.reddit.com/r/FellowKids/comments/73sh18/ad_for_me_on_instagram_i_physically_cringed/).

How to survive a public faming: Understanding "The Spiciest Memelord" via the temporal dynamics of involuntary celebritification


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