

Life After Death:

The Discursive Construction of Kobe Bryant and Caroline Flack Post-Death on Twitter

Hope Reiner

Academic Year 2019/20

Research Project of the MA in International Studies on Media, Power, and Difference

Department of Communication

Universitat Pompeu Fabra

Life After Death: The Discursive Construction of Kobe Bryant and Caroline Flack

Post-Death on Twitter

Abstract

The overall purpose of this study is to discover how the images of Kobe Bryant and Caroline Flack are discursively constructed on Twitter post-death and what these differences and similarities say about the construction of celebrity. The design of the study includes a quantitative content analysis and qualitative thematic analysis of a sample of 100 tweets with 100 or more retweets for each celebrity after their deaths. The major findings of this study conclude that the discourse for each celebrity is predominantly positive, however Kobe Bryant is referenced positively more frequently in relation to his character and career while the discourse surrounding Flack focuses on conflicts surrounding her death. Kobe Bryant is most commonly referenced as talented, a legend, and an inspiration in reference to his career while being referenced as a good guy, a family man, and someone larger than life in reference to his character. Caroline is most commonly referenced when bashing the media for bullying her into suicide. Conflicts relating to Bryant were minimal and referenced as something he overcame, while Flack faced more scrutiny for her wrongdoings. These findings indicate that a celebrity's profession is linked with definitions of work and talent (definitions that are gendered).

Keywords: Kobe Bryant, Caroline Flack, Twitter, celebrity, discursive construction

Academic Paper: This article was written for publication in the journal, *Celebrity Studies*, published by Routledge/Taylor & Francis and ranked 1st Quartile (Cultural Studies) by Scopus database.

Table of Contents

1. Abstract.....	1
2. Introduction.....	3
3. Literature Review.....	4
4. Methodology.....	15
5. Results.....	17
6. Discussion.....	19
7. Conclusion.....	23
8. Graphics.....	25
9. References.....	28

Introduction

As social media and celebrity news continue to hold a prominent space in the lives of the public, so have responses to celebrity death. This can first be seen through the death of Princess Diana in 1997 (Thomas 2008). Whether individually affected by a celebrity death or not, people are regularly exposed to discussions regarding these deaths as people gravitate towards social media to express grief, opinions, and thoughts during these times. Two recent cases in particular that have taken the world by storm are that of former NBA player, Kobe Bryant who passed on January 26th, 2020 as a result of a helicopter crash, and *Love Island* television host, Caroline Flack who committed suicide on February 15th, 2020.

Due to celebrity news becoming more popular as time progresses with the help of social media, it is worth inquiring about how these platforms assist in shaping the narratives and images of a celebrity after they die. Previous studies have looked into the effects of media and celebrity death, although more research is necessary to fill gaps in existing knowledge. Some studies focus on responses of grief specifically, while others look at the discourse surrounding celebrity memorials and ceremonial events (McCurdy 2010, Sanderson and Cheong 2010).

Through the use of cultural and celebrity studies, the purpose of this study is to examine and determine how people discursively construct the images of celebrities on Twitter after they pass, specifically using the case of Kobe Bryant and Caroline Flack. The research questions that guide this study ask how the images of each celebrity are discursively constructed on Twitter post-death, how they are different and/or similar, and what these similarities and differences say about the construction of celebrity in general. This study highlights an interesting topic within

the celebrity studies field that discusses the social impact of celebrity, and furthers knowledge within the field that has been previously analysed.

Literature Review

This analysis aims to understand how Twitter is utilized to discursively construct images of a celebrity post-death, specifically using the recent cases of Kobe Bryant and Caroline Flack. This area of research is important, as social media has heightened celebrity culture and has transformed the ways in which people receive information, communicate, and form opinions. This literature review discusses the construction of celebrity along with various studies and academic works that investigate topics surrounding multiple celebrity deaths and their relation to media, and public reactions and engagement both on and offline. This sheds light on what types of research relating to celebrity death discourse have been previously conducted, how it can be of use to future research, and the knowledge gaps that must be filled.

Celebrity Studies

In order to understand the effects of social media on constructing images of celebrities after they die, celebrity itself must first be understood. Celebrity is a topic that has been explored using a variety of methods. Today, we have cultural studies research to thank for the prominent development of celebrity in academia, as we now use the framework developed within this field to analyse the idea of celebrity. Celebrity can be defined as simply a famous person or someone who is well-known, however various scholars have elaborated on this definition as well.

One significant shift that has changed the idea of celebrity over time is that the term celebrity no longer applies strictly to movie and television stars; celebrities now come in many

forms and are capable of attaining high celebrity status without being seen on-screen. Chris Rojek (2001 cited Holmes 2005, p. 10) elaborates on this idea by stating that there are three kinds of celebrity: ascribed, achieved and attributed. Ascribed celebrities attain status through lineage, whereas achieved celebrity is gained through personal achievement, and attributed celebrities obtain status through focused media representation (Holmes 2005, p. 10).

It is clear that today's society has gravitated towards attributed celebrities with assistance from the media. It is also worth noting, as Gaeme Turner (2004 cited Holmes 2005) describes and authors such as Holmes believe, that the term celebrity does not just apply to a certain group of people through empirical observation, but rather is discursively constructed by how a person is represented. This idea of celebrity will prove useful when analysing how both Kobe Bryant and Caroline Flack are viewed in the eyes of the media and the public.

As this study aims to analyse celebrities famous for different reasons, it is essential to look into the scope of celebrity that exists in today's society. The meaning of celebrity has vastly shifted as a result of the 'demotic turn,' defined as the rapid and increasing production of 'ordinary' celebrities often seen through reality television platforms (Turner 2006, p. 153). According to Dyer's book *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*, the construction of celebrity directly relates to the ability to see one's authentic self. If one is to become famous without real talent, then they must portray themselves as authentically as possible to make up for this (Dyer 1986 cited Holmes 2004). As a result of this turn, fame is now more widely accessible than it once was; television and reality have become just as intertwined as famous and ordinary people.

Just as the media as a whole has the ability to shape the ways in which people view the world, reality television can speak to perceptions of class attitudes and how that relates to the

construction of celebrity. The rise of the reality television star has created more views on the undeserving celebrity who is seen as outside of the legitimized definitions of talent and merit (Holmes 2004, p. 111). Through reality television, a new kind of exposure has developed specifically for the white, working-class, celebrity chav female, which is used as a basis for judging class distinctions through symbolic and cultural capital (Tyler and Bennett 2010, p. 377). By using this demographic as reality stars, class inequality is maintained through more than simply monetary value, but uses their capital or lack thereof as a means of judging/shaming, and setting the basis for what kinds of people are considered superior/inferior, and normal/abnormal (Tyler and Bennett 2010, p. 377).

Jade Goody, 2002 *Big Brother* contestant and one of the first celebrity chavs in the UK, was often victim to public scrutiny, positioning her at the forefront of the instruments of class-making (Raisborough *et al.* 2013, p. 252). Because this embodiment of the celebrity chav often coincides with the ignorant, white, working-class female, this also means, as Skeggs (1997 cited Raisborough *et al.* 2013, p. 253) describes, that proper femininity is reserved for those within the middle-class. Through these depictions seen on reality TV, audiences are encouraged to reject the working-class and the characteristics associated with it, showing that discussions of celebrity act as a foundation for where class attitudes are constructed (Raisborough *et al.* 2013, p. 255). Although contestants may not actually be rich, as Sconce's (2004 cited Holmes 2012, p. 143) states, being on the show puts them in a privileged space where they are points of judgement for the public's hate for the undeserving rich.

Turner and Holmes' position on the discursively constructed celebrity can also be applied to the idea of deserving and undeserving celebrities (Mendick *et al.* 2015). Unlike reality stars,

sport stars are associated with talent and *are* believed to be deserving of fame. As a result of this perception, fans gain strong emotional attachments to sport stars that surpass a simple love for sports, leading to the development of fantasy connections between themselves and the athlete. This fictional relationship is known as invasive egoism (Rojek 2006, p. 674). The more media exposure a sports star is given, the more support invasive egoism has as news about the sport star's life is considered a significant moment in the life of the fan as well. This is able to happen through the rise of satellite television, the rise of the desire for physical health, the need to sustain masculinity, and monetary power of the sports industry (Rojek 2006, p. 682-683).

Through these ideals, the sport celebrity has become a staple icon within popular culture, as they are able to move freely within many elite spaces. They also act as prime examples of how people should live their lives: through extreme determination and discipline. Rojek also suggests that with the decline of religion and traditional family structures, people are more likely to look to these stars as a means of inspiration (Rojek 2006, p. 687). These ideals are certainly prevalent today, and likely will have an impact on how people view Kobe Bryant when discussing him post-death.

What is interesting about people's perception of the media is that, as Nick Couldry (2003 cited Turner 2006, p. 160) defines, there is a false understanding that the media is the center of the social world, known as the 'myth of the media centre.' That being said, if the media takes this idea and acts as the legitimate face of society's center, then the content it provides will have a strong influence on both society and culture, and how people view reality (Turner 2006, p. 161).

Celebrity Death and Understanding Celebrity

Due to celebrity becoming an essential piece of today's popular culture, it is worth understanding the role it plays within society and within celebrity death discourse. Chris Rojek argues that there are vast similarities between the way people treat celebrities and religion. Because organized religion has become less popular over time, celebrities have filled that space for both individuals and society as a whole. Durkheim argues that this shift is a result of an increase in moral individualism; leading organized religion to become less important (Rojek 2001, p. 56). Since religion is no longer a staple of Western culture that provides a sense of belonging, celebrity has now become essential in providing a sense of community in secular society (Rojek 2001, p. 58).

Regardless of this notion, secular society is rooted in Christianity. This means that the ways in which failure and success are determined within celebrity culture are similar to those of religion (Rojek 2001, p. 74). Rojek makes it clear that celebrity is a means of distraction from an increasingly religious-less world filled with structural inequalities only religion could alleviate through eternal salvation. As a result, we live in a materialistic society to ignore the meaninglessness of life and the social inequalities within society while strengthening the influence of commodity culture (Rojek 2001, p. 90).

Now that the construction of various types of celebrity have been thoroughly discussed, it is essential to look at specific cases of celebrity death studies and celebrity death coverage. Here, topics such as how celebrity death impacts how we understand celebrity, and the concept of mourning rituals are mentioned.

The platform that changed the ways in which celebrity death was covered was *Entertainment Tonight*, using the deaths of actors Natalie Wood and John Belushi in 1981 and 1982 (Magee 2014, p. 291). This work used content analysis and interviews in order to better understand how this shift in media coverage progressed. *Entertainment Tonight* was the first show to take the idea of celebrity tabloids and make it into television. Through this platform they shared celebrity news and gossip, especially regarding celebrity death. As stated by Kitch and Humes (2012 cited Magee 2014), through this coverage *ET* was able to blend the past and present and public and private figures in attempts to create an underlying message that produced ideas surrounding death and mourning. This television coverage, using tools such as videos, stories and more also made the audience feel as though these deaths were personal to their lives (Magee 2014, p. 295).

It is essential to note this case as it has shaped the ways in which celebrity death is covered today. Now when a celebrity passes, is it the standard to see interviews from loved ones of the deceased, along with commentary on the life and death of the celebrity at-hand. The death of Wood introduced these ideals, but it wasn't until the death of Belushi a few months later that other news sources started to follow suit. Now, it is considered normal for regular news stations to discuss celebrity news as well, and the more scandalous the death is, the more coverage it receives (Magee 2014, p. 299). Not only are these discourses seen on television, but they have now gravitated towards social media as well, leading one to believe that analyzing online death discourses holds value in relation to the current state of celebrity and popular culture.

Aside from the first staple cases of celebrity death coverage of Wood and Belushi, one of the first essential cases that has shifted the way in which both media and the public frame and

discuss celebrity death is that of Princess Diana in 1997. One study in particular aims to dissect the perception of mourning in the media during the time of her death using quantitative analysis methods, and how it relates to the portrayal of widespread agreement among the masses (Thomas 2008). This study is relevant as research shows that the public often gages what reactions to celebrity death are appropriate based on what they see in the media, which could very well have an effect on Twitter discourses as well. Both Princess Diana and Kobe Bryant also had tragic, untimely deaths, making reactions to their death potentially similar.

When the death of someone as famous as Princess Diana occurs, the media often displays a portrayal of national unanimity. However, as time passes the discourses can change and reveal less-popular opinions surrounding a celebrity death. Although the media portrays a sense of communal mourning after the death of Princess Diana, surveys show that most people did not engage in mourning or watch the funeral, and over 40% complained of over-coverage of her death (Thomas 2008, p. 364). These portrayals, opinions and responses to Princess Diana's death could very well be similar to those of Kobe Bryant, however the scope of the research is limited to surveys, and does not allow for an in-depth, qualitative analysis.

A component that is arguably important to one's ability to empathize with celebrity death is whether or not they see the celebrity as 'one of them.' Although it is more likely for fans of Princess Diana to react to her passing, it was not a necessary component for grieving. This can be argued as a response to mass media's ability to condense the world into a 'global village,' creating a new type of connection people feel towards celebrities, regardless of the authenticity of this interaction (Thomas 2008, p. 369). This global village has certainly strengthened with the rise of social media as well.

Another celebrity death that took the media by storm was Michael Jackson's. When doing a content analysis of his ceremonial events, like many other studies, it is noted that social media and constant news cycles play a significant role in over-saturating celebrity news and audiences' exposure to it (McCurdy 2010). Because Jackson's death was a topic of discussion both online and offline, the internet also became a space to receive news about this and engage with others. Due to such high online traffic, it appears that collective individualism, '...viewing the media event not from a communal screen or as a communal event but streamed to a personal screen as a personalised event (Dayan 2009),' is becoming the standard when engaging in media events (McCurdy 2010, p. 237). This idea of collective individualism and need for engagement could also play a role in the online responses to the deaths of Kobe Bryant and Caroline Flack.

Responses to ascribed and achieved celebrity deaths such as the ones mentioned above always gain a large, positive response from the media. One may assume that this is not the case for attributed celebrities, however the unusual case of Jade Goody proves otherwise. Regardless of how the public initially viewed Jade, the discourse shifted when she became diagnosed with cancer as it is frowned upon to speak ill of the dying (Raisborough *et al.* 2013, p. 257).

Jade went from being considered a trashy, celebrity chav, to a strong-willed, dying mother doing what she could for her children while breaking taboos about death. This example shows the relationship between not only celebrity and class-making, but also how the framing of celebrity death in the media helps shape our understanding of celebrity. It will be interesting to see how similar ideas may contribute to depictions of Caroline Flack post-death.

Celebrity Death and Mourning Rituals

Mourning rituals are also a staple component of understanding responses to celebrity death. Another celebrity death that had a great effect on the public is that of crocodile hunter, Steve Irwin. In an article discussing the effects of his death on public mourning, it is noted that pilgrimaging to the Australian Zoo allowed people to connect with others who are also grieving (Gibson 2007, p. 1). Although social media does not allow for physical pilgrimage, it certainly acts as a space for users to come together and express grief communally. Similar to Diana and other beloved celebrities, what all mourners of Steve Irwin have in common is the belief that the celebrity they're mourning is admirable in their work and their life (Gibson 2007, p. 1). Steve Irwin was viewed as an honest working man, who was the same person in private and public spheres, making it easy for many to empathize with his death (Gibson 2007, p. 2). This idea will be interesting when analysing tweets regarding Kobe Bryant, as communal mourning is still in the process of taking place. It will also be interesting to see whether these ideals hold true for Caroline Flack, a celebrity whose work was not deemed as credible as Irwin or Bryant.

Another celebrity death that acquired a substantial reaction from the masses was David Bowie. When analysing responses to his death using discourse analysis, one study uses Twitter specifically to examine how the platform functions in relation to interactions between celebrities, fans, and popular culture (Van den Bulck and Olof Larsson, 2019). This is relevant because Twitter is the platform of choice in analysing Bryant and Flack's death as well. Using tweets with the hashtag '#Bowie' from the first 48 hours after his death, the study applies both qualitative and quantitative analyses in order to gather information regarding online mourning, bridging gaps between journalism, celebrity, and fan studies.

Although Twitter is believed to be a space to share ideas, previous research notes that some believe it to be another platform that does not change celebrity-audience hierarchies (Van den Bulck and Olof Larsson 2019, p. 312). Through this analysis, it was discovered that there was a lack of negative parasocial expressions, meaning people did not have negative things to say about Bowie himself. This also indicates that any controversial things Bowie may have been involved in during his life were forgotten (Van den Bulck and Olof Larsson 2019, p. 314). Knowing this, it will be worth noting whether or not the same can be said for Bryant and Flack's negative press. Although limited to the first 48 hours, a specific hashtag and a specific celebrity death, this study acts as a key example of prior research that has been conducted and can be expanded on in relation to celebrity death discourse on Twitter.

Responses to celebrity death can display a variety of emotions. One emotion in particular that is seldom studied in relation to celebrity death responses is nostalgia. Using quantitative methods, this study, conducted by Gall Myrick and Fitts Willoughby (2019), investigates feelings of nostalgia and how it contributes to both prosocial behavior and the social sharing of information. Although the study is focused on the case of Mary Tyler Moore and her health advocacy, this study can show how people who have feelings of nostalgia after a celebrity death behave, allowing it to be applied to other studies. Based on the rise of constant news cycles and social media, it is hypothesized that the more news one sees on Mary Tyler Moore, the more likely they are to identify with her and exhibit feelings of nostalgia, therefore displaying prosocial behaviors such as donating to a cause or sharing with others (Gall Myrick and Fitts Willoughby 2019, p. 3). Although limited to a quantitative method, this study can be elaborated on through newer studies of celebrity death using more specific, qualitative methods. These

findings are important as they could also potentially be a predictor of online responses to Bryant and Flack as well.

Another study aimed to analyse how grief discourse is communicated online as a response to Michael Jackson's death, applying a thematic analysis of platforms Twitter, TMZ.com and Facebook. This study uses a stratified random sample to collect postings, while using the five stages of grief to analyse them. Through this analysis, it is discovered that religious discourse is commonly used when talking about Jackson's death, and that many people also took it upon themselves to defend his legacy, often applying religious factors to this defense (Sanderson and Cheong 2010, p. 332). Through this study it is made clear that people gravitate towards platforms where they can express themselves in regards to a celebrity death. Through this expression, people establish the ways in which they believe a celebrity should be remembered by, and defend their honor if necessary. These findings can only speak for Michael Jackson, however it opens doors to analyse further online discourses of celebrities after they pass.

Overall, there is a stable foundation of research concerning both the construction of celebrity and celebrity death discourse and media on various platforms. It appears as though people rely on social platforms to express themselves in different ways when a celebrity passes, and that the constant celebrity-based media the public receives plays a significant role in this need for engagement. These studies assist in discovering what to expect or examine when conducting future research on this topic, however more in-depth, qualitative analyses seem necessary to fill the gaps of knowledge regarding celebrity death discourse. By conducting a qualitative discourse analysis on how people construct Kobe Bryant and Caroline Flack's image

post-death on Twitter, this study will be able to expand on the knowledge previously gathered, with reference to something happening in the present-day, and see how it relates to the construction of celebrity as a whole.

Methodology

The main topic of the research for this study is celebrity death and how it is discussed on social media. In order to better understand this two case studies have been chosen: Kobe Bryant and Caroline Flack. The reason these two case studies were selected for this analysis is because they are two very different celebrities in terms of their career paths, their gender, and their representations of deserving and undeserving celebrities. Kobe Bryant is known for his 20-season basketball career with the Los Angeles Lakers from 1996 to 2016, entering the National Basketball Association straight out of high school. One of the main conflicts surrounding Bryant was his sexual assault case from 2003 regarding a hotel employee who claimed he raped her. The case was dropped since the victim refused to testify, however she later filed a civil lawsuit which was settled out of court, with Bryant denying all allegations and claiming their sexual encounter was consensual. Caroline Flack is known for radio presenting, acting, winning the 14th season of *Strictly Come Dancing* in 2014, and presenting on various shows such as *X-Factor* and *Love Island*. The main conflict surrounding Flack regards a domestic assault case from December of 2019 where she allegedly hit her boyfriend in the head with a lamp. Flack pleaded not guilty to the charges against her.

Due to their differences, conducting a comparison in the discursive construction of their images on Twitter is productive in furthering knowledge in the field of celebrity studies and

more specifically, celebrity death. The research questions that are to be answered through this study are the following: ‘How are the images of Kobe Bryant and Caroline Flack discursively constructed on Twitter post-death? How are these discourses similar and/or different? What do these similarities and differences say about the construction of celebrity?’

The method used for this research contains a random sample collection of tweets, using qualitative thematic analysis to properly examine the sample and identify recurring themes, along with quantitative content analysis to accurately quantify the data collected. Some staple studies that have applied similar qualitative thematic analysis and quantitative content analysis methods consist of the works of Van den Bulck and Olof Larsson (2019) who also looked at Twitter discourses surrounding the death of David Bowie and that of Sanderson and Cheong (2010) who used discourse analysis to analyse various online platforms in relation to online grief discourses surrounding Michael Jackson. Both studies act as prime examples of productive ways of utilizing thematic, discourse and content analysis that have proved useful in understanding this methodology prior to conducting this study.

In order to conduct this research, tweets were the sample used for analysis, using tweets starting from the day of both Bryant’s death on January 26th, 2020 and Flack’s death on February 15th, 2020 and onward. 100 tweets were collected per celebrity that had to contain the words ‘Kobe’ and/or ‘Bryant’ and ‘Caroline’ and/or ‘Flack’ and must have had at least 100 retweets. The sample for both celebrities must have contained either a description of their character, a description of their career and/or discussions of conflicts surrounding them or their deaths. These categories were chosen in order to identify how people view the celebrities as a person, how they view their careers and how they view the conflicts surrounding them.

The purpose of using a sample of 100 was to collect a significant amount of tweets that have had substantial reach as seen through 100 or more retweets to see how the images of each celebrity is discursively constructed in relation to the most important aspects of their celebrity lives. The samples collected were then analysed using qualitative thematic analysis, where the three main categories were further analysed and sub-categorized to see more specifically what people were saying about each celebrity. Quantitative content analysis was also applied to the samples to quantify the topics within the sample collection.

After collecting one hundred tweets for each celebrity, all usernames, verification statuses, the dates of the tweets, the content of the tweets, the visuals used, the number of retweets and whether the tweets discuss their character, career, or conflict(s) were coded. This allows us to see what discourses dominate the conversation surrounding each celebrity. Shown below is a portion of the table that was used to categorize and code the sample tweets.

Twitter Username	Verified?	Date of Post	Content of Post	Use of Visuals	# of Retweets	Character-Related	Career-Related	Conflict-Related to Kobe	Conflicted related to Kobe's Death
@balldontstop	no	04/01/2020	Kobe's game	1 minute video c	100		yes		
@NBAMemes	no	04/02/2020	Kobe was on a	picture of exerpl	505		yes		
@SportsCenter	yes	03/20/2020	"Keep working	video of Kobe ta	6,000		yes		
@_JBanks_	no	02/24/2020	Kobe's love for Vi	no	22,500	yes			
@JarbasFaria	no	2/24/2020	Kobe learned hov	no	12,100	yes			
@r0bato	no	02/24/2020	Shaq says the da	video of Shaq s	93,300	yes	yes		
@shondarhimes	yes	02/24/2020	Said goodbye to	picture of Kobe	551	yes	yes		
@JDMorgan	yes	02/24/2020	Watching the	no	565		yes		
@AudelDelToro	no	02/24/2020	Kobe &	video of Kobe ta	11,100	yes			
@33643pts	no	02/24/2020	Still the best	picture of Kobe	6,500	yes			
@TalbertSwan	yes	02/10/2020	"@GayleKing	link to Gayle Kir	427				yes

Table 1

Results

These research findings apply to the case study of how people discursively construct the images of Kobe Bryant and Caroline Flack on Twitter after their deaths. This was done in order

to see how they are viewed in relation to various parts of their lives, to see how these representations of their images are similar and/or different to one another, and what this says about the construction of celebrity in general.

For Kobe Bryant, 48.8% of tweets referenced him in relation to his career which dominated the discourse, while tweets discussing his character followed close behind at 43.9%. There were minimal tweets discussing conflicts surrounding Bryant (1.6%), and a handful of tweets discussing conflicts surrounding his death (5.7%), mainly aimed at the media for rushing inaccurate reports on the accident that led to his death, and backlash at Gayle King for bringing up his sexual assault case from 2004 during an interview with a friend of Bryant's [*chart 1 page 28*]. The most common discourses surrounding Bryant's career refer to him as talented, an inspiration, a legend, as well as referencing his 'Mamba Mentality,' which was an alter-ego of sorts that Bryant created that demonstrated his intense work ethic and strive to always be better than the day before [*image 1 page 29*]. In reference to his character, Bryant was most commonly mentioned as a family man, an overall good guy, and someone who was larger than life [*image 2 page 29*].

In Flack's case, conflict surrounding her suicide dominated the discourse on Twitter (72.3% of tweets), with the majority of people bashing the media and cyber bullies for leading Caroline to her death [*image 3 page 30*]. Her death was also mentioned in reference to other public figures who have faced similar media scrutiny, using her as an example of how media can have a tragic effect on people in the spotlight. Followed by death conflict were references to her character (16.1% of tweets), where she was discussed in relation to her infectious personality, her kindness, being an amazing person, and one reference to her beauty and talent. Next followed

discussions revolving around conflict in Caroline's life, where all tweets within this category reference a lack of pity for her death due to her domestic abuse case that had taken place in December of 2019 (8.9% of tweets) [*image 4 page 30*]. There was seldom mention of Flack in relation to her career (2.7% of tweets), where there was one mention of her success and one mention of her bubbly presenting on the reality television series, *Love Island* [*chart two page 28*].

Discussion

Based on the results of the analysis, the discourse surrounding Kobe Bryant post-death on Twitter discursively constructs his image most commonly as talented, a legend, and an inspiration through his successful basketball career and as seen through his 'Mamba Mentality.' He is also seen as a family man, an overall good guy, and someone who was larger than life. As Kobe Bryant was someone who was widely well-known due to his success in the NBA, he fits the standard definition of a celebrity: a famous person or someone who is well-known. More specifically, he fits under Rojek's definition of an achieved celebrity: where his status is gained through personal achievements (Holmes 2005, p. 10).

Through Kobe's professional achievements, he acts as a prime example of the construction of the sports icon. Sports icons are associated with talent and are believed to be deserving of fame. As a result of this perception, fans have gained strong emotional attachments to Bryant over the course of his career that surpass a simple love for basketball. This emotional attachment leads to the development of fantasy connections between themselves and Bryant, known as invasive egoism (Rojek 2006, p. 674). The more media exposure Bryant was given

throughout his career as he became more successful, the more support invasive egoism had as news about his life is considered a significant moment in the life of his fans as well. These notions directly correlate to the discursive construction of Kobe's image after his death on Twitter.

Bryant and sports icons alike also act as a prime example of how people should live their lives: through extreme determination and discipline (Mendick *et al.* 2015). It is also worth noting that in today's secular society, with the decline of religion and traditional family structures, people are more likely to look to these stars as means of inspiration, as many did with Bryant (Rojek 2006, p. 687). Not only did Bryant represent the value of hardwork, but his ability to be seen as a star is also due to the rise of the desire for physical health, and the need to sustain masculinity in today's society (Rojek 2006, p. 682-683).

Kobe's image wasn't only discursively constructed on Twitter for his athletic talent after his death, he was also seen as a family man and an overall good person. This positive viewing of his life outside of basketball is also due to how the media frames stardom through blending public and private spheres and portraying a perception of intimacy to his audience. As Dyer suggests, the construction of celebrity directly relates to the ability to see one's authentic self (Dyer 1986 cited Holmes 2004). Fans of Bryant believe through his media representations, that he is in fact authentically himself in both public and private realms, assisting in the positive construction of his image after his death on Twitter. By viewing Kobe Bryant as a good guy who loved his family, many people were able to empathize with his death because they saw him as 'one of them' (Holmes 2005). This can be argued as a response to mass media's ability to

condense the world into a 'global village,' creating a new type of connection people feel towards celebrities, regardless of the authenticity of this interaction (Thomas 2008, p. 369).

Although there was some mention of conflicts surrounding Bryant, mainly in reference to his sexual assault case in 2003, it was seldom mentioned and was always referenced as if it was something that he overcame in his life. Similar to the case of David Bowie, this indicates that there was a lack of negative parasocial interactions online, and any controversial things Kobe may have been involved in during his life were forgotten (Van den Bulck and Olof Larsson 2019, p. 314). Through the discursive construction of Bryant on Twitter post-death, it is evident that the term celebrity does not just apply to a certain group of people through empirical observation, but rather is discursively constructed by how a person is represented (Holmes 2005).

In the case of Caroline Flack's image being discursively constructed on Twitter post-death, the discourse varies quite a bit from that of Kobe Bryant. Conflict surrounding Caroline's death dominated the discourse, which comes as no surprise since she committed suicide due to intense public scrutiny from both the media and cyber bullies in regards to her recent domestic assault charge from December of 2019. When Caroline was referenced in relation to her conflicts, they were also all in relation to her assault charge, where many people displayed a lack of sympathy for her because of what she had allegedly done. That being said, Caroline still had a number of people reference her in a positive light, with mention of her as an amazing person, her infectious energy, and her kindness being most common.

Unlike Bryant, Caroline's career was seldom mentioned, with one reference to her success and one mention of her talent. As Caroline was most commonly known as a reality

television host, she could be considered an attributed celebrity who obtained status through focused media representation, and not through personal achievement (Holmes 2005, p. 10). Due to Caroline's career field and gender, she acts as an example of the production of the 'demotic turn,' defined as the rapid and increasing production of 'ordinary' celebrities often seen through reality television platforms (Turner 2006, p. 153, Mendick *et al.* 2015). Because Caroline gained fame predominantly through reality television, something that is not typically associated with talent and merit, she is considered by many an undeserving celebrity (Holmes 2004, p. 111). This idea of deserving and undeserving celebrities supports the fact that a lack of sympathy was shown by a number of people on Twitter in regards to her death.

Caroline's career on *Love Island* also represents the notion that being on the show puts her in a privileged space where she became a point of judgement for the public's hate for the undeserving rich (Holmes 2012, p. 143). Not only are careers in reality television considered unworthy of fame and success, but they also amplify the production of the celebrity chav. Although Caroline does not fit all of the characteristics of a celebrity chav such as unintelligence, a working-class persona and bigotry, her profession is still connected to these ideals as is her biggest conflict: her domestic abuse charge. Flack's abuse charge also indicates to the public that she was not the same person in public and private spheres, demonstrating a lack of authenticity which as a result leads to a lack of identifying with her as a person (Holmes 2004, p. 114).

Overall, the discursive construction of the images of Kobe Bryant and Caroline Flack post-death on Twitter differ greatly. These differences are mainly due to the different types of celebrities they were, the different career paths they took, the differences in their deaths, and the differences between their representations within the media. Both celebrities were mentioned in

positive light, although Kobe Bryant's were much greater than that of Flack's. What all mourners who spoke positively had in common was the belief that the celebrity they're mourning is admirable in their work and their life.

Although both faced conflicts throughout their careers, they were still seen positively by many, indicating that regardless of their conflicts it is frowned upon to speak ill of the dead (Raisborough *et al.* 2013, p. 257). The fact that Caroline faced more scrutiny than Bryant also indicates that one's profession as well as one's gender may determine the amount of backlash one receives in regards to conflicts.

Conclusion

This study focuses on the discursive construction of celebrities post-death on Twitter. It contributes to the previous knowledge within the field of celebrity studies because it focuses on various aspects of celebrity including audience perception, media coverage, celebrity construction, death discourse and how they all tie into the use of social media. It is significant because both celebrity and social media are a staple part of modern society, and analysing the two aspects together can speak on how today's popular culture impacts society on an individual and collective level. Social media is an aspect of celebrity culture that has only recently been able to have a large impact on how people consume news and contribute to the discourse, so it is essential to incorporate into celebrity studies research moving forward.

Through this research on the idea of celebrity in relation to the discursive construction of the images of different celebrities post-death online, it is clear that there is a false understanding that the media is the center of the social world, known as the 'myth of the media centre'

(Couldry 2003 cited Turner 2006, p. 160). The ‘myth of the media centre’ can be seen through media representations of both Flack and Bryant, and how these same representations are discursively constructed through people on Twitter. That being said, if the media acts as the legitimate face of society’s center, then the content it provides will have a strong influence on both society and culture, and how people view reality (Turner 2006, p. 161). This idea directly relates to the construction of celebrity and the discursive construction of celebrities as shown through the cases of Kobe Bryant and Caroline Flack.

This study also indicates that there is a gendered distinction between public and private spheres. Portrayals of deserving celebrities such as Bryant are more focused on career and achievements, whereas undeserving (feminized) celebrities such as Flack are more focused on private life than public. There is also a clear dynamic between mourning rituals and celebrity discussion. Mourning rituals and obituaries generally highlight the good in a person as it is frowned upon to speak ill of the dead and is a way of paying tribute to the lives they have lived. This is seen through the majority of the discourse surrounding the celebrity discussions of both Flack and Bryant.

Although this study acts as a point of reference to future research on online celebrity death discourse and celebrity construction, it is limited in only being able to speak specifically on the two cases of Kobe Bryant and Caroline Flack in relation to their character, careers, and conflicts as seen through Twitter. This research encourages future analysis on celebrity studies, perhaps further looking into the discourses surrounding celebrities before they die vs. after they die, or comparisons on perceptions of celebrities based on gender and class differences, along with perceptions of each as seen through social media.

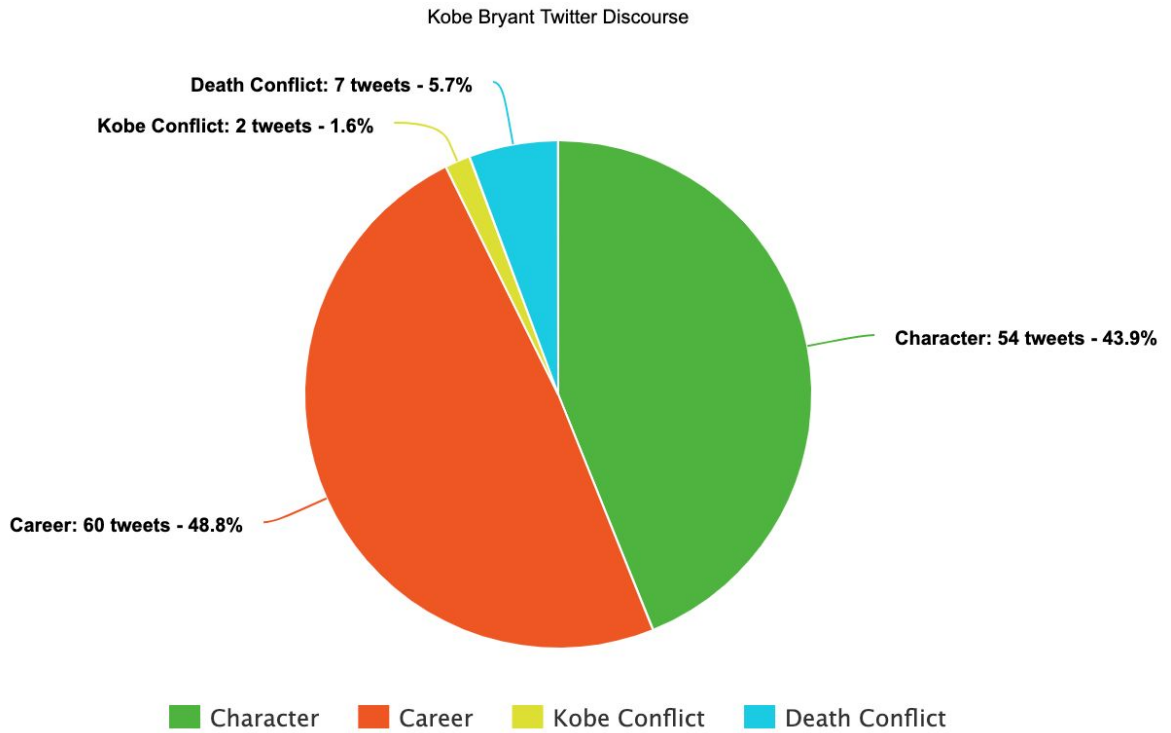


Chart 1

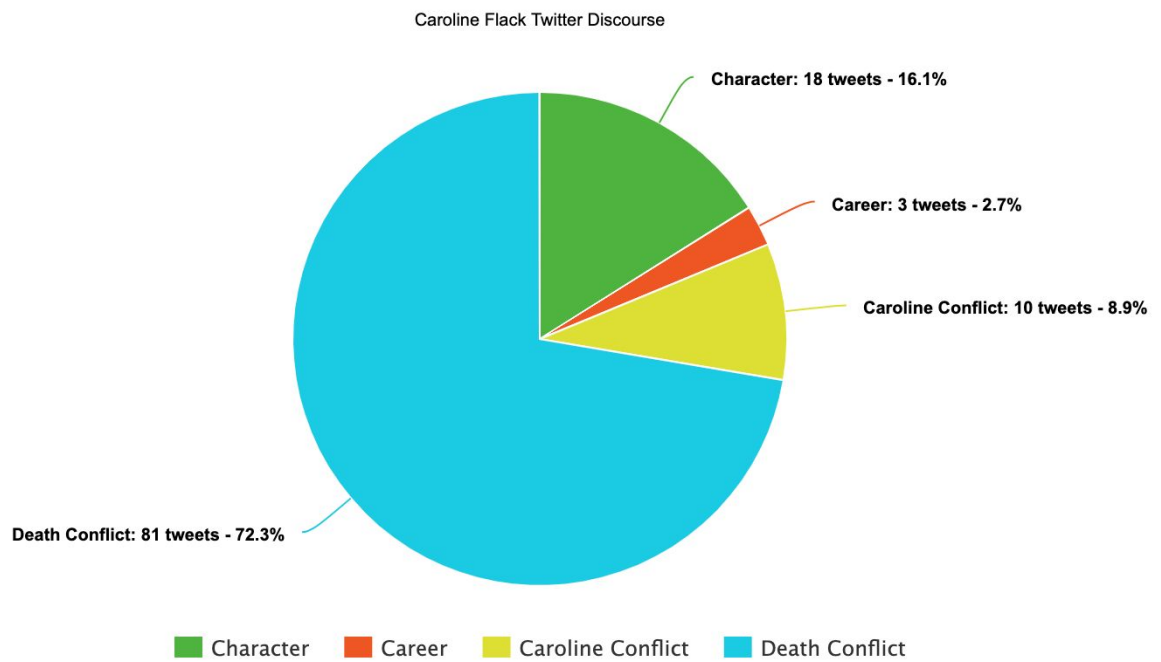
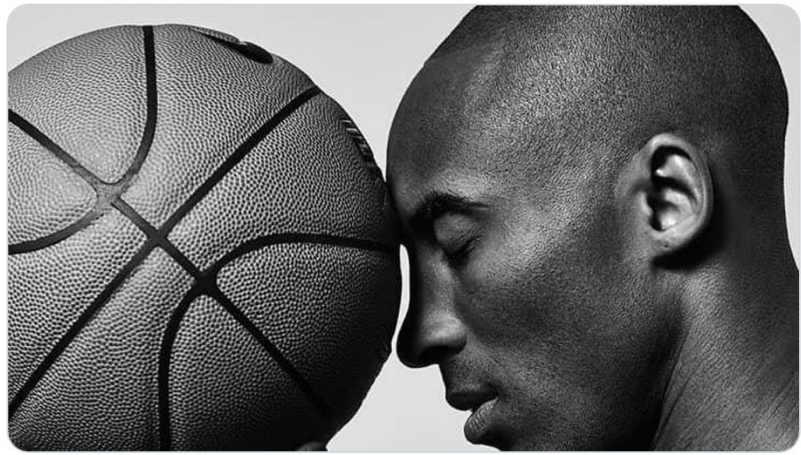


Chart 2



Cristiano Ronaldo @Cristiano · Jan 26

So sad to hear the heartbreaking news of the deaths of Kobe and his daughter Gianna. Kobe was a true legend and inspiration to so many. Sending my condolences to his family and friends and the families of all who lost their lives in the crash. RIP Legend



3.9K 106.9K 790.3K

Image 1



SHAQ @SHAQ · Jan 26

Kobe was so much more than an athlete, he was a family man. That was what we had most in common. I would hug his children like they were my own and he would embrace my kids like they were his. His baby girl Gigi was born on the same day as my youngest daughter Me'Arah.



3.7K 171.4K 1.2M

Image 2



Jordan Coombe  @Jordan_Coombe · Feb 15

Absolutely devastating news about Caroline Flack. This isn't suicide this is manslaughter from the media. Absolutely blown her life upside down. Things happen behind closed doors.

 108

 3K

 16.9K



Image 3



Guts @MrMeeds · Feb 15

The media didn't kill Caroline Flack. Stop that. She assaulted her boyfriend and ruined her life by doing so. She then lost her job and has now killed herself.

Stop pushing the blame on the media.

 278

 1.5K

 8K



Image 4

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

No funding was provided to conduct this study.

Biographical Note

Hope Reiner is a graduate student at Pompeu Fabra University majoring in International Studies on Media, Power, and Difference. She received her undergraduate degree from Roger Williams University in Communication and Media Studies. Her research interests include topics surrounding celebrity, social media, and popular culture.

References

- Gall Myrick, J., and Fitts Willoughby, J., 2019. The role of media-induced nostalgia after a celebrity death in shaping audiences' social sharing and prosocial behavior. *Journal of health communication*, 24 (5), 461-468.
- Gibson, M., 2007. Some Thoughts on Celebrity Deaths: Steve Irwin and the issue of public mourning. *Mortality*, 12 (1), 1-3.
- Holmes, S., 2004. 'All you've got to worry about is the task, having a cup of tea, and what you're going to eat for dinner': Approaching celebrity in Big Brother. *In: S. Holmes and D. Jermyn, eds. Understanding reality television*. London: Routledge, 111-135.
- Holmes, S., 2005. 'Starring... Dyer?': Re-visiting star studies and contemporary celebrity culture. *Westminster papers in communication and culture*, 2 (2), 6-21.
- Holmes, S., 2012. It's a jungle out there! : Playing the game of fame in celebrity reality TV. *In: S. Holmes and S. Redmond, eds. Framing celebrity: New directions in celebrity culture*. Abingdon, Oxon, Eng: Routledge, 140-170.
- Magee, S., 2014. Rest in Mediated Peace: How Entertainment Tonight's coverage of Natalie Wood's and John Belushi's deaths helped shape celebrity death coverage today. *Celebrity studies*, 5 (3), 291-304.
- McCurdy, P., 2010. The King is Dead, Long Live the King: Meditations on media events and Michael Jackson. *Celebrity Studies*, 1(2), 236-238.
- Mendick, H., et al., 2015. 'We can get everything we want if we try hard': Young people, celebrity, hard work. *British journal of educational studies*, 63 (2), 161-178.
- Raisborough, J., et al., 2013. Media and Class-making: What lessons are learnt when a celebrity chav dies? *Sociology*, 47 (2), 251-266.
- Rojek, C., 2001. Celebrity and religion. *In: B. Bullen and P. Hamilton, eds. Celebrity*. London: Reaktion Books, 51-100.
- Rojek, C., 2006. Sports celebrity and the civilizing process. *Sport in Society*, 9 (4), 674-690.
- Sanderson, J., and Cheong, H., P., 2010. Tweeting prayers and communicating grief over Michael Jackson online. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, 30 (5), 328-40.
- Thomas, J., 2008. From People Power to Mass Hysteria: Media and popular reactions to the death of Princess Diana. *International journal of cultural studies*, 11(3), 362-76.

Turner, G., 2006. The Mass Production of Celebrity: 'Celestoids', reality TV and the 'Demotic Turn.' *International journal of cultural studies*, 9 (2), 153-165.

Tyler, I., and Bennett, B., 2010. 'Celebrity Chav': Fame, femininity and social class. *European journal of cultural studies*, 13 (3), 375-393.

Van den Bulck, H., and Olof Larsson, A., 2019. 'There's a Starman Waiting in the Sky': Mourning David #Bowie on Twitter. *Convergence*, 25 (2), 307-23.