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# Losing Parasocial Friendships over Celebrity Politics: A Cognitive Discrepancies Approach

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**Losing Parasocial Friendships over Celebrity Politics: A Cognitive Discrepancies Approach**

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### **Abstract**

The present study examines four cognitive discrepancy management strategies that media users can employ in response to a celebrity making a political statement that runs contrary to their beliefs. The experiment ( $N=382$ ) replicates the results using three celebrities and two attitude object contexts. Exposure to a celebrity making political statements that the media user disagrees with resulted in weaker PSRs with the celebrity and attribution of lesser importance to that issue. Viewers who particularly liked the celebrity prior to the study were more likely to decouple the actor from their line of work in order to continue enjoying the actor's media content despite their political disagreement. These findings illuminate the potential consequences of celebrity politics for both the media figures' stardom and the citizens' political participation.

*Keywords:* Parasocial relationships, Celebrity politics, Political homophily, Social media

### **Public Significance**

Entertainment celebrities often voice their stance on various social issues. The study examines the consequences of this practice, showing that although entertainers can leverage their celebrity status to attenuate public opinion, it might come at the cost to their popularity. These findings can inform efforts to maximize the impact of political advocacy, enhance celebrity management practices, and promote political participation.

### **Losing Parasocial Friendships over Celebrity Politics: A Cognitive Discrepancies Approach**

In her 2017 acceptance speech for a lifetime achievement award at the Golden Globes, Meryl Streep poignantly criticized President-elect Donald Trump. In response, Trump unleashed a fierce counterattack on social media, calling the actress “overrated” (Barraclough, 2017). In all probability, among the millions of Americans who voted for Trump, there had to have been people who also loved Streep. How did these individuals reconcile their liking of the two media personalities that had now become vicious political adversaries?

Many entertainers use their celebrity to make a statement on political causes – from endorsing presidential candidates to advocating for social issues. While research, overall, suggests that celebrity’s political activism can significantly impact public opinion (Garthwaite & Moore, 2013), it remains largely unknown how these efforts are met by individuals across the aisle and what the cost of taking a stance on controversial political issues are. How do media users manage the incongruence between their liking of the media personality and their disagreement with the celebrity’s politics? To shed light on these questions, the present study examines four cognitive discordance management strategies that media users can employ in response to celebrities’ political statements that run contrary to their beliefs.

#### **Celebrity Politics**

Celebrity involvement in U.S. politics can be traced back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as celebrities promoting Liberty Bonds during World War I (Brownstein, 1992) and actors campaigning for the Republican presidential nominee Warren Harding (Morello, 2001). A century later, celebrities continue to play an important role in politics. For example, in the 2020 Presidential elections, the roster of celebrities endorsing the Democratic Party nominee sported

major pop stars such as Justin Timberlake and Taylor Swift. In addition to casting support for a political candidate, celebrities are also vocal on various specific political issues – from actor Sean Penn demonstrating against the war in Iraq, to NFL player Colin Kaepernick protesting against police brutality.

Ample research in other strategic communication contexts has documented the tremendous impact that celebrity endorsements can have on media users. For instance, when implemented properly, this strategy can boost consumers' brand attitudes and purchase intentions (for meta-analysis, see: Knoll & Matthes, 2017) and promote the adoption of various health behaviors (for a meta-analysis, see: Kresovich & Noar, 2020). Similarly, celebrities seem to exercise their influence on media users in the political domain, enlisting the public's support for social policies, mobilizing citizens to vote, and fostering support for specific political candidates (Brown, 2020; Oldenburg, 2015). Famously, Garthwaite and Moore (2013) estimated that Oprah Winfrey's endorsement of Barack Obama for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination netted over one million votes and increased voter turnout overall. Celebrities' impact was thought to be particularly pronounced among younger and less politically involved voters who are generally less likely to pursue political information and thus would rely more heavily on heuristics such as celebrity endorsement (e.g., Knoll & Matthes, 2017; Kresovich & Noar, 2020).

Celebrities' involvement in politics is not received without controversy. Some scholars deem it to be a populist and less sophisticated form of citizenship (for review: Nolan & Brookes, 2015). From this perspective, celebrity politics give too much power to individuals who lack credentials, therefore hijacking the democratic process (Aecher et al., 2020). Others, on the other hand, see it as an opportunity to increase political participation among otherwise disengaged

citizens (Nownes, 2012; Veer et al., 2010; Loader, 2016). In this view, celebrities should be praised for leveraging their popularity to promote social causes.

Young media users echoed this ambivalence. Young adults in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia expressed concerns about the celebrities' potential power to influence social issues despite lacking expertise and accountability (Loader et al., 2016). Others, loath celebrity politics as a publicity stunt and are critical of celebrities partaking in political campaigns (Nisbett & DeWalt, 2016). Nonetheless, young people appear to be generally approving of celebrities using social media for political speech (Nisbett & DeWalt, 2016). They are simply curious to know what their favorite media figures think about important social issues (Loader et al., 2016).

Past research has demonstrated that youngsters rely on celebrities' social media for cultivating a parasocial relationship (PSRs) -- the illusion of an interpersonal bond between the audience members and the media personality (e.g., Bond, 2016). Celebrity's self-disclosure, such as posting stories and photographs that offer a glimpse of their personal lives, promotes media users' parasocial relationships with the media figures and leads to greater user engagement (Kim & Song, 2016, Tukachinsky, et al., 2019). In a similar vein, celebrities' political social media posts offer a sense of immediacy and authenticity in connecting to the celebrity, exposing youth to the media figures' worldviews and beliefs (Nisbett & DeWalt, 2016). Such political social media posts can, therefore, contribute to parasocial bonding with the celebrity.

Past research has shown that homophily (Tukachinsky et al., 2020), and particularly attitudinal homophily (Turner, 1993), wherein individuals believe their worldview to match that of the media figure, promotes a sense of closeness to one's liked media figure. However, this finding raises questions regarding the potential effect of incongruence between the media users'

and the celebrities' expressed political views. What happens if the media figure divulges a political stance that the media user opposes?

Celebrities seem to be cognizant of the potential toxicity of this situation and tend to be strategic when casting public support for social causes. This caution brings celebrities to gravitate towards non-contentious causes (e.g., stopping hunger in Africa) that would not spark controversy or tarnish their reputation. Even when celebrities make a stand on more partisan issues (e.g., LeBron James' social justice activism), it is done in a very calculated manner, in fear of compromising the celebrity's star status and alienating fans with a different worldview (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017).

Understanding the effects of such incongruence is particularly important in the case of younger media users, given the critical role that celebrities play in their psychological development (Stever, 2011). In adolescence, celebrities constitute role models that inform the teenagers' emerging identity. In young adulthood, celebrities provide an important experience of safe intimacy and social comfort. These deep and meaningful relationships that young people form with media personalities uniquely position celebrities to penetrate young media users' political apathy and promote political engagement (e.g., Austin, et al., 2008; Inthorn, et al., 2011). However, the impact of exposure to celebrities' political speech was examined mostly in non-contentious contexts. While celebrities and scholars express concern for the potential negative ramifications of taking a political stance audiences disapprove of, there is little empirical examination of this question. Thus, the consequences of exposure to celebrities' counter-attitudinal political speech remain largely unknown. The current study makes a step towards filling the gap by exploring young adults' responses to disagreement with celebrities' political social media posts.

### **Political Homophily and Social Relationships**

People generally prefer the company of others whom they find to be similar to themselves, particularly in terms of attitudes and world views (Montoya et al., 2008). This homophilic preference has been explained by the fact that communication with like-minded individuals is more efficient and friction-free (Rogers & Bhowmik, 1970). Consequently, friendships and romantic relationships form mostly along political lines (Buliga et al., 2021; Buliga & MacInnis, 2020). Regardless of their political leaning, Americans surround themselves with friends that share their political worldview and loathe those who disagree with it (Iyengar et al., 2012). Recently, 24% of Democrats stated that they would not be friends with someone who holds opposing political views as them (Sanders, 2020) and 39% of Americans declared that they would not date someone who identifies with a different political party than them (Ballard, 2020).

Homophily not only drives relationship formation, but also plays a role in maintaining existing ones. Political issues are increasingly seen as morality and justice issues, and by extension, people's political stance is viewed as a reflection of their ethics and values. Thus, relationships fold under pressure and individuals lose mutual respect due to political disagreements (Smith, 2020). No matter what side an individual is on, people typically see themselves as fair and reasonable and deem the other side irrational or even immoral (Ballard, 2020). Consequently, political disagreements become much more personal, leading to drastic steps, including termination of friendships and marriages (Smith, 2020; Whitesides, 2017). Similarly, in the context of social media, individuals feel morally superior to others with an opposite political worldview and "unfriend" them (Neubaum et al., 2021), particularly when someone takes offense to their post or expresses public disagreement (John & Dvir-Gvirsman,

2015). Not surprisingly, then, people have become more cautious of expressing their beliefs. Recently, 62% of Americans reported that they avoid voicing their beliefs because they fear others may find them offensive (Ekins, 2020). When individuals do speak their mind, those who oppose their views face a cognitive incongruence find themselves torn between their commitment to the friendship and their political stance.

### **Theories of Managing Cognitive Inconsistencies**

Several of the early psychological theories of persuasion developed in the 1940s and 1950s (for review: Newcomb, 1968b) examine how individuals manage cognitive inconsistencies that arise when there is a mismatch between an opinion a person holds about another entity (e.g., object, person, event, etc.). Collectively, these theories maintain that to achieve a balanced state, either the relationships between these three elements should all be positive, or two of the relationships can be negative, and the third one should be positive. These two balanced states feel comfortable and will be resistant to change. Any other combination of relationships between these cognitive elements would be unbalanced, resulting in a psychological tension that individuals would be motivated to resolve by changing the discordant cognitive elements. Newcomb (1968a), further built on this theorization, positing that the motivation for achieving symmetry depends on the intensity of the person's initial sentiments towards the other entity and the perceived severity of the discrepancy between the other entities. Equilibrium can be achieved by either changing the other person's attitude towards the third entity or by changing one's own attitude towards the other person or towards the matter they disagree on.

### ***Response to Disagreement With a Celebrity***

The cognitive discrepancy management theories suggest that to reconcile the incongruence between the audience member's liking of the celebrity and the celebrity's objectionable political stance, media users can employ one of several strategies. Generally speaking, they can be classified as attitude modification and rationalization strategies.

**Attitude modification.** First, cognitive dissonance can be resolved through attitude change by modifying one of the two incongruent beliefs (Jarcho et al., 2011; Starzyk et al., 2009). In this case, audiences would change their attitude towards the celebrity or their attitude towards the political issue. After all, the entire *raison d'etre* of entertainers making public political endorsements is to use their celebrity status to impact their fans' political beliefs. However, while attitudes on some topics can be relatively amendable, attitudes that are central to one's worldview, addressing important issues that individuals are more heavily invested in and committed to, will be highly resistant to change (Bodenhausen & Gawronski, 2014). The alternative to changing one's political belief to align it with that of the celebrity is to change one's attitude towards the celebrity.

Detachment from a celebrity is not a task that should be taken lightly. Parasocial relationships that media users form with celebrities generally employ the same psychological mechanisms that underlie non-mediated social relationships (Tukachinsky et al., 2020). These PSRs can be deep and meaningful, and thus their termination (dubbed parasocial breakup, PSB) can be a painful experience (Eyal & Cohen, 2006) akin to responses to non-mediated relationship dissolutions. Social exchange theories suggest that when interpersonal relationships are under strain, individuals who are deeply invested in and committed to the relationship avoid risking a breakup. Instead, they tend to prefer passive conflict resolution strategies, such as displaying loyalty to their partner (Homans, 1961; Redmond, 2015). Following the same logic, the intensity

of the media users' prior engagement with the transgressed celebrity will make a PSB more painful and, thus, a less likely course of action.

In sum, which attitude is going to be changed – that concerning the celebrity or the political issue – should, therefore, be determined by their relative importance. The stronger individuals feel about the political issue at hand, the harder it would be for them to modify that attitude. Conversely, greater investment in the celebrity will make it costlier to undergo a parasocial breakup from that media personality. Although, to our knowledge, research has not specifically examined the effect of political disagreement with celebrities on PSRs termination, several studies examined media users' reactions to celebrities' moral transgressions (e.g., Hu, 2016). In line with the above theoretical propositions, these studies found that individuals are more likely to forgive celebrities for relatively minor misbehaviors that are presumably not as central to their moral self-concept. This tendency is particularly prevalent among individuals that had a stronger connection with the celebrity in the first place (Hu et al., 2018).

Taken together, it is hypothesized that exposure to a celebrity expressing a political stance that is incongruent with that of the media user, will result in several cognitive discrepancies management strategies. First, individuals can restore balance between the discrepant cognitions through attitude change: (H1) reducing PSR with the celebrity; or (H2) changing their own attitude towards the issue. It is hypothesized that the strength of the attitude prior to the occurrence of the dissonance determines whether this, now incongruent, cognition will be modified. Those who felt less strong about the celebrity to begin with will be more likely to reduce their PSR with the celebrity, whereas holding a less firm belief on the political issue will make audiences more open to adopting the celebrity's stance:

H1a: Media users exposed to an actor expressing attitudes that are incongruent (vs. congruent) with their own stance, will report lower PSRs with that actor.

H1b: The effect in H1a will be moderated by prior liking of the celebrity such that the effect of disagreement with the actor on PSR strength will be more pronounced among those who liked the actor less prior to exposure to the celebrity's incongruent political speech.

H2a: Media users exposed to an actor expressing attitudes that are incongruent (vs. congruent) with their own stance, will report lower support for the actor's position.

H2b: The effect in H1a will be moderated by prior attitude intensity such that the effect of disagreement with the actor will be less pronounced among those who held more moderate opinions on the issue prior to exposure to the celebrity's incongruent speech.

**Rationalization strategies.** Attitude change is only one way in which individuals can manage the dissonance, and a costly one at that. Instead, individuals can attempt to rationalize and reframe the conflicting beliefs in a way that would trivialize the discordance. This notion has been recently demonstrated in a study on public responses to then-Republican Presidential candidate, Donald Trump. Gabriel et al. (2018) found that the PSR media users had with Trump as a reality show personality resulted in a propensity to believe his positive political statements while discounting his controversial statements as not something he intends to act on. In fact, self-identified Democrats were particularly prone to disregard Trump's negative statements.

Relatedly, individuals can dismiss the importance of the issue, thereby rendering the dissonance less bothersome (Starzyk et al., 2009; Jarcho et al., 2010; McGrath, 2017).

In the case of celebrity moral transgressions, media users can also engage in moral decoupling, by differentiating between their judgment of the media personality behavior and the

celebrity's line of work. In so doing, audiences can condemn the entertainer's misbehavior without paying the full price of detachment from that media figure. For example, Wang and Kim (2019) found students who read a news story about a celebrity's minor transgression (assaulting a paparazzi) used moral decoupling to allow themselves to enjoy the actor's work while also disapproving of his behavior. Similarly, Hu (2016) found that reading a news story about an actor's misbehavior damaged the PSR with him but did not reduce the audiences' PSR with the character he played. This finding implies that, at least some of the time, audiences are able to maintain a distinction between the actor and the character portrayed by that actor. This decoupling, in turn, allows media users to continue enjoying the work of an actor whom they find personally reprehensible.

Thus, it is hypothesized that individuals use rationalization strategies for managing cognitive discrepancies: (H3) decoupling support for the celebrity and the celebrity's political position; or (H4) underplaying the importance of the issue. Here, again, prior liking and attitude strength are expected to moderate media users' response. Specifically, it is hypothesized that:

H3a: Media users exposed to an actor expressing attitudes that are incongruent (vs. congruent) with their own stance, will express lesser support for the actor's work.

H3b: The effect in H3a will be moderated by prior liking of the celebrity such that the effect of disagreement with the actor will be more pronounced among those who liked the celebrity more prior to exposure to the actor's incongruent political attitudes.

H4a: Media users exposed to an actor expressing attitudes that are incongruent (vs. congruent) with their own stance, will rate the issue as less important to them.

H4a: The effect in H4a will be moderated by prior attitude intensity such that the effect of disagreement with the actor will be more pronounced among individuals who had more

moderate attitudes towards the issue prior to exposure to the actor's incongruent political attitudes.

## Method

### Study Overview

The study has been approved by the authors' Institutional Review Board. Data were collected using an online platform during the Fall 2019 semester. Upon consenting to participate in the study, students were asked a series of demographic questions, their political leaning, and stance on various social issues. Then, they were randomly assigned to one of three celebrity conditions (Jack Black, Dwayne Johnson, or Ryan Gosling) and were presented with a Twitter account profile of that celebrity. Participants were asked to identify the name of the celebrity in the photograph, list the movies/TV programs they have seen the celebrity appear in, and indicate how much they like that celebrity. All the participants correctly identified the celebrity and reported seeing his work. Next, participants were randomly assigned to one of the 12 political tweet conditions (Jack Black/Dwayne Johnson/Ryan Gosling X liberal/conservative X guns/immigration). The three tweets expressed either a very conservative or a very liberal stance on either gun control/rights or immigration (Figure 1). A manipulation check question asked participants about the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the celebrity. Then, participants proceeded to complete measures of PSRs with the actor; decoupling support for the actor's work; attitudes on the political issue; and importance of that issue<sup>1</sup>. The study concluded with a debriefing message informing the participants that the tweets were fabricated for the purpose of the study.

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<sup>1</sup> In the final stage of the study that is not reported in this manuscript, participants were presented with a print advertisement for bottled water featuring the same celebrity. Participants were asked to report their perception of this brand of water and purchase intentions.

## Participants

The sample was comprised of 382 undergraduate students from a university in the Western United States aged 18-35 years ( $M = 19.5$ ,  $SD = 2.29$ ). The majority of the participants were women (79.5%). Most of the participants identified as White (61.9%), followed by Asian (17.1%), Latinx (9.1%), African American/Black (2.7%), Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian (1.2%) and the rest of the participants identified themselves as “other”. On a 7-point Likert scale ranging from *Strongly Liberal* (1) to *Strongly Conservative* (7) (McCright & Dunlap, 2011), participants rated themselves, on average, around the center of the scale ( $M = 3.24$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ).

## Manipulation

### *Pilot Tests*

The celebrity and the topic used in this study were chosen based on extensive pilot work with participants outside the main study sample. First, a group of students was asked to list their favorite celebrities. Another sample of students was then used to assess students’ PSRs with those celebrities and their perception of each celebrity’s stance on various social issues (e.g., same-sex marriage, immigration, etc.). The pilot data identified celebrities that are recognized by all the students, were liked, but were not associated with any particular political stance (and thus could be believably manipulated to post either a liberal or a conservative statement). For instance, Emilia Clarke was one of the most well-liked actors, but she was known for her liberal attitudes, making her a poor choice for this study. Three celebrities who were not politically active at the time of the study were used: Jack Black, Dwayne Johnson, and Rayan Gossling.

It was important to use a study context in which it would be possible to manipulate the media figures’ stance. For instance, pilot study participants believed that all the celebrities were

strong supporters of same-sex marriage, rendering this topic unsuitable for the study. Based on the pilot results, immigration and gun rights/control were chosen as attitude objects in this study. These topics are particularly fitting because these issues have become increasingly polarized in American society over the past few years (Mitchell & Jurkowitz, 2021). Americans are divided on party lines over support for stricter gun laws (Doherty et al., 2021), immigration policies, and taking refugees (Daniller, 2020).

### ***Attitude Congruence Manipulation***

In the first phase of the study, participants reported their views on various social topics, including the target social issues (immigration and gun control) embedded among filler items related to issues such as taxes and abortions. For each social issue, participants were asked to indicate on a 7-point scale how liberal or conservative their leaning is. These scores were later used to classify individuals as having either a liberal or a conservative stance on that issue. After completing the pretest measures, to manipulate congruence between the audience's and the celebrity's stance, participants were randomly assigned to view tweets that expressed either a liberal or a conservative position on guns or immigration. Hence, regardless of the participant's personal views, half the participants were exposed to counter-attitudinal messages. The posts were generated using a photo-editing software to make the messages appear as coming from the actor's verified account and kept a consistent engagement metric (see Figure 1).

At the data analysis stage, pretest ratings of the social issue that each participant was exposed to in the tweet (guns or immigration) were used to divide the sample into liberal/conservative groups. Individuals who chose the middle response option on the scale or stated "I don't know" were excluded from the sample at this point (immigration:  $n = 49$ , guns:  $n$

= 40). Next, each participant was classified as either seeing an attitude-congruent or attitude-incongruent tweet, regardless of its actual political leaning.

A manipulation check item confirmed that the manipulation had a large and significant effect ( $t(265) = 18.96, p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d = 2.32$ ). Individuals that were classified as falling into the incongruent condition (exposed to a counter-attitudinal tweet) rated their agreement with the celebrity substantially lower ( $M = 2.76, SD = 1.57$ ) than those in the congruent condition ( $M = 5.90, SD = 1.11$ ).

### **Measures**

All the measures used a 7-point Likert-type scale, and responses were coded such that higher scores indicate greater agreement with the statements.

#### ***Prior Liking of the Actor***

Pretest levels of liking of the celebrity were assessed with a single item. Participants were shown a photograph of one of the three celebrities (Jack Black, Dwayne Johnson, or Ryan Gosling), and were asked to indicate how much they liked that actor ( $M = 5.43, SD = 1.09$ ).

#### ***Parasocial Relationships***

After exposure to the tweets, participants' PSR with the actor was assessed using Rubin's PSI scale (Rubin, et al., 2009). The original scale has been criticized for including items that not only capture PSRs but also tap into PSI and other modes of involvement with media figures (for review, see Tukachinsky & Sangalang, 2016). Thus, to increase the scale validity, it is a common practice to only employ a small subset of the original items on the scale (see meta-analysis: Tukachinsky, et al., 2020). Accordingly, the current study included four items from Rubin's scale that have been used in past research to specifically capture the relational aspects of

parasocial experiences (Tukachinsky & Sangalang, 2016), e.g., “The celebrity makes me feel comfortable, as if I am a friend”, Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .88$ ,  $M = 4.57$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ .

### ***Consistency between the Media User’s and Media Figure’s Attitudes***

To determine the extent to which individuals agree with the celebrity’s position, participants completed measures relevant to the attitude object discussed in the tweet. These scores were then recoded to express their agreement with the celebrity regardless of the direction of that stance.

**Attitudes Towards Gun Control.** Participants reported their stance on gun control using a nine-item Tenhundfeld’s et al. (2017) Gun Attitude Scale (e.g., “People should be allowed to have handguns in their homes”, Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .91$ ,  $M = 3.34$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ).

**Attitudes about Immigration.** Attitudes about immigration were assessed with the seven-item Ommundsen and Larsen’s (1997) Attitudes Toward Illegal Alien’s scale, e.g., “Access to this country is too easy” (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .79$ ,  $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ).

**Consistency with the Actor’s Position.** To determine the extent to which the media users’ attitude on the political issue (guns/immigration) is consistent with that of the celebrity, responses to the questions about guns and immigration were recorded. For each participant, only the score on the scale assessing the topic of the celebrity’s tweet were used. These scores were recorded such that higher score indicated more agreement with the celebrity ( $M = 4.29$ ,  $SD = 1.59$ ). In other words, regardless of whether the topic of the tweet was guns or immigration and whether it expressed a liberal or conservative stance, *higher scores on this recoded scale always indicated upholding attitudes that are more consistent with those expressed by the actor.*

### ***Support for Actor’s Work***

Participants were asked four questions about decoupling their support for the actor's work and his politics (e.g., Cronbach's  $\alpha = .93$ , "I can be a fan of this actor's work regardless of his personal opinions" ( $M = 4.82$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ).

### ***Importance of the Political Issue***

Participants were asked how important each of several social issues was to them, with the higher the score indicating more importance. For each participant, only the topic relevant to their experimental condition (guns/immigration) was used ( $M = 5.88$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ).

### **Analyses**

A series of ANCOVAs was performed to test the hypotheses. Congruence (vs. incongruence) condition was used as a fixed effect. Demographic characteristics, including age, political leaning, sex (dummy coded female vs. male random factor), and race (dummy coded White vs. Non-white random factor) served as control variables. Additionally, message variables, celebrity type (Johnson/Black/Gosling) and attitude object (gun control/immigration) were controlled for. Interactions between these message characteristics and message congruence were also included in the model to ensure that the effect of attitude congruence was consistent across all conditions. Finally, to test whether each response to the message (H1b: PSRs, H2b: attitude towards guns/immigration, H3b: support for the actor's work, and H4b: importance of the issue) depends on prior liking and strength of the apriori attitude, these variables (coded high/low) were entered into the model as a main effect and interaction with congruence condition. Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of dependent variables by congruence condition. Figure 2 shows the interactive effects of congruence and apriori attitude strength and liking of the actor.

## **Results**

### **Distancing from the Actor**

The first hypothesis postulated that exposure to an actor expressing political attitudes that are incongruent with those of the viewer would result in lower PSR, particularly if the viewer liked the actor less prior to learning about the actor's political views. Congruence had a direct effect on PSRs ( $F(1, 248) = 114.27, p < .001$ ) and the effect was moderated by both the extent to which the media user liked the actor prior to exposure ( $F(1, 248) = 6.15, p < .01$ ) and the media user's initial attitude strength on the issue ( $F(1, 248) = 4.19, p < .05$ ). The findings fully support H1. As can be seen in Table 1, overall, individuals exposed to a celebrity expressing incongruent attitudes were rated lower on PSRs than those exposed to the celebrity expressing attitudes they support. However, as shown in Figure 2, the gap was greater among media consumers who, to begin with, did not like the actor as much and those who held more extreme views on the topic.

Interestingly, the effect of congruency also significantly interacted with the celebrity condition ( $F(2, 248) = 4.48, p < .05$ ). Specifically, while incongruent political speech reduced PSRs with all three actors, this effect was less dramatic for Dwayne Johnson. The effect was not moderated by topic ( $F(1, 248) = .75, p = .39$ ), such that disagreement with the actor on either gun control or immigration had similar detrimental consequences for their PSRs.

### **Attitude Change on the Political Issue**

The second hypothesis posited that the incongruence with the actor's political beliefs can be managed by modifying one's attitude on the issue, to make it more aligned with that of the actor, especially if individuals did not feel strongly on that issue in the first place. Not surprisingly, individuals overall reported much less support for the actor's expressed political opinion in the incongruence compared to congruence condition ( $F(1, 191) = 248.34, p < .001$ ). However, in line with H2b, those who had a weaker attitude to start, reported greater support for

the actor's stance than those who held more extreme views to begin with ( $F(1,191) = 20.98, p < .001$ ). Contrary to H2b, liking of the actor did not moderate the effect ( $F(1,191) = .33, p = .57$ ). The effect was not moderated by the celebrity condition ( $F(2,191) = .75, p = .78$ ). However, although it was replicated in both attitude object contexts, the gaps were greater for gun control than for immigration ( $F(1,191) = 5.30, p < .001$ ). H2 was partially supported.

### **Support for the Actor's Work**

H3 examines decoupling in the form of continuing to support the actor's work regardless of the actor's politics, which was hypothesized to occur with particularly liked actors and weaker attitudes on the disagreed issue. In line with the prediction, support for the actor's work was lower when the actor expressed an incongruent political stance ( $F(1, 248) = 12.80, p < .001$ ). As predicted in H3b, the effect occurred for those who did not uphold a very strong position on the issue ( $F(1, 248) = 4.97, p < .05$ ) and had a stronger liking of the actor prior to the study ( $F(1, 248) = 7.74, p < .01$ ). As in the case of H1, the effect was moderated by the celebrity condition. Congruence influenced support for both Jack Black and Ryan Gossling, but support for Dwayne Johnson's work was relatively immune to incongruence ( $F(2, 248) = 3.23, p < .05$ ). As in H1, the effect of congruence was demonstrated across both attitude object conditions ( $F(1, 248) = .15, p = .70$ ). H3 was fully supported.

### **Issue Importance**

H4 posited that individuals will resolve the dissonance by attributing lesser importance to the issue, particularly if they liked the actor and did not hold strong opinions on the issue. As predicted in H4a, media users exposed to the celebrity's incongruent statements rated that topic as less important compared to media users who saw the celebrity making attitude-congruent statements ( $F(1, 248) = 7.99, p < .05$ ). However, contrary to H4b, a priori liking and attitude

strength did not moderate this effect ( $F(1, 248) = .12, p = .73, F(1, 248) = .01, p = .99$ , respectively). The same pattern of results held for all topic and celebrity conditions ( $F(1, 248) = .30, p = .57, F(1, 248) = .43, p = .65$ , respectively). Thus, H4a was fully supported, but there was no support for H4b.

### Discussion

The study explores how individuals respond to a celebrity making political statements that they disagree with. Overall, it appears that disagreement with a celebrity's political stance damages the PSR with that celebrity. Distancing themselves from the media personality was the most common response among participants in the study. However, individuals who did not feel strongly about the issue (and thus experienced a lower dissonance in the first place) or those who particularly liked the celebrity prior to the study (thus risking a more emotionally costly PSB) retained their PSR with the celebrity despite the political disagreement. In instances of political disagreement, decoupling the celebrity's politics from his artistic work became a more commonly used strategy. Discounting the importance of the issue was also a prevalent cognitive discrepancy reduction strategy across all media users, whereas attitude change on the political topic was minimal and limited to those who did not uphold a strong stance on the subject. The low malleability of attitudes on these political issues is not surprising given that the study specifically examined polarizing issues that tend to be more resistant to change.

These findings contribute a novel angle on a well-established body of literature demonstrating that PSRs mirror non-mediated friendships, such that similar psychological mechanisms govern both types of relationships (for a meta-analysis, see Tukachinsky et al., 2020). In times when political animosity drove apart many families and friendships, it is not surprising that similar patterns emerge in a parasocial context. Yet, this presents a unique context

that differs from non-mediated relationships in two opposing ways. On the one hand, parasocial relationships usually involve lesser investment and are less expensive to replace than social relationships. Thus, from a social exchange perspective, terminating a PSR would be easier than a non-mediated friendship. At the same time, media personalities are unique in that they exist on two levels -- both as a media persona with whom one can have a PSR and their media character (e.g., fictional characters in film or even an athlete's identity on the field). This dual-level allows moral decoupling wherein audiences can continue engaging with the media content they like despite their disagreement with the media figure's personal politics.

The strength of the study design lies in using multiple messages, including two distinct political contexts (immigration and gun control) and three celebrities, demonstrating the robustness of the effects across all conditions. The only exception was the audiences' relative willingness to maintain PSRs with Dwayne Johnson and continuing to watch his films despite a political disagreement with him. The intensity of the PSRs and interest in watching movies with Jack Black and Ryan Gosling were more gravely impacted after participants saw the actors' tweets expressing a viewpoint that opposed their own. It is unclear whether the difference in responses to Johnson and the other two actors stems from something idiosyncratic to this celebrity (e.g., Johnson's way of interacting with his fans) or from a broader characteristic that sets him aside from the other two celebrities used in this study. For instance, unlike the other two celebrities who are both actors and singers, Johnson's celebrity status originates from his career as a professional wrestler and football player. Conceivably, some respondents related to Johnson as an athlete rather than actor, and this role moderates the type of responses to a political disagreement. Alternatively, the difference lies in the types of fictional media content the actors star (action/adventure vs. comedy and drama). Another possible difference leading to the

audiences' differences in responses could be related to the actor's race. Johnson was the only person of color used as a stimulus in this study. Past research suggests that Black celebrities engaged in social activism are subjected to particularly high public scrutiny, especially when the topic is more controversial (Cunningham & Regan, 2012). Future studies can illuminate these questions by systematically comparing various celebrities that derive their fame from different industries (sports, music, acting) and represent different ethnic/racial groups.

### **Practical Implications**

**Civic Engagement.** The findings of the current study point at several possible implications for celebrity politics. First, the study results stress how important it is for media figures to secure their audiences' PSR prior to making political statements. Otherwise, celebrities may risk losing their fan base. This leads to the question of whether celebrities should take such risks at all. Given the minimal effect that celebrities had on the attitudes of individuals they would want to persuade the most -- is worth to speak up their mind on political issues?

Celebrity politics have been criticized for giving power to individuals who are neither an expert on these policies, nor bear any accountability or responsibility. To their credit, though, they were praised for getting people who are politically indifferent to become more involved citizens (for review: Nolan & Brookes, 2015). However, this study suggests that celebrity drawing attention to a controversial political issue can also backfire. When the media user disagrees with the celebrity, they appraise the political issue as less important, essentially choosing their relationship with the celebrity over the topic. Thus, again, it is critical to further weight the larger scope of possible and benefits and costs of celebrity political speech.

**Entertainment and Persuasion.** The effect of celebrity politics on PSRs and moral decoupling can also have implications for media users' subsequent encounters with media

content featuring these celebrities. First, whereas the current study asked participants about their intention to consume media featuring this actor despite his political views, it would be interesting to examine audiences' actual responses to such media content. For example, a longitudinal study could track the effect of attitudinal incongruence on actual media behaviors, including selective avoidance of the actor's films and unfollowing the celebrities on their social media. Moreover, future study participants could be shown a movie starring the actor that viewers disagree with and examine the extent to which the political discrepancy hinders viewers' enjoyment from the film and their PSR and identification with the fictional character played by that actor. Although Hu's (2016) study on actor's moral transgression found that viewers could maintain PSRs with the character despite the actor's misbehavior, other studies (Koban et al., 2021, Tukachinsky, 2020) suggest that viewers struggle to differentiate between the actors and the characters they portray. Individuals seem to project their views of the actor onto the character and vice versa, which could, theoretically, hinder their enjoyment from that celebrity's media content.

Second, the negative effects of political disagreement with a celebrity could extend to hinder the celebrity's persuasive appeal in other contexts. Past research has found that consumers report greater distrust, more negative perception of the brand, and lower purchase intentions, when the brand is endorsed by a celebrity who was involved in controversial political activism (Cunningham & Regan, 2012; Schmidt, et al., 2018). The current study sheds light on a possible psychological mechanism underlying these effects, and validates the hesitancy of commercial brands to solicit celebrity endorsement from politically vocal celebrities.

### **Limitations**

The current study used a sample of college students. This was an appropriate choice given the meaningful involvement that young adults tend to have with celebrities, and the

importance of increasing political involvement specifically in this age group (e.g., Loader et al., 2016). However, it is important to replicate the study results in more demographically diverse groups, varying in terms of age, educational attainment, and ethnicity. A common limitation of experimental research in communication is the use of single message designs. The current study overcomes this limitation by utilizing two attitude objects and three celebrities. However, the celebrities used in the study (that were feasible to use based on the pilot study results) were all male Hollywood actors. Replication using a greater variety of celebrities, representing different genders and ethnicities would advance our understanding of how membership in these social categories moderates the effects of PSR, PSB, and political homophily. For instance, overall, compared to men, women reported slightly lower levels of apriori liking of and a non-significant tendency for lower posttest PSRs with the actors<sup>2</sup>. Additional research, specifically designed to examine same/cross-sex PSRs and sex differences could further examine this dynamic.

For example, future studies could employ more nuanced measures. First, they would benefit from measuring more directly the centrality of the political issue to the media users' self-concept, or their overall political engagement. Moreover, the current study was situated in theories of cognitive incongruence. However, as political polarization leads to coupling political disagreement with moral judgment, moral theories and a measure of moral judgments could also be incorporated in future investigation.

Second, the pretest in the current study employed a measure of apriori liking. Liking constitutes a lower level of engagement with media personalities than PSRs, that entail feelings of intimacy and personal connection. Hence, presumably, celebrities that are liked but are not considered "parasocial friends" may not trigger as much psychological discordance. Similarly,

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<sup>2</sup> Liking:  $M_{\text{females}}=5.37$ ,  $Sd=1.09$  vs.  $M_{\text{males}}=5.67$ ,  $Sd=1.10$ ,  $t(368)=-2.14$ ,  $p < .05$ ; PSRs:  $M_{\text{females}}=4.52$ ,  $Sd=1.30$  vs.  $M_{\text{males}}=4.79$ ,  $Sd=1.18$   $t(336)=-1.66$ ,  $p =.10$

replication of the study specifically using committed fans, who experience even stronger baseline parasocial attachment to the celebrities, can offer a stronger test for the theoretical propositions examined in the current study.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on both PSR and PSB while providing evidence of how the Hollywood stars expression of their political ideals on social media influence everyday media users. These findings highlight the importance of celebrity politics and offer directions for further exploration of this ever-timely topic.

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Table 1

*Means and Standard Deviations of Dependent Variables by Congruence Condition*

	Incongruent Condition		Congruent Condition	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
PSR with the actor	3.29	1.34	5.16	0.96
Consistency with the actor's attitude	2.90	1.28	5.54	0.90
Support for actor's work	4.54	1.50	5.08	1.03
Importance of the issue	5.84	1.33	6.31	0.99