

PATER FOR MILLIONS: NEGOTIATING THE COLLAPSE OF A YOUTUBE FATHER PERSONA

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ABSTRACT

Shaytards was widely considered the original YouTube family vlog, and the family built their massive following with representations of wholesome, heteronormative, religious Americans who could have fun with everyday life. As classic microcelebrities (Senft 2013), the family of six created a valuable brand for millions of fans, which led to fame and wealth. But when the father and driving force of the vlog was caught sending sexually explicit texts to a “cam model”, more than the family brand collapsed. Shay’s persona, as the steady father force for an imagined family (Friedman & Schultermandl 2016) of millions was sent into disarray. This article follows the comments across multiple channels that show how the imagined family negotiated this collapse, demonstrating how an audience can establish a deep personal connection with a microcelebrity’s persona.

KEY WORDS

YouTube; Microcelebrity; Father; Narrative Stancetaking; Family Breakdown

INTRODUCTION

On February 12, 2017, a YouTube channel called DramaAlert posted an eight-minute video called, “Shay Carl ‘It Goes Down in the DMs’ #DramaAlert Aria Nina - Cam Girl Interview!” (DramaAlert 2017). The video begins with an introduction reminiscent of the BBC, then cuts to a man named KEEM sitting behind a large laptop computer. KEEM has a red computer mouse and audio control board to his right and a microphone arm holding a golden microphone on his left. Like an announcer at a boxing match in Las Vegas, KEEM begins: “Let’s get right into the neeeews! Holy shit, it goes down in the DMs, that’s right. We have a big story today coming from the Shaytards, the original vlogging YouTube family.” A photo appears, showing the family on the couch; the children’s faces are blurred out, despite their being highly exposed on YouTube for most of their lives. What follows in the video is an interview with Aria Nina, who details a set of explicitly sexual texts from ShayCarl, who has an established persona as a wholesome, loving, religious father on a popular YouTube family vlog.

The Shaytard channel, as of this writing, has more than 5 million subscribers. The family’s five channels combine for nearly 8 million subscribers and more than three billion video views. As one of the very early family vlogs, the Shaytard channel became an industry. Shay began as a prankster on YouTube, before revising his persona to *paterfamilias* of a growing, faith-based family. In gaining a mass audience for that performance, he became a *pater* for millions. The Shaytards consistently performed two critical roles on YouTube: a classically patriarchal heteronormative family, and an open and transparent vlogging family by inviting viewers to become intimately involved virtually. Combined, these created what Friedman and

Schultermandl (2016) refer to as *imagined family*, “the kinship constellations attained through quick media technologies” (p. 6). Through living their lives and consistently promoting their faith as Latter-Day Saints (LDS), a regular implication was that there is a way of being the *right* kind of family, one that aligns with the norms that Western religious faith demands. But what happens when the key persona symbolising this *rightness* collapses in a public way? Here, I will examine that question from both sides of the imagined family dynamic—the microcelebrities who constructed and maintained the edifice of the family, and the consuming-creating audiences that maintain the bonds between themselves, the family, and each other.

FROM MICROCELEBRITY TO MACRO-DAD

When Senft coined the phrase “micro-celebrity” to capture a digital phenomenon of users presenting themselves as “coherent, branded packages to their online fans” (2013, p. 347), she established a metaphor for digital being. If anything, digital life has taken on even more characteristics of a marketplace versus a communal space since her initial theorisation. As McRae reminds us, some of the market is driven by a desire to believe in the image, even while doubt pervades, wrapped neatly in the term “authentic,” to point where authenticity is a “kind of labour that is necessary for lifestyle blogging success. ‘Success’ in this case is defined as social and monetary capital acquired through heavy website traffic and brand sponsorships” (McRae 2017, p. 3). Such complications around performing and assessing authenticity emerge in a platform that encourages users to “Broadcast Yourself.” This dynamic is not lost on users: “at the same time that people are beginning to perceive a coherent online presence as a good and useful thing, they are also learning that negative publicity can be quite dangerous to one’s employment, relationships, and self-image” (Senft 2013, p. 350). An active audience of buyers can just as easily become sellers, and all elements of the transaction are commodities. Online platforms are a market fuelled by the contemporary definition of parasocial interaction (Giles 2009), a complex set of behavioural outcomes sparked by mediated interactions and a continuum of possibilities for a relationship. Because of the two-way communication that digitality affords, the entire range of possibilities for these interactions seems available. Concurrently, the possibilities of being any identity you want to be appears equally available.

Yet still, users who post on YouTube seek out “clicks” as a sign of robust parasocial relationships (Chen 2016). Chen argues that YouTube is a space to first construct digital selves, then perfect the presentation of those selves, and then enter into parasocial relationships with other selves. This is a divergence from a strict microcelebrity model, in which some users find themselves in parasocial relationships nearly impossible to actualise (true fan-celebrity) to relationships that are at least digitally actualized (relationships among digital selves).

This nuance is critical when examining the effects of an *imagined family*. Within a particular YouTube channel, especially those that grow a large following, both digitally actualised and non-actualised relationships are at play regularly. The marketplace and the intimate space collapse, and this is where the stakes rise, because social media technologies have “drastically altered our means of imagining community by selectively fostering kinship ties, based not only on common genealogies but also on common values” (Friedman & Schluterman 2016, p. 8). Within these common values, the health, wealth and happiness of the central figure correlates to the health of the whole system of relationships around them. This seems to imagine a much more expansive experience than a marketplace, even as the market continues to pervade imagined intimacies.

One generic persona that draws from both broad social norms and personal experiences is that of the father figure. As Bruzzi (2019) reminds us, Hollywood has played an outsized role for modern Western culture in defining the father persona, and the connections it has to masculinities. The role of masculinities, and thus fatherhood, is fluid depending on contemporary concerns (such as the economy), aspirations for what it means to be successful, the advancement and setbacks of women’s rights, as well as the cross-current identities, such as

race, religion, and geographical location. As Bruzzi points out, progress in liberating what fatherhood must look like has been regularly met with backlash, resulting in the state of flux. “As we come closer to the present day, there is less consistency than ever in Hollywood’s depiction of the father” (p. 158). Hamad (2014), on the other hand, argues that the persona of the father on a personal journey to embrace their paternal position is the newest way to center men and privilege their narratives. This could obviously take on many forms of fatherhood, but all serve to place men in a postfeminist position of both embracing traditionally feminine roles and characteristics (the sensitive nurturer rather than the distant breadwinner), while reconstructing the traditional heteronormative household. Villamarín-Freire (2021), however, sees these moves with the father persona as potentially positive: “I think that postfeminist fatherhood can have a positive social impact, especially in the way in which men who are exposed to those representations conceive of their masculine identity” (p. 340). This assumes, she admits, work that unravels the establishment of such a persona for a new round of patriarchy. What comes out of all the literature is a longing, both scholarly and social, for clear definitions of fatherhood. That longing extends to a desire for clear representations of fatherhood. For nearly a decade, ShayCarl embodied just that as the family vlogging pioneer. Fans repaid him and his family with millions of subscriptions, billions of views, that meant millions of dollars in income.

The Shaytards had a broad appeal, thanks to Shay’s early prominence on YouTube and his goofy humour, combined with wife Colette’s good natured and overtly religious persona. The Shaytards were not exactly evangelising the LDS faith, but also were not shy in sharing their beliefs and, more commonly, their core values. The LDS label is a key feature of a family who is white, heterosexual, child-rearing, working class, upwardly mobile and religious, though only occasionally pious. From the homemade production quality to the folksy use of language and humour, the most notable element of this entertainment is that it appears relatable, in both its mundane moments (get the family fed) to its most profound (videoing the birth of a child). The personae rests upon “heroic normativity,” a rallying image of the self that 1) resists elite establishment cues, such as high artistry, refined language use, the prominence of traditionally important people or institutions; 2) embraces non-elite establishment cues, such as nuclear family life, faith, patriotism, and individualism; 3) lives in tension with traditional media by subverting it with non-gated platforms (such as YouTube and Twitter) while also leveraging its attention; 4) finds its heroism in quantifiable proofs, such as number of subscribers/followers, likes/loves, positive sentiment, or more generally, mass agreement on identity. The mass appeal for such a persona rests on mainly one normative, domestic trait—faithfulness.

WHITE, MALE, RELIGIOUS

The allure of fictionalising the self is powerful when creating a persona to negotiate a private and public world. Whether in the purposeful act of applying fictive tropes upon one’s own persona, such as when Louis C.K. and Jerry Seinfeld both played fictional versions of themselves for American television shows (Piper 2015), or in using fictionality for coherence of disparate personas presented across everyday lives (Greenburg 2022; Warren 2016), the “fabrication of a role for particular directions and ends,” (Marshall 2014, para. 3) leaves personas in a “perpetual state of what could be authentic self-performance or a performance of the authentic” (Piper 2015, p. 15). For family vlogs, cross sections of identities must be maintained, adhering to norms around gender, class, race, ideology, creating a precarious balance in performing a ‘way to live’, heroic normativity being just one. In Shay’s case, being middle class, white, male, and a member of the LDS church each comes with a set of expectations.

The Shaytards’ clarity about their commitment to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a Christian-based religion started in the United States in the 19th Century now with more than 16 million members (Church of Latter-Day Saints 2022), gave them an unusual

cultural place on YouTube. In one sense, there is an element of outsider that must be negotiated, as LDS members inspire wary, and often misinformed, mental images in viewers' minds, from stereotypes such as wearing strange undergarments, to misinformation, especially that Mormons are polygamists (Barlow 2012). In another sense, it can feel ecumenical, as one commenter notes after watching a Shaytards video about Mormonism: "I love that this video's lesson is parallel to many other religions other than LDS." And in yet another sense, their depiction of family life drew praise and large audiences from LDS church members, because the church encourages members to use social media for spreading the faith (Wrigley 2011). In fact, The Deseret News (Petersen 2015) credited the Shaytard channel with converting a British woman to the LDS. She said, "I guess I was just lost. I saw how they were as people, and I wanted to be like that. I was unhappy in my relationship with my boyfriend at the time, and I wanted the love that they had for each other." The aspirational theme of that comment is rooted in the family's performance of daily joy, as she explained: "I found them both hilarious. They were so happy. There was just something so different about their family." That differentiation is performed, and effectively so. That the riffing off themes of familialism and religiosity was improvisational provided a sense of authenticity to the videos.

Embedded in that approachability is Shay's performance of masculinity. The trope of the Shaytards channel is a man-child, with a heart of gold, built a life with a faith-filled and faithful wife, both of whom benefit monetarily from the fruits of their love of God, children, and each other. It is safe, stable, and merely asks that one accept the moulding in which this particular life is injected. For those who long for such a family, or want to see their own identification of family reflected in videos, the trope is alluring. American men, especially from the working class, are confronted with mediated forms of masculinity to emulate (Mosher and Tomkins 2010). Having consumed a version of maleness, from movies and television and from other boys who performed the roles of maleness, it becomes commonly accepted to act tough, solve problems with dominance, aggrandise one's self, while simultaneously providing for, and objectifying, women. While this crosses the lines of class to some degree, men from working class backgrounds are especially expected to fit such moulds. When these expectations fail to meet reality, men can look again to mediated fathers and families. Especially for white men, popular culture does allow some choice (Gee 2014) among a range of white, hetero family and father figures. The image that the Shaytards channel portrays aligns nicely with the description Coontz offers about the idealised nuclear family "who have tended to pride themselves on the 'modernity' of parent-child relations, diluting the authority of grandparents, denigrating 'old-fashioned' ideas about child raising, and resisting the 'interference' of relatives" (1993, p. 1). Shay represents a 'rule-breaking' modern family man. He throws his children in the air like toys while they screech in glee. He makes himself the butt of jokes, instead of acting as an authority figure, to centre his masculinity. It is family-as-Disney-ride and it is infectious. ShayCarl's persona begins with masculinity, the prime identity in this culture from which all others flow, coloured with casualness, a modern trope of family life, reinforced by religiosity, and bonded tightly together by heteronormativity. To maintain the image, and to create cohesion for his persona, what is most needed is for the fault lines to remain unseen, but the collapse took place in public, and such a collapse is consequential beyond the channel's audience. Looking through the lens of both microcelebrity and *imagined family*, I analyse the negotiation of that collapse via comments on YouTube, Reddit, and Twitter, with these core question in mind:

- How does the moral father persona navigate his own shaming within his own imagined family channels?
- What characteristics of a morality-based mass imagined family emerge in times of crisis?
- Does disruption of the father persona provide space for re-examining normative values that were core to the family's appeal?

METHODS

Small stories research is particularly useful as a methodological guide in Persona Studies. Small stories focuses on semiotic interaction of users across multiple platforms, “which allow for differentiated degrees of publicness” (Georgakopoulou 2017, p. 273), creating a proper vision of the complexity in which a persona must navigate the private-public chasm. YouTube presents a “public” digital space, one in which persona-crafting can be achieved at scale and become part of the microcelebrity marketplace. Certain phenomena are consistent among small stories in social media spaces. Narrative stancetaking, for example, establishes that a story is being shared and positions other users as participants and co-tellers of the story (Georgakopoulou 2017, p. 275). Who is on the receiving end of a narrative stance is crucial—on the one hand, a small digital space of known friends (texting, Snapchat, DMs) allows for a co-creation of a story that is rooted in offline-online history and context. YouTube, on the other hand, affords narrative stances that reach well beyond existing groups, and into contexts that lack clarity around who, where, when, and how someone is communicating. The chances for the narrative stances to be negotiated with the teller (or without them) changes drastically based on platform and intention for an audience. The method of small stories research is to watch both the permutations of a digital story being formed, how visibility and interactivity are afforded by the platform and how all of this both facilitates and complicates personas and their narratives. In this article, I add to small stories research through a thematic analysis that looks at intensity of statements, repetition of words, and repetition of insights or conclusions (Owen, 1984).

A sample of 125 videos across a decade of Shaytards’ postings established both daily narrative stances and a broader development of persona for Shay and each family member. Ultimately, I focused on all comments from five videos, one Twitter posting by Shay, and one Reddit thread, all posted after the story of Shay’s digital infidelity. This allowed me to study the renegotiation of Shay’s persona, the reconsideration of the family’s narrative and its social implications, and the negotiation of the *imagined family’s* state of being.

BREAKING THE BOND

The negotiation of what any family disruption means to both individual and shared lives comes in waves. Multiple narrative stancetaking moments make up the broader narrative of what happened to the Shaytards and each one is negotiated by audiences across multiple platforms. For the first wave, the revelation, specifics about Shay’s persona collapse quickly led to sorting out victims. The first victim, Aria Nina, was the centre point of the controversy, because of her interview with KEEM. She told the YouTube host that the relationship began when Shay messaged her to thank her for her support in a Twitter spat he had with another YouTube celebrity, Laci Green. The conversation quickly became sexual, and then became rude, according to Nina, “so I decided to post all of the DMs.” The messages were raw, vivid sexual fantasies. In the video, KEEM asks Nina to read some of the DMs: “I sure can, they are extremely special: I gotta finish stroking this ... I’m going crazy ... Come knock on my hotel room door ... I want to bend you over and slowly slide it in your ass ...” KEEM goads her to continue to read more amid bursts of laughter, and then sends out a second shock wave: “I know some people might say, ‘Well, ShayCarl was probably hacked or whatnot.’ Shay actually reached out to me and I know these DMs are real because he confirmed to me that they are real.” Shay had apparently argued that Nina had started the conversation, which she denied. Those details did not really matter. In a Reddit thread (Reddit 2017) that showed all of the DMs, the reaction wavered between mocking (“50 Shades of Shay?”), condemning (“I know shay had his flaws but damn, cheating is the last thing I would have ever expected from him.”) and Nina was quickly erased from the conversation by those expressing sympathy for Shay’s wife, Colette:

My heart is breaking so badly for Colette... She stuck with him even when they were dirt poor, she gave him five beautiful children, and she has always been an

amazing and loving wife. Shay always seemed to have so much love for her. Every time something like this happens, my view of "love" becomes more and more jaded. I really did think they were one of the last few remaining examples of a beautiful, "perfect" relationship (Reddit 2017).¹

But another thread of thought quickly sprang up in Reddit, one that unravelled the myth of family that the Shaytards had been creating:

Humans are not meant to live with the same person forever, it's not in our genetics. At best you can repress those thoughts and what you get is this! What shay should have done is tell his wife about these thoughts openly, and propose a threesome with a girl if he's such a horny fuckboy. (Reddit 2017).

Naturally, this theme was resisted heavily by others in the community:

If you don't want to live with one person forever, don't fucking get married and have 5 kids with someone. Are you ok with your wife/girlfriend cheating since it's "in her genetics" to get better sperm? Or would you want her tell you her sexual thoughts about other men and propose an mmf threesome?

Some of this rhetoric is a result of Reddit's openness to multiple perspectives, fueled somewhat by its culture of anonymous commentary (Humphrey and Gbadamosi 2021), and it is unclear how much the voices that dominate the YouTube comments cross over with the Shaytard subreddit. But it's clear that there was an understanding of the fissures that lie close beneath the story world the Shaytard channel had created:

Mormonism actively encourages people to repress feelings and act in a non-natural manner that causes these feelings to boil over and then you get a situation like Shay found himself in.

The first time I got my Mormon friend drunk he had an emotional breakdown talking about how much he hated his life and what his parents forced on him. It's terrible for you. (Reddit 2017).

This kind of speculation is part of the fissures among cultural and lifestyle choices so common in American discourse. In previous research on collapse of personas, about anonymous trolls whose real identities were exposed, the strategies for negotiating the sudden change ranged from defiance to life-endangering remorse (Humphrey 2017). For Shay, the language he used reflected remorse, and also reflected the narratives of other white male American religious leaders whose personas were damaged.

'MY HEART IS SICK'

On Twitter, Shay posted his first narrative stancetaking post via an image from his Notes app in his response to the chaos (Shaycarl 2017):

I've been lying to myself. My heart is sick. It's been impossible to keep up this perfect 'happiness is a choice' mentality. I can't do it anymore. I started drinking again 3 months ago. I have struggled with alcoholism for years. I thought I was able to escape addiction & it's associated demons, but that disease has manifested itself back into my life (due to my decisions) because it is a life long disease. I hate myself for it! I have not been myself the past few months. The reason I haven't

¹ All online comments will be presented with original spelling and punctuation.

been uploading vlogs is because my life has slipped back into this horrible state. I am not making excuses. I have a problem. This problem has hurt the ones I love most because I delayed the decision to get help. My wife, friends and family are by my side. My purpose is to rehab. It's my only priority. I will not be on the internet. I'm sorry if you expected more out of me. I'm sorry I've let you down. I'm sorry I let my family down. I'm sorry I let myself down.

The language of family vlogging is largely flipped here. The predominant “we” as model family subjects, gives way to “I” as a collapsed version of the self. It is so self-focused, in fact, that he does not address the specific incidents of sexting. He has erased what would be the most devastating piece of the story and left his audience to deal with those specific actions on their own. There are echoes of that self-flagellation in the confessions of preachers Jimmy Swaggart and Ted Haggard, along with Republic governor Mark Sanford, three American men who built large followings around narratives of classic Judeo-Christian and patriarchal morality. Each responded after being exposed for visiting sex workers (Swaggart), having sexual contact with another man (Haggard) and having an affair that included disappearing for nearly a week (Sanford). In all cases, though ranging widely in content and strategy, the language is driven by first person singular. In each case, the men place the blame on their choosing dark forces. Three of four confessions included a litany of people injured and refer to either neglecting their role or “letting down” those around. Also, three of the men referenced delay in getting help:

Shay: The problem has hurt the ones I love most because I delayed the decision to get help (Shaycarl 2017).

Swaggart: And I think this is the reason (in my limited knowledge) that I did not find the victory I sought because I did not seek the help of my brothers and my sisters in the Lord (Swaggart 1988).

Haggard: When I stopped communicating about my problems, the darkness increased and finally dominated me (Haggard 2006).

Sanford's statements allude to help he was offered (from a Bible group and even his father-in-law) but did not ultimately take (New York Times 2009). In all four cases, the theme of internal struggle, and self-isolation, reflects the individualism so central to Western masculinity, agentic language of doing battle with evil forces within them:

Shay: I thought I was able to escape addiction ... (Shaycarl 2017)

Swaggart: And I have thought that with the Lord, knowing He is omnipotent and omniscient, that there was nothing I could not do ... (Swaggart 1988)

Haggard: For extended periods of time, I would enjoy victory and rejoice in freedom. (Haggard 2016)

Sanford: And that is, I suspect, a continual process all through life, of getting one's heart right in life. (New York Times 2009)

What is almost always missing in the narratives that they tell is a sense of common “we.” All of the blame is their own, even while agency lost, and all other characters in the narrative are victims. Shay's case is missing some acknowledgement of the other party in the controversy, which is fairly uncommon. Swaggart does not address the sex workers' lives, but does talk copiously about the integrity and even compassion of the media that broke his story. Haggard addressed the young 20-year-old man who he says “is revealing the deception and sensuality that was in my life”, and asks his congregation to “forgive him, actually, and thank God for him” (Haggard 2006). Sanford laments that he did not consider the needs of the woman with whom he had the affair over his own, adding if he had, “I wouldn't have jeopardized her life, as I have” (New York Times 2009). Shay, on the other hand, erases Aria Nina from his narrative, instead

blaming “addiction & it’s associated demons.” This could very well be a subtle artefact of the way these four men engaged with media. While the two pastors and governor each had to build their broader narratives in a traditional public light via mass media, Shay was able to build his following more directly. Especially because this story never reached the same level of mass media controversy, Shay could establish a cleaner narrative of the break from his old self. What he could not control is the fact that these very same media are available to his fans and critics alike.

Research has shown that the rules for public apologies and forgiveness in mass media may not hold true in digital platforms (Sandlin & Gracyalny 2018, Valentini et al. 2017). The commenters might be as influential in the process of confession as the confessors. Although while the digital confessors might want the scandal to quiet down, the memory of the event gets embedded and contextualised in nearly every corner of their digital presence, because while distraction online is commonplace, digital memory is notably persistent.

NEGOTIATING FROM WITHIN AND WITHOUT THE CHANNEL

Shay’s wife Colette was the first to return to YouTube, on her own channel called Katilette, seven months after the news broke that Shay had been sexting with a cam model. Her narrative stancetaking moment, a 10-minute vlog, included compelling title: “Letting a Dream Die” (Katilette 2017). While not exactly clickbait, it was not the announcement the title might suggest. She begins, “I’m back and I’m so grateful right now that I was able to turn the camera on,” explaining that she tried to make the video many different times over the year, but self-doubt and second-guessing stopped her from doing so. She continues, “I finally just felt, like you know what? I’m just going to let go of all the things that I’m trying to control and just accept what is and talk to you guys.” The primary message of the opening few minutes is that she wants to share what she learned in the past seven months while she also draws clear boundaries about the details of their life post-scandal. Her message is a mix of self-empowerment and raw honesty: “This is about me, this channel is about me, and I’m excited to share with you guys what’s in my soul. My soul is so full right now.” A few minutes later she says, “there are some things that I don’t want to share with you, and I won’t, and I’m okay with that, and if you’re not, sorry, no big deal, I don’t care.” This is a stark contrast to the looser boundaries the family had created over the years. She explains the silence over most of 2017 in the most generic of terms: “We were planning on leaving anyway in March for a while you know, at least quitting the Shaytards channel, letting the kids take a break and all that stuff, but stuff happened and life happened and we had to leave.” She quickly addresses Shay’s alcoholism, that their life has been messy and that she has returned a very different person.

The Shaytards channel for many years developed a fun and authentic-feeling narrative about the perfection of the Western family myth; thus, it is quite dramatic for the matriarch to foreshadow a paradigm shift in her own thinking. The title could also be read through the lens of microcelebrity, an engaging marketing tactic to regain the digital brand’s position, one that can be relatable. And Colette seems to play up that theme a little more when she says her life experiences might reflect the viewers’; that this situation of addiction—and the sexual element of the scandal—is not a break for the mass imagined family, but a reinforcement of the bond, and perhaps even a redefinition. She begins by joking: “I’m totally hippy now, that’s my new thing. I meditate, I read a lot of books, I’m so happy right now.” The theme shifts to dealing with anger and how listening to a self-help book was allowing her to see the need for acceptance of the way life actually is, and “we have to allow a dream to die.” And it is here that the narrative of domestic life, which the Shaytards channel had turned into a mass imagined family while benefitting from their individual persona constructions, is both explicated and critiqued:

And I saw myself as a little girl thinking I want a perfect relationship. I want to have a perfect marriage. I want my Prince Charming to come sweep me off my feet and I want to be a mom and I want to have a hundred children and the way

I wanted my life to be. And I know that's an exaggeration but I did, I had that idea, and I was holding on to it so tightly that it was hurting me, because I knew life isn't perfect and it hasn't been perfect. And it's been really messy, Shay and I's relationship has been messy, and it's been hard. And I have had my heart broken, and um, and we both have, really. The way that we thought life would be, wasn't. But as I let that sink in and as I let my soul just accept it, I started to tell myself it's okay. I was looking at that little girl in my mind saying it's okay. I gave her a hug and I patted her on the back and I was like, Colette, it's okay that your dream didn't come true. It's okay. It doesn't mean that you're any less. You were wonderful and you were just fine. ... If your dream would have come true, would you be who you are today? And I heard those words and I thought, "No!"

In many ways, these exaggerated details of the dominant story about family (perfection, monarchical imagery, the loss of agency from being swept up, giving birth central to women's identities) were the exact details the Shaytards channel narrativised regularly. Now the image of that life was being directly reconsidered. Not only that, but she also comforts herself as a child, speaking both to adults who shared similar dreams, and to actual children watching the video, rejecting this supposed ideal and, ultimately, realising that it restricts human growth and identity. At the nearly 9-minute mark, Colette addresses the marriage simply saying "Shay and I are working on our relationship still. It's not perfect, we're taking it one day at a time, and it's messy but it's okay, and that is reality."

As usual, the great majority of the comments were supportive and asking the family to return to making videos. But there were also pointed critiques for Colette's choices, including a large group encouraging her to leave Shay:

Men like that just do it again and again. It is said that staying with a man who cheated on you will keep doing it. Yes men can change but not with the same woman he CHOSE to hurt.

Many also homed in on Colette's critique of her own persona construction, which led to a thread of negotiating the meaning of her comments and the whole incident:

Commenter 1: But why does she give up on a dream just because somebody else cheated?

Commenter 2: After someone cheats on you like a husband or boyfriend you feel like you messed up on life and that your not worth it and you feel like your dream have been crushed feelings are a thing you know its really really hard to experience something like that one day you trusted that person and the next there throwing you away and cheating on you now no one should have to go through that but it happens and its the hardest thing about life especially if you have kids , she is a beautiful woman and she deserves more she was just angry very angry at shay but eventually she has to forgive him and just move on in life and find someone perfect for her and the kids . she is probably suffering right now with this situation. But its reality one day she will be happy again and forget the pain she had now.

Commenter 3: Because the dream included a man that didn't exist.

Commenter 4: He didn't cheat though. He talked to someone inappropriately yes, but I think online chat is purely fantasy he was never going to actually cheat and he hasn't. So why everyone is just talking about him like he had f#cked Someone else is just not totally fair or truthful.

Commenter 3: if you don't constitute it as cheating then that's FINE. but if you were married with 5 children I doubt you'd count it as any less.

Commenter 4: thinking hard about it truthfully I would feel betrayed and have some trust issues and some doubts of their love towards me. It would make me feel insecure. I wouldn't necessarily call them a cheater. But I would think we have some big issues to deal with regarding our relationship. I'd probably be asking

Commenter 3: well "cheater" is just a label and you don't have to consider it cheating but it's not being faithful which is BASICALLY one big aspect of a monogamous marriage so you take it however you'd like it.

Commenter 5: it's not letting a dream die as much as it is trying to have the perfect life. It's not possible. We have to embrace the good AND the bad in life.

In many ways, much like Colette did toward the end of the video, these commenters represent a fairly large-scale effort to repair the memory of the imagined family and not redefine it. If Shay damaged the bond, it was only his personal decision, not a flaw in the structure itself. That was another major theme of the early comments:

Shay did a shitty thing to you ! He . REALLY. Did. But if you're over it, then you do YOU, Collete. I love you and want happiness for you and your children. Shay is going to have to gain back my trust. I love you hun, stay positive :) ♡

The comment above received more than 900 likes. While it was clear from Collette's video that Shay had harmed his wife and children, commenters wanted to make it clear that he had hurt them, too.

Nearly two months later, in November, Shay's personal channel posted a video simply titled, "i'm sorry" (Shaycarl 2017). "I've been terrified, and so ashamed, embarrassed, disgusted and just scared." And then, much like the *mea culpas* we examined earlier, he goes into a litany of apologies, starting with his wife, children, and his wider family, then adds, "and I want to say sorry to all of you." Next, he makes an interesting move that almost borders on a defence:

A lot of people say I don't owe anybody an apology, but I do. And I want to take responsibility for my actions, for the choices I made. ... Not because I have an alcoholism problem, I'm not justifying anything I did or said. (Shaycarl 2017)

Shay then swings back to saying he's not seeking forgiveness from his audience "if God has forgiven me", and adds that he doesn't even think Colette has forgiven him yet, but believes "But I have to forgive myself" (Shaycarl, 2017). There, the themes of both videos meet for a moment, both claiming a place for the self outside of the purview of the imagined family. At that point, the video ramps up emotionally: "I hate myself for the pain I caused my angel of a wife, the embarrassment, the public humiliation. I'm tired of hiding from it." At the two-minute mark, Shay taps into master narratives of gender and relationships, and for the first time directly addresses the scandal's primary cause, the sexting, which leads to almost melodramatic levels of description:

I fell to my natural man, carnal, sensual, devilish, part of me that exists, that I have to fight against every day. The path of least resistance, this tilt toward the telestial, that nags at my soul, that pulls me something, to someplace I don't want to be. I'm not perfect. I'm not perfect. I never said I was perfect, but I fought to stay happy. I still believe that happiness is a choice. I believe my choices have caused me much unhappiness and that if I choose better, I will find joy (Shaycarl, 2017).

Telestial is a phrase specific to Mormonism, the lowest of the three degrees of glory in God's kingdom, according to the Encyclopedia of Mormonism (Williams, 1992): "It embraces those who on earth willfully reject the gospel of Jesus Christ, and commit serious sins such as murder, adultery, lying, and loving to make a lie ... and who do not repent in mortality." In all of these

rhetorical approaches, Shay's full apology reflects the themes of the other religious men we analysed who had been caught in sexual scandals. The primary difference was that Shay had nine months to contemplate the issue, whereas the other men's responses came within days of the scandal breaking. And unlike Colette, who seemed to have contemplated and questioned the meaning of the narrative in which she had embedded herself, Shay reinforces it:

I believe in families. I believe my family is the most important thing in the world to me. I don't care about YouTube, I don't care about fame or money, I don't care about scalable businesses. I care about my wife and kids. To me, we are eternal, and the things that matter the most last the longest, and I believe that families are forever. That is my biggest hope, that is the one thing I care about, is that I can exist with them after this body dies. After we exit this earth, whatever this mortal test is, after that is over, I don't want our relationships to expire. I want to be with my wife forever. And I don't know if that's true, but it is my biggest hope (Shaycarl 2017).

Overall, the confession reads like a rank order of power. Shay has the agency to make himself happy and if he makes the right decisions, the heavenly powers will reward him with eternal life alongside his family, whether they have choices in that matter is unclear. But what does become clear is that this incident has only reinforced, and made more blatant, his sense of mission: "That's what I'm going to focus on. I'm going to focus on strengthening my family. I'm going to focus on families in general" (Shaycarl 2017).

Then, in a sudden shift, Shay seems to subtly admit a greater responsibility in the scandal and appears to apologize to Nina: "I just want to apologize and take full responsibility for the things that I said to somebody that I did not deserve to be saying those things to." He leaves long pauses in the video, easy enough to edit out, that are telling their own story. There's a point toward the end of the video where Shay is talking about starting over, but not necessarily with a celebrity plan in mind. "I don't expect any of you to forgive me. I just want to start fresh and not feel like a scum. And I felt that I deserved to and I allowed myself to suffer. And I'm not..." and then stops and puts his face in his hands. It's clear in those moments of pause that he is demonstrating struggle, perhaps resisting self-defence, perhaps specifically referencing the charges that members of his own imagined family have levelled against him.

The comments from the YouTube audience largely reflect anger and loss, again with a mixture of snark ("Hey I'm cheating here", a parody of his intro), scepticism about his sincerity ("You deserve an Oscar for worse performance in apologizing") and motivation ("What would he have done if no one found out?"), as well as speculation about his sobriety in the car ("he was drunk while recording this, cool guy"). There are also positive themes in the comments, including just wanting the family back online and a willingness to give him another chance. But the grand theme is of regret and condemnation. One of the most searing covered a lot of ground:

*I looked up at you and your family when I was a kid...
I come back about 3 years or 2 years later and I see this..
YouTube destroys families... here is a prime example.
What goes on behind the scenes is completely in the shadows. People only believe what's on screen. This is an example... this is a good example of the darkness behind the camera being brought on the camera. It's miserable..*

Shay's monologue in that car is not just problematic to viewers because he is sometimes hyperbolic or that he comes off as a bad actor. It is hard to accept for many because it no longer represents the full narrative:

Someone who cheats on you doesn't love you. If you loved Collette that much you would never have even let it cross your mind about talking to another woman .

Don't @ me because there's nothing you can say that would change my mind . I really looked up to you shay, now I feel like you've manipulated all of your YouTube audience. ...

Pain is entwined with condemnation, and sometimes even willingness to forgive. For some, this incident offers an opportunity to reflect on how the myth props up false expectations, but that's only one angle. Another, less positive view, is that young and older people enjoy the scorn. That is a dominant theme of the comments, to smear, judge, condemn, second-guess and dismiss. This is, in fact, a major gratification for many on the web, and a cottage industry in its own right. Another theme focuses on forgiveness, opening an avenue for the family to rebuild their damaged image. Some of those comments can reinforce accepted gender roles:

It looked to me like you fell into a common trap for men who gain success and wealth. So many opportunities are suddenly there for you and every deal takes a piece of your time and some degree of control of your life. Pretty soon it feels like you have no control whatsoever and it wears on you. I'm in my 40's and I've seen 2 of my business partners go through similar situations. You're not a bad person, Shay. You're imperfect, as we all are.

Other comments fall into the classic American narrative of second chances, especially if the offender can offer something in terms of entertainment, shameless defense of a way of life, or both:

Mistakes are always forgivable if the person chooses to move forth with a good heart and good intention to do better and improve. I think it's easy for people removed to judge others but you never know what someone's dealing with, no one's above making a mistake anyway, we're all human. Thank you for making a video Shay and owning up to your mistakes, it takes a strong person to do that. I wish you the best in your recovery and journey in the future. God knows what is in you in place of you <3 Bless. I'll still be here for you and your family.

The “slip of judgement” argument is useful in deflecting the damage of hierarchical gender roles, especially narratives of ownership and dominance. The shock of the revelation naturally gives way to the instincts to forgive, to accept humanness, to offer second chances. These instincts disproportionately favour heterosexual men, especially those willing to take up the mantle of the Western family myth.

CONCLUSION

YouTube's publicness, augmented by the allure of microcelebrity, creates a powerful setting for persona studies to focus. What is lost in narrowing in on the marketplace for such a setting? When it comes to a celebrity that engenders a sense of shared commitment, one that might bind an imagined family, what gets lost is the personal loss felt by members who have no control over the vicissitudes of the celebrity's life. This loss is often expressed on YouTube and other social platforms. The commenters' control rests in the very channels where the bonds were created—videos, comments, votes—where the audience can negotiate the meaning of the narrative they have witnessed and experienced. Most of the videos that the Shaytards posted over a decade remained after Shay's persona collapse, and comment sections revived in many of the most popular videos to contextualise those past events with the with Shay's scandal in mind. When a father figure such as Shay disappears, or continues his persona's collapse, the ability to shape the narrative is all that is left for the audience.

Real loss results from the collapse of microcelebrity personas in which audiences have become emotionally (and potentially financially) invested in. As demonstrated in this analysis, commenters make it clear how much they, as members of the imagined family, relied on the Shaytards to guide, empower, and fulfil them. This reliance is based on the regularity of persona

building through regularly sharing videos, and the intimacies the family revealed about their lives, which ultimately led to a belief that the myths the family are selling actually exist and can be relied upon. After the collapse, what remains for the imagined family is not a close marketplace as conceptualised by McRae (2017), but a collapsed set of beliefs, and each other.

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