

You want a piece of me: Britney Spears as a case study on the prominence of hegemonic tales and subversive stories in online media

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Abstract

In this work, we seek to understand how hegemonic and subversive (counter-hegemonic) stories about gender and control are constructed across and between media platforms. To do so, we examine how American singer-songwriter Britney Spears is framed in the stories that tabloid journalists, *Wikipedia* editors, and Twitter users tell about her online. Using Spears' portrayal as a case study, we hope to better understand how subversive stories come to prominence online, and how platform affordances and incentives can encourage or discourage their emergence. We draw upon previous work on the portrayal of women and mental illness in news and tabloid media, as well as work on narrative formation on *Wikipedia*. Using computational methods and critical readings of key articles, we find that Twitter, as a source of the #FreeBritney hashtag, continually supports counter-hegemonic narratives during periods of visibility, while both the tabloid publication *TMZ* and *Wikipedia* may lag in their adoption of the same.

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Introduction

In February 2007, according to *Us Weekly*, American singer-songwriter Britney Spears' "head-shave officially put her on board the train-wreck express" in a mercilessly publicized mental health breakdown that led to her being placed under a restrictive conservatorship governed by her father (Reinstein, 2007). Later, a UCLA psychiatry professor (seemingly unrelated to Spears' case) was quoted in another *Us Weekly* article saying, "I could understand her feelings about the conservatorship, but it's tough love and it's warranted. She needs to accept that" (Reinstein, 2008). Her autonomy, it seemed, was something that she had to deserve — in her father's eye, and also in the public's eye — in order to be free of others' control. Being worthy of autonomy, it seemed, required behaving in a way that was controllable while simultaneously filling the narrow role of "proper" female celebrity. This was the prevailing cultural discourse around Spears' conservatorship, if it was mentioned at all, until 2019 and the emergence of the #FreeBritney movement: that Spears, because of her mental health issues and failure to correctly enact white female celebrity, ought to be in the conservatorship for her own well-being.

Ewick and Silbey (1995) define a "sociology of narrative" that includes a dichotomy of "hegemonic tales" and "subversive stories;" here, we try to apply their framework in a multiplatform mixed-methods study. The rules of content support stories that the public can understand, relate to, and believe; media outlets therefore prefer stories that have morals that the public has seen dozens of times and that are non-disruptive to their understanding of reality (Ewick and Silbey, 1995). These stories, in turn, prop up hegemonic themes and norms by retelling them in new ways, with new narrators, over and over again. Some of the stories told about Spears were hegemonic tales; they framed Spears as out-of-control and the conservatorship as "tough love." Stories like these reify cultural ideas about women's subservience and controllability, as well as the autonomy of disabled people; they use narratives about Spears' mental health issues to entrench hegemonic norms.

Subversive stories, according to Ewick and Silbey, bring together the "particular and the general" — they tell us how a particular person's plight is "*rooted* in and part of an encompassing cultural, moral, and political world that extends beyond the local." The #FreeBritney movement, taken as a whole, is itself a subversive story, with the "particular" Spears' fight to be free of the conservatorship and the "general" a misogynistic and ableist society that is hesitant to grant the marginalized autonomy. Within a subversive story or hegemonic tale, framing can be used to prop up or subvert hegemonic norms, and different threads of narrative can be used in subversive or normative ways. The counter-hegemonic narratives around Spears and her conservatorship tell us that Spears deserves freedom and that the conservatorship itself, and our previous understandings of it, were symptoms of societal prejudices.

Tabloids often entrench and propagate narratives that uphold existing power structures (see, for example, Williamson [2010]). Along with mainstream media, their editorial decisions are made with advertising dollars and clicks per article in mind, while assuming a public sphere that is only so permeable to new ideas, such as that Britney Spears deserved freedom from her conservatorship regardless of past or present behavior. On the other hand, crowd-built platforms like *Wikipedia* show some promise as places for counter-narratives to emerge, or at least for conflicting narratives to coexist to some extent (Page, 2014). That said, *Wikipedia* requires citations and other standards, allowing editors to weaponize ideas of credibility and neutrality to remove counter-narratives from the public-facing article (Ford, 2015). Finally, social media — despite varying degrees of content moderation policies — is structurally the freest when it comes to storytelling. However, voice and attention on social media are two separate concepts; while everyone can promote their own narratives however they choose, only some narratives gain traction, and those usually come from the voices of normative elite actors (Hindman, 2008).

The narrative treatment of Britney Spears on social media, in tabloid media, and on *Wikipedia* has varied drastically between platforms and over time. Her changing portrayal online, especially as a result of the relatively recent #FreeBritney movement, may be a result of online affordances that allow non-journalists and non-elites to produce highly visible content, including content employing counter-hegemonic frames [1]. Such narratives suggested that Spears' conservatorship was abusive and that Spears deserved liberation from both the conservatorship and the narrow bind of being a well-controlled female celebrity. They often demanded reflexivity from the general public for their part in entrenching the narrative of Spears as an out-

of-control woman who didn't know her place (see, for example, Grady [2021]). When some of the especially egregious abuses Spears experienced in the conservatorship became public, discussions around reproductive autonomy and disability rights appeared to blossom, first on Twitter and then, to a limited extent, on other media platforms. These discourses centered the rights of marginalized groups, while earlier prominent narratives about Spears cemented ideas that women should either "know their place" or face the consequences.

However, for Britney Spears, the subversive narrative — that Spears ought to be released from her conservatorship and have her autonomy restored, and that the conservatorship was abusive — not only surfaced on social media but spread from social media to other platforms as a credible social movement, and ultimately helped her break free. In other words, we see in the case of #FreeBritney the successful dissemination of a counter-hegemonic narrative beginning online. Through a critical and computational analysis of the traces left by narrative generation processes, coupled with an interrogation of the incentive structures involved, we will make sense of the different logics underlying narrative construction in tabloid news media (*TMZ*), *Wikipedia*, and Twitter.



Background & theoretical approach

Britney Spears, pop icon

Britney Spears is often listed in the canon of American pop icons; she has been extremely successful throughout her career, which began with her successful appearances in numerous children's talent shows and recitals from the age of three onwards. Spears' debut song, "... Baby one more time," hit No. 1 on the Hot 100 and has been often cited as one of the most successful debut singles of all time (Trust, 2019). Her second album, "Oops!...I did it again," broke the world record for the most sales in one week for an album by a female artist with 1.3 million copies sold (Caulfield, 2012). She has headlined seven full world tours, with ambitious staging and choreography, and has sold more than 150 million records worldwide (Lipshutz, 2012). From 2013 to 2017, her "Piece of me" Las Vegas residency grossed nearly US\$138 million dollars and was critically acclaimed (Allen, 2018). She has lived the better part of her life in the public eye, and nearly every detail has been scrutinized in tabloids and the mainstream media — especially in the 2000s, when she suffered a mental health crisis (Yandoli, 2021).

#FreeBritney: Britney Spears as movement figurehead

Britney Spears was first put under a conservatorship, with her father Jamie Spears as the conservator, in the aftermath of a very publicized 2008 mental health crisis. Various media outlets capitalized on Spears' struggle, depicting her as unpredictable and dangerous across cover pages, headlines, and articles (Tuomi, 2020); images of Spears shaving her head especially captured audiences' attention, '[catapulting] the starlet to another kind of fame' and encouraging the media to continue their reporting on her crisis (Luckett, 2010). The subsequent conservatorship restricted her financial affairs, reproductive rights, and day-to-day activities. In April 2019, Spears checked into a mental health facility; supportive fans were unsure whether this was a voluntary decision. The hashtag #FreeBritney originated with calls to release Spears from the mental health facility and continued to gain momentum as Spears petitioned to be released from the conservatorship; Spears later would credit the movement with "saving [her] life" (Ravindran, 2021). Details about the conservatorship were released or leaked to the press over the following months, after a long period of silence, Spears testified in court that the conservatorship was abusive, citing how she was forced to have an IUD placed, making it impossible for her to have a child, and she was not allowed to marry her long-term boyfriend. In August 2021, following months of court proceedings, Judge Brenda Penny ruled to remove Jamie Spears from his role as conservator, and in September 2021, the conservatorship was terminated (Yandoli, 2021).

Framing

This work examines framing across media platforms. In media studies, framing is how a communication source (or the entities producing that communication source) makes sense of an issue that is political or otherwise controversial (Nelson, *et al.*, 1997). Framing can involve word choice, imagery, and the inclusion or exclusion of certain entities or events; the overall aim is to promote a particular narrative or point of view (Bryant, *et al.*, 2013). Goffman (1974) coined the term; since then, many subprocesses and kinds of frames have been brought to life in the literature (see, for example, Scheufele [1999] or Chong and Druckman [2007]). More recently research on framing has begun to include computational methods, involving automated frame detection on a large scale (see Lai, *et al.* [2022] or Pashakhin [2016]); additionally, open source tools are now available for researchers without technical backgrounds to detect frames in large datasets (Bhatia, *et al.*, 2021). In this work, we use a mixture of computational and qualitative methods to detect and understand framing in the context of Britney Spears' conservatorship case, and by extension, the broader narratives surrounding her experience.

Media framing of mental health and celebrity

Mainstream narratives about female celebrity are, by and large, misogynistic and conservative in nature. Meyer, Fallah, and Wood (2011) concluded that magazines enforce the idea that women are "mad" by definition and, moreover, tabloids perpetuate the cultural inventions of gender and madness in order to stay in power and in control of the celebrity narrative. While studying Demi Lovato's narrative surrounding their mental health struggles, Franssen (2020) noted that recovery from mental illness is framed as a "neoliberal ideology of individuality;" in short, Lovato used their recovery and rebranding as an "embodiment of achievement, self-improvement, and confidence." Society tends to frame male celebrities' mental health crises as "strong-willed triumph over mental illness," while female celebrities' mental illness is "associated with inherent frailty and instability" (Franssen, 2020). Even in male celebrities, mental illness is often framed in the media as a spectacle to be gawked at. For example, *TMZ* coverage of Pete Davidson's struggles with borderline personality disorder and suicidality "showed the range of inappropriate ethical types of reporting on celebrities with mental health issues and suicidal thoughts" and strongly linked narratives of his mental illness to stories about his relationships (Whitehouse, *et al.*, 2020). Assuming Spears suffers from some sort of mental health condition, the prevalent framing of her mental illness as a spectacle, or Spears herself as a victim without agency, replicates these hegemonic patterns that are known to be harmful.

The cultural role of (online) media platforms

The cultural work of tabloids

Tabloids peddle narratives that are fundamentally conservative. For example, Williamson (2010) discussed coverage of Britney Spears' "breakdown" through a feminist lens and notes that notes of classism make themselves known in coverage of Spears' "breakdown." Spears' family is working-class from the U.S. South, and Musial (2019) noted the tension between "Southern belle" framing employed early in Spears' career and "white trash" framing that characterized narratives of her "breakdown." While neoliberal ideology would seem to suggest that Spears' "media-driven social mobility" (Williamson, 2010) was a valid way to achieve wealth and status, the mockery and criticism that she faced from both tabloid and mainstream media made plain the belief that her fame was, in fact, a fluke, not based on her talent or individual merit. Ordinary working-class women could see themselves in Spears' roots, note her treatment in the media when she stepped outside the control expected of a "proper" celebrity, and understand the allusion to their own "potential place in public culture" (Williamson, 2010).

Wikipedia

A *Wikipedia* article can be useful both in its current form and as an archive of previous editions. For example, Page (2014) discussed how frames and narratives in the *Wikipedia* article on the Amanda Knox case shifted, likely in parallel with public opinion, as more information became available. *Wikipedia*

requires editors to cite credible sources, but editors must confront situations in which different sources say conflicting things in order to determine which source is the best available. Page suggested that closed structures and single tellership might inhibit the proliferation of counter-narratives. While it is a crowd-sourced platform, “*Wikipedia* has evolved a system of checks and balances that resembles a newsroom” (Avieson, 2019); the question, then, is whether the same information pipeline employed in the newsroom allows counter-narratives to emerge. Ford (2015) argued that *Wikipedia*’s editorial elements present opportunities for power struggles between editors supporting different narratives; a politics of classification and sourcing becomes clear in the trace ethnographic study of these elements. There may be opportunity for narratives to shift over time, but even seemingly objective editorial choices or flags (like the “neutral point of view” flag) can promote hegemonic narratives and frames more subtly (Ford, 2015).

Women, autonomy, and social media

Celebrity culture on social media tells girls that they need to be attractive, have a boyfriend, and participate in partying in order to fit in, but they then face harsh backlash for emphasizing these qualities in their online profiles (Bailey, *et al.*, 2013). Spears faced the same double bind as a high-profile celebrity in the 2000s; while her image as an attractive woman who was rarely single and enjoyed partying certainly brought her fame and notoriety, it also led to widespread critiques of her fitness as a mother, pop star, and autonomous adult. While neoliberalism and post-feminist ideologies tend to support women’s autonomous choices, at least on the surface, the hypervisibility of social media tends to limit the true set of choices women have available to them. Influencer and reality TV star Kylie Jenner’s image on social media cultivates and exemplifies these ideologies. Fans of Jenner interviewed in Frangos (2018) were able to discuss issues of sexism as seen in their own experiences but struggled to connect those same ideas to political or societal issues. Frangos highlighted the tension between ideals of autonomy or choice espoused on social media and the constant self-regulation involved in being a highly visible female social media influencer. In an analysis of comments left on actor, influencer, and writer Lena Dunham’s Instagram posts, Ghaffari (2022) found that women were required to limit how they presented their actual emotions and struggles in order to conform to gender stereotypes. A presentation of struggles that will gain traction on social media often relies on an acceptable central figure. It is interesting to note that Spears, as the figurehead of a significant moment in the disability rights conversation, is a white, wealthy, cisgender woman: a poster child, in many ways, for the “southern belle” archetype.

Research questions

With this background in mind, we look at recent shifts in narrative generation regarding Britney Spears. We expect both hegemonic and subversive threads of narrative to exist in the media ecosystem; while hegemonic narratives might overwhelm subversive ones on some platforms, the opposite might be true elsewhere, and in some cases they might exist side by side. As citation requirements and editorial practices vary across platforms, so too do their processes of narrative formation. It remains unclear, however, how these differences impact their capacities for counter-hegemonic storytelling. Media platforms are not islands, either; narratives might bleed through from one platform to another, possibly mutating as they do so. Comparative multi-platform studies are relatively rare in social media literature; however, we recognize that all digital media is not the same, and studying narrative formation over multiple platforms simultaneously allows for a better understanding of the downstream effects of their different editorial practices. As we follow the genesis and evolution of the stories that unfold on these platforms, we hope to answer the following questions:

RQ1: Where do subversive narratives originate — between tabloids, *Wikipedia*, and social media — and how do they spread?

RQ2: How does subversive narrative adoption differ on platforms with different citation practices and editorial standards?



Data

In this work, we examine the archival and narrative work of several sources of knowledge, including *TMZ* (an American tabloid magazine and Web site); *Wikipedia* (a crowd-edited encyclopedia); and Twitter (a microblogging platform). While *Wikipedia* and Twitter could ostensibly be considered to (minus outages) contain or be able to retrieve the full history of their content, tabloid magazines are less often in the business of making their history accessible. *TMZ*, for example, claims to have archival functionality, including images of stars over the years (so that readers can “trace changing hairlines and waistlines of their favorites performers over the years”) as well as what appears to be a partial archive of articles written since the site’s inception, using the names of stars mentioned in the article as an imperfect index. It is worth noting that while the site itself was launched in 2005, and Britney Spears’ career predates the site, the archive of articles about Britney Spears is only scrapeable past 2009. *TMZ* is not a site that intends to build history or one that is in the business of archive-making, unless it is in the service of critiquing stars’ appearances. This limits the scope of our data collection, but it is also telling of the types of narratives and history that tabloid magazines prioritize.

Determining burst events

First, using Twitter’s Decahose, which provides a 10 percent sample of all tweets, we collected data on the per-day frequency of tweets and retweets that tag #FreeBritney from April 2019 (when the hashtag was introduced) until November 2021 (the time of tweet collection). We found that while most months produced <1,000 #FreeBritney tweets, five of the months in our timeframe produced between 3,255 and 6,757. Drawing on news articles and a careful archival of events maintained by Britney fans that has since been deleted [2], we aligned these bursty months of activity with key events in the timeline of the #FreeBritney movement. More information on these events and their corresponding dates is given in [Table 1](#). We focused all of our analyses on these bursty periods, in order to hone in on the most dynamic moments of the #FreeBritney movement. We used Twitter data because it indicates how much a large slice of the population is discussing the issue in a public fashion.

Table 1: : Summary of burst events in the Spears conservatorship case.				
Approximate burst date	Relevant event	Tweet volume	TMZ article volume	Wikipedia revisions
April 2019	The hashtag #FreeBritney emerges due to revelations from a whistleblower	88,304 tweets	29 articles	87 revisions
July 2020	The initial conservatorship hearing occurs	480,775 tweets	10 articles	132 revisions
February 2021	The Framing Britney documentary is	843,849 tweets	20 articles	90 revisions

	released			
Total		1,412,928 tweets	59 articles	309 revisions

Twitter

For each bursty month, we collected all tweets that contained the words “britney” and “spears” using Twitter’s Academic API, which provides a full (100 percent) archive search of all public tweets, for all of the bursty months, the preceding month, and the following month. We consider these three-month chunks to be a “burst.” We include data from the months preceding and following the bursty months for robustness, and to ensure that we are not overlooking important context for the bursty month itself. This left us with a total of 1,412,928 tweets for analysis; the exact number of tweets associated with each burst can be found in [Table 1](#).

Wikipedia

This dataset consists of all versions of the “Britney Spears” *Wikipedia* article from its inception until 4 January 2022. It was collected using the pywikibot Python package. The page went through 1,182 distinct versions over its lifetime, 309 of which occurred during burst periods and were included in our dataset. See [Table 1](#) for the distribution of edit events across bursts.

TMZ

The *TMZ* dataset consists of the full text of all *TMZ* articles under the “Britney Spears” topic accessible via scraping the Web site’s archives during the burst events indicated. Article volume is indicated in [Table 1](#). Unfortunately, due to the structure of the Web site, it was impossible to reach non-recent articles that were not in the earliest 50 pages of the *TMZ* archives; we were therefore unable to obtain records for events that took place later in 2021.



Methods

To address our research questions, we carried out a keyword frame analysis coupled with a critical discourse analysis. The former was intended to track and compare discursive frames across examined sources (*TMZ*, *Wikipedia*, and Twitter) over time; we opted for a simplistic keyword approach over a more sophisticated classifier because it was highly interpretable, and avoided potential biases introduced by the fact that our sources varied tremendously in length and form. Further, keyword analyses deal directly with word choice, which, as mentioned, was an essential part of framing (Bryan, *et al.*, 2013). However, they were limited by their inability to account for context and tone. Therefore, we conducted a critical discourse analysis over text with high keyword densities in order to fill in those blanks and better understand *how* keywords were used.

Keyword frame analysis

For this analysis, we ran each text dataset (tabloid bodies, *Wikipedia* talk page edits, and tweets) through the spacy package’s named entity recognition algorithm; this allowed us to collect entities relevant to the discussion of Britney Spears’ conservatorship and the ensuing #FreeBritney movement, such as “Amanda Bynes,” “Los Angeles Superior Court,” and “Jamie Spears.” We also ran text through a keyword extraction algorithm, rake, that is included in the NLTK (Natural Language Toolkit) Python package; this extracted relevant, non-entity keywords such as “work bitch,” “entertainment,” and “finances.” We automatically

removed all keywords that were only mentioned once in the text dataset that they came from, treating them as noise. We then manually inspected the remaining keywords ($N = 8,183$), further removing all terms that were not meaningful to Britney Spears and her conservatorship case, such as “Thursday” or “Lady Diana.” This step was carried out by one author and based on her familiarity with the event. This left us with 253 keywords to qualitatively sort into narrative frames.

Next, using our familiarity with the press coverage and social media discussion surrounding Spears during the conservatorship case, literature about Spears’ previous framings in the media, and close readings of news articles about the case, four researchers manually and independently grouped the keywords into three narrative frames evoked in the background section: “movement figurehead,” “artist,” and “media spectacle.” Authors were not required to place a keyword in any category if they were not certain that it belonged there. A keyword was considered to belong to a category if at least three out of the four researchers believed it definitely should be in a given category. We attempted a few other ways of determining keyword sets, including using keyword co-occurrence networks and varying thresholds for certainty and agreement in the keyword categorization method. While the keyword lists differed between methods, the results and conclusions of our analyses remained the same.

The “movement figurehead” frame corresponds to discussion of Spears as someone who deserves empowerment and has been wrongly imprisoned and harmed by her conservator; phrases associated with this frame include “free britney,” “social media movement,” “stop conservatorship abuse,” “#WeAreSorryBritney,” and “reproductive rights,” which likely refers to the IUD that Spears was forced to have inserted against her will. The “artist” category includes discussions of Spears’ artistic accomplishments and work as a musician; phrases that frequently appear in this category are “my prerogative,” “baby one more time,” “super bowl,” “britney bitch,” and “pop star.” Lastly, the “media spectacle” frame portrays Spears as someone who has stepped out of the narrow behavioral bounds of white female celebrity and is therefore an object of ridicule and the subject of intrigue; keywords related to this frame include “medication,” “mental health facility,” “ulterior motives,” “paparazzi,” “drugs,” and “bikini post.” While the “media spectacle” framing promotes hegemonic ways of thinking, the “movement figurehead” framing is a subversive story in that it portrays Spears as deserving of empowerment rather than a deviant. The “artist” framing is ostensibly neutral, but can be used in service of either hegemonic tales or subversive stories depending on voice and nuance. Refer to the [Appendix](#) for the full list of keywords and frequencies associated with each frame.

Finally, for each burst and each text dataset, we calculated the proportion of keyword hits belonging to each frame per day, normalized by the number of keywords assigned to that framing. For example, if a given day’s tweets had 500 unique keyword hits for “movement figurehead,” 300 for “artist,” and 200 for “media spectacle,” and there were 50 keywords for “movement figurehead,” 30 for “artist,” and 20 for “media spectacle,” then the resulting normalized scores for the narrative framings would be 33 percent for each, as each weighted score was the same. Examining these distributions allowed us to track the prominence of our three frames over time and across different media. In doing so, we were able to see on which platforms these narratives first emerged (see *RQ1*) and subsequently where they thrived (see *RQ2*). This gave us a data-driven understanding of where, and how, subversive narratives circulate online.

Critical discourse analysis

Following the above analysis, we performed a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2010) on pieces of text that had a high density of keyword matches for one particular narrative framing, and low density for the other two framings. More specifically, if more than 75 percent of the keyword matches pertained to one narrative framing, we considered it to be high-density. We focus on these high-density texts because critically analyzing the entirety of our data would be infeasible, and the selected texts are representative of the relationships between our keywords and their respective frames.

The goal of this step is to situate and contextualize the results of the keyword analysis — that is, to ask (for example) whether the word “medication” is used to demean Spears or to position her as a competent adult,

and whether it well-represents the “media spectacle” frame under which it was grouped. As such, when analyzing text, we paid attention to the way that individual keywords supported the overall messaging and tone. Since we were aware of the vocabulary that indicated a particular narrative framing, we were able to then take note of how those specific words were utilized in service of the text’s overall narrative agenda. We further grounded this analysis in what Fairclough (1988) calls the “history of the present,” or, in our case, an understanding of the undercurrents already present in the social conversation; for instance, online activism regarding disability and women’s reproductive autonomy has been particularly visible in the last 10 years (see, for example, Mann [2018]). With all of these considerations, our critical discourse analysis serves to imbue keyword frame analysis with important depth and nuance.



Analysis

Twitter

The discussion on Twitter consistently had a significant proportion of keyword hits related to the “movement figurehead” framing during bursts of visibility for the case. Spears, as discussed earlier in the literature review section, is in many ways an acceptable movement figurehead; being a white, wealthy, cisgender woman who often conforms to gender stereotypes makes her a palatable figure for consumption and amplification on Twitter. According to our keyword hits metric, the “movement figurehead” framing became established earlier on than on *Wikipedia* and quickly established itself during the burst periods that we analyzed. Twitter likely originated a critical mass of “movement figurehead” discussion that then trickled into other platforms in ways that we will discuss later. Spikes in tweet volume often heralded a larger proportion of keyword hits resulting from the “movement figurehead” framing; these are likely driven by off-platform events that then generate bursts of content generation.

When we manually examined highly representative and highly viral threads from the Twitter dataset, as surfaced by our computational analysis, we found many instances of compelling, multifaceted discourse. Viral threads on Twitter belonging to this frame discussed reproductive justice, disability rights, and regret at the longevity of the conservatorship. For example, one Twitter user emphasized the disability rights aspect of Spears’ case, tweeting that failure to frame #FreeBritney as a disability rights issue ignored a fundamental aspect of Spears’ experience. Another user wrote about Spears’ coerced IUD placement as an example of the reproductive coercion that the disabled community has so often faced. Their tweet brought Spears’ forced IUD placement into the broader context of the routine violation of disabled people’s reproductive rights. This conversation, and conversations affirming disabled people’s human rights writ large, are not often part of discourse around hypervisible female celebrities. Linking the conversation to Spears’ plight made her conservatorship battle a subversive story while *also* surfacing disabled activists’ subversive stories. While discussion of autonomy and choice around women who are highly visible on social media often tends to be superficial — hypervisibility on social media requires constant self-regulation, denying autonomy — on Twitter, Spears’ hypervisibility as a movement figurehead generated widespread, multifaceted discussions of agency.

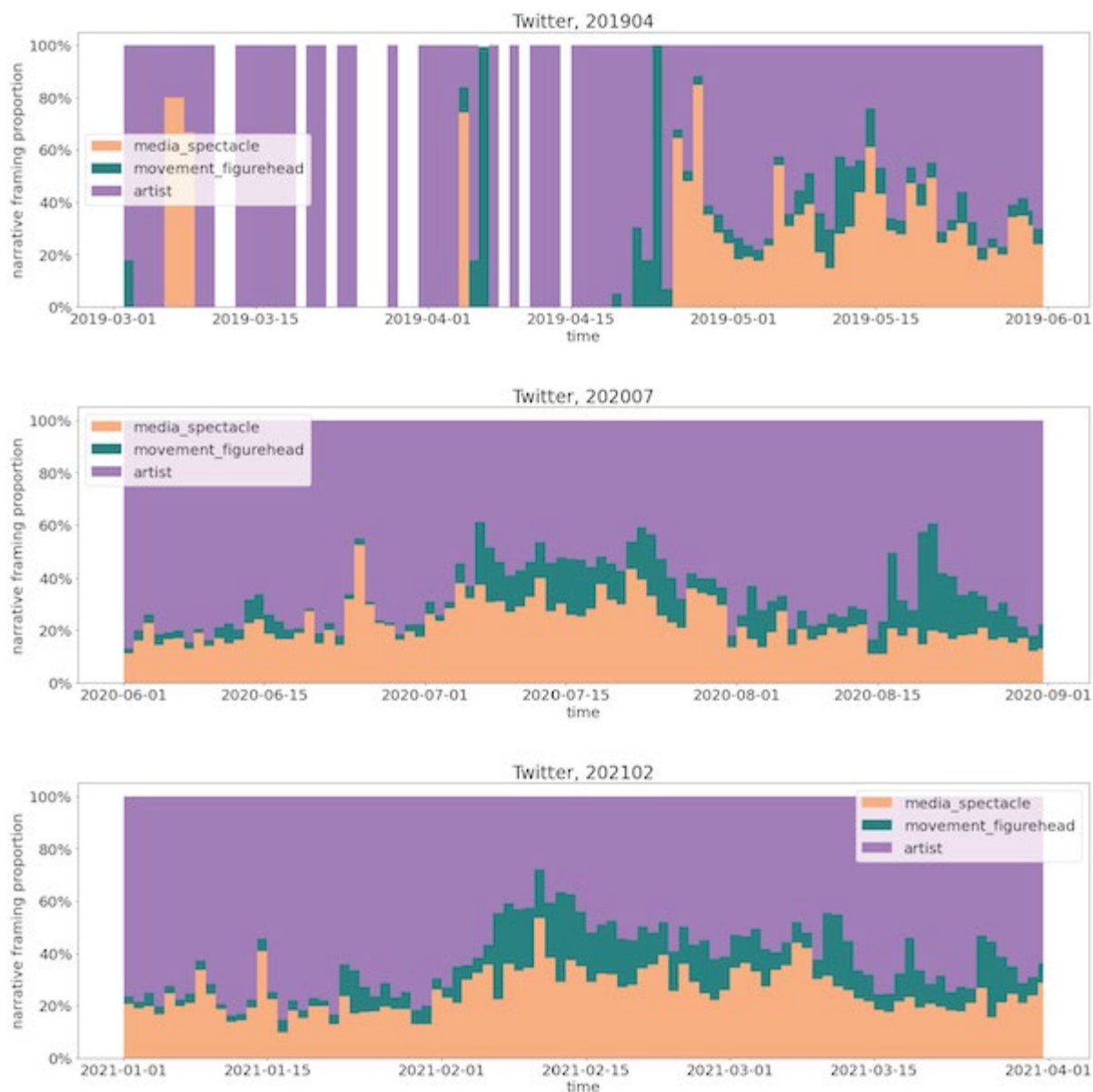


Figure 1: Plots of Twitter keyword hit proportions during the three bursty periods studied: April 2019, July 2020, and February 2021.

Wikipedia

Wikipedia's coverage of Spears referred to the "movement figurehead" frame much less, especially in earlier activity bursts; the vast majority of the narrative on *Wikipedia* was consistently driven by "artist" frames. For example, a January 2021 Talk page entry only mentions Spears' conservatorship battle in passing, in the context of her career: "As we know, the Spears brand continues, but Spears herself physically is not the one in charge of these decisions, given the nature of her legal dispute."

Wikipedia emphasizes credible sources and neutral point of view, and ideas of "credibility" and "neutrality" are fraught, particularly when the origin of a social movement is on social media. Given this consideration, and other subtleties of narrative uncovered by representative talk page entries, discourse analysis is key in determining whether *Wikipedia*'s editorial norms are a significant factor in narrative framing outcomes. Indeed, *Wikipedia*'s discussion of the "movement figurehead" frame is proportionally tiny compared to

Twitter or even *TMZ*, as we will see in the following section.

To understand why this is the case, we can look behind the scenes. One user wrote on a July 2021 Talk page, “While the rising interest in the conservatorship enhances its notability, not every development warrants inclusion (*e.g.*, her court appearance generating ‘over 1 million shares on Twitter’). I don’t think we’re going to look back 10 years from now and wonder how many tweets her testimony sparked,” indicating that *Wikipedia* editors did not think that social media developments were particularly noteworthy. Primary sources may be outside the set of text accepted as a *Wikipedia* citation; tabloids are also not seen as particularly credible *Wikipedia* sources. According to the same user on the same July 2021 Talk page, “[[Free Britney movement]] already chronicles the conservatorship as a whole outside of the movement. If you move the article to [[Conservatorship of Britney Spears]] and give the article a new lead section, it would work the same way. I think a lot of what’s in this article (and [redacted]’s draft) fail ... *TMZ* is cited multiple times in both.”). By positioning itself as a narrator that itself only looks at “credible” sources, *Wikipedia* editors do their best to ignore or minimize narratives posted on social media (where, in the previous section, we saw several subversive threads of storytelling emerge) as well as “less credible” mainstream media sources like *TMZ*. Ignoring the “fringe” elements of discourse from both pro-hegemonic and subversive sources of narrative means that *Wikipedia* ends up telling what its editors feel is the authoritative version of a tale — a version that is nonetheless hegemonic in nature.

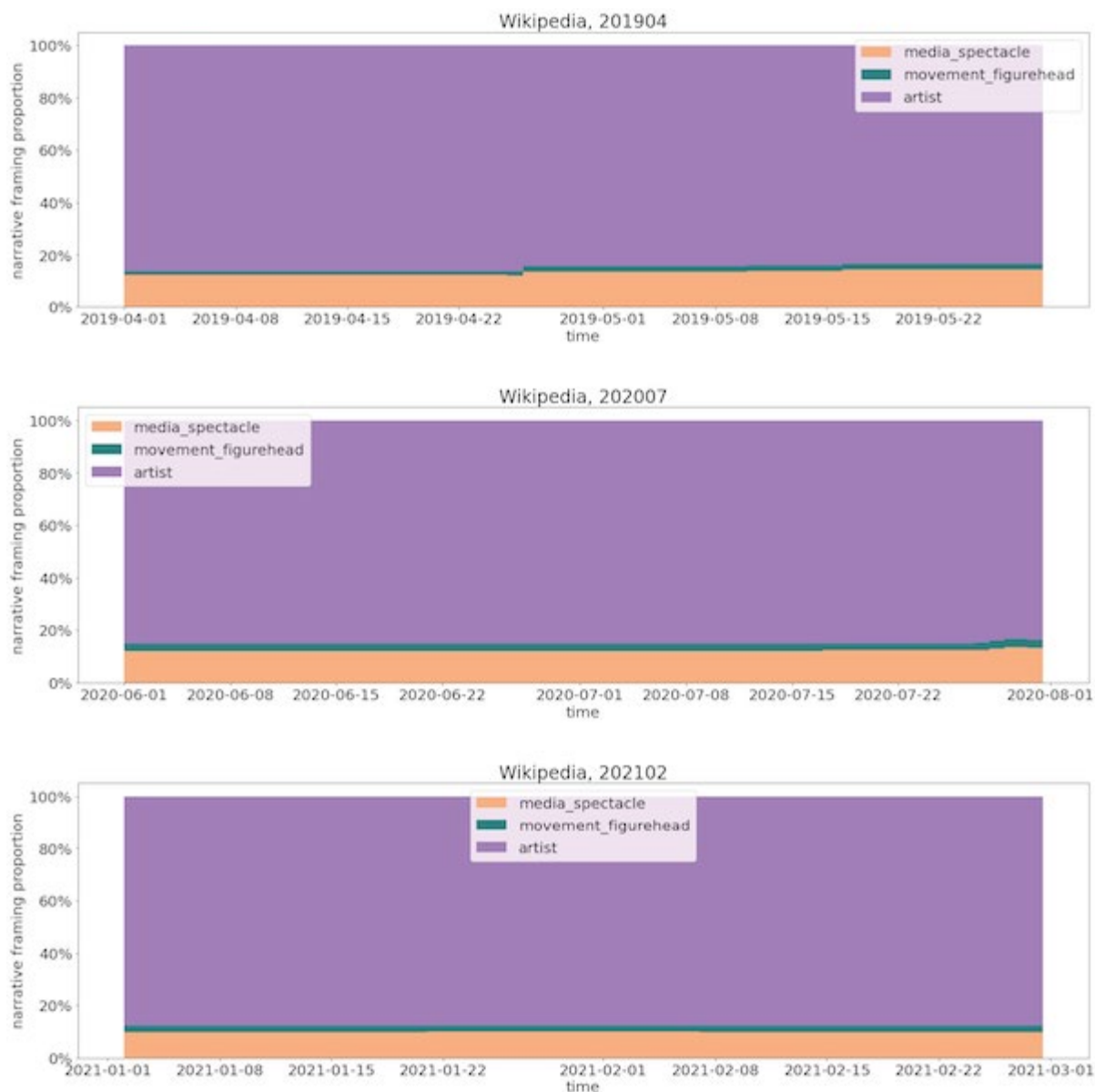


Figure 2: Plots of *Wikipedia* keyword hit proportions during the three bursty periods studied: April 2019, July 2020, and February 2021.

TMZ

While the article volume from *TMZ* is small compared to the volume of tweets on Twitter, the *TMZ* dataset's text is notable for having many more hits for the "media spectacle" frame when compared to either the Twitter dataset or the *Wikipedia* dataset. Upon close reading of *TMZ* articles that had a non-negligible number of keyword hits for the "movement figurehead," we noticed that even the sparse keyword hits for this framing did not tell the whole story. It would appear, in fact, that framings common on social media are not easily spread to other media platforms with more unified editorial control and objectives, even though *vocabulary* may trickle out from social media. For example, quotes from articles in the April 2019 burst include the following:

"... our sources say Jamie knows what's up and believes there are people out there in social media pulling the strings in the

‘Free Britney’ movement who might attempt to wrestle her away if she leaves California.”

“... despite the social media cry to ‘Free Britney,’ her conservatorship is biz as usual.”

The content of these articles generates some keyword hits for the “movement figurehead” frame, but it is important to note that the text containing them is actually subverting that framing. A manual, critical reading of the articles is necessary to understand the cultural work that *TMZ* writers are attempting to do discursively. While *TMZ* articles picked up on the *vocabulary* of the “movement figurehead” framing found on social media, and did so fairly early on, *TMZ*’s coverage did not serve to sustain or emphasize the *narrative* brought forth by the “movement figurehead” framing on Twitter. While *TMZ* adopts the vocabulary of the subversive story (the “movement figurehead” narrative), the way it folds these terms into stories promotes hegemonic tales about Spears’ stability and autonomy.

The April 2019 coverage (see [Figure 3](#)) discusses Spears’ alleged instability and mental illness, as well as her confinement to a mental health treatment facility, in juxtaposition with the #FreeBritney movement. *TMZ*’s treatment of Spears’ conservatorship strongly suggests that its existence is for Spears’ own good; despite deploying movement-related words, it serves to reify the hegemonic narratives already present around Spears’ conservatorship and autonomy. An article dated 26 April 2019 ends with the following:

“We’re told progress is being made, but there’s another big unresolved factor. The meds will stabilize her, but there are more fundamental mental health issues that go to judgment and perspective, and that requires intensive therapy ... something she has been and will continue to receive. Short story ... she’s doing better, but she’s not right, at least not yet.”

The syntax used in the article denies Spears’ agency. *TMZ*’s authors write that “progress is being made,” “the meds will stabilize [Spears],” and “[Spears] has been and will continue to receive [therapy];” Spears’ role in her own recovery is made invisible. Her “more fundamental mental health issues” are attributed to a lack of “judgement and perspective.” In short, the language used in the “media spectacle” framing, when deployed alongside the co-opted vocabulary of the “movement figurehead” framing, furthers harmful stereotypes about mental illness, celebrity, and women while simultaneously stripping Spears of her agency.

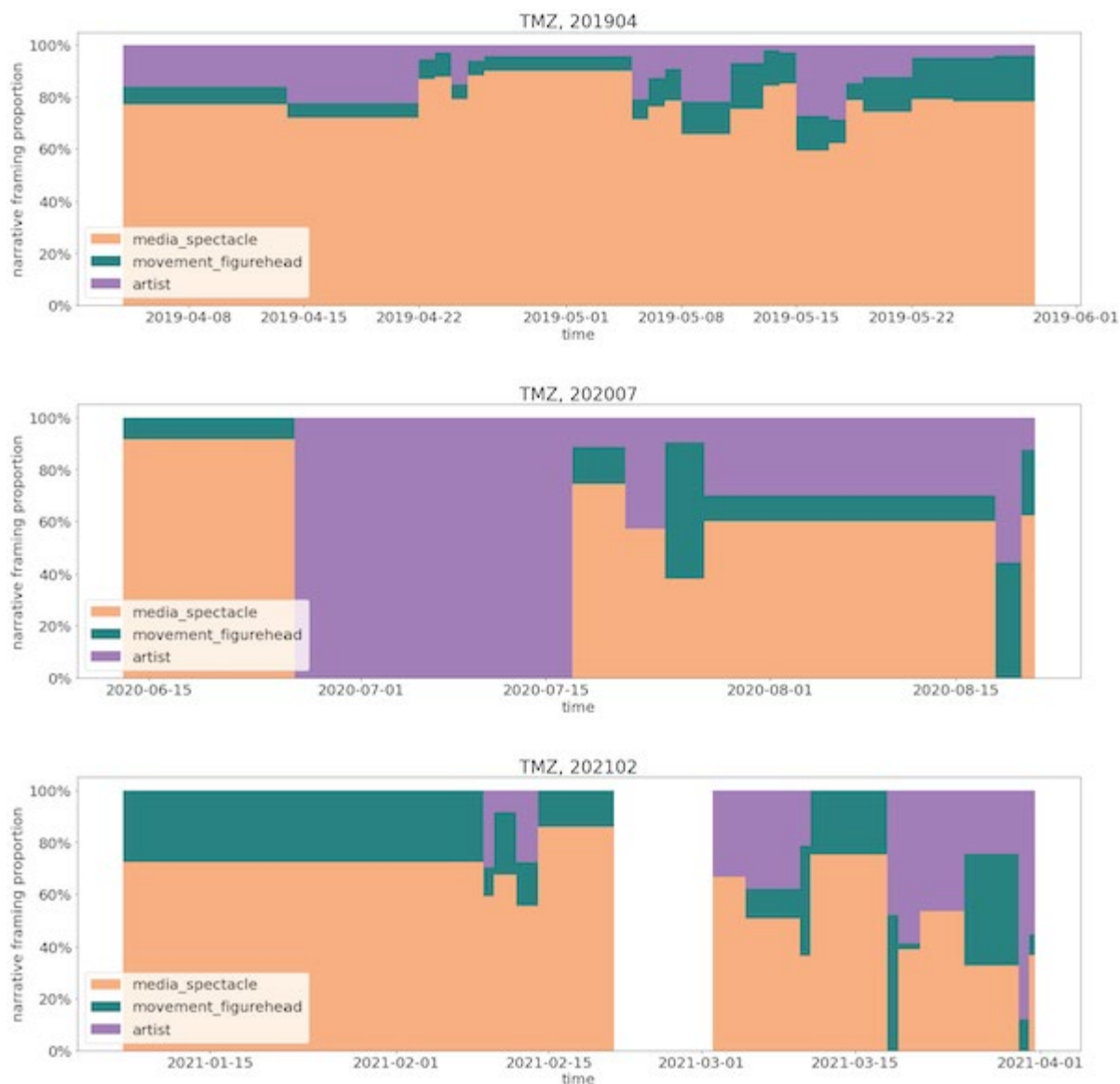


Figure 3: Plots of *TMZ* keyword hit proportions during the three bursty periods studied: April 2019, July 2020, and February 2021.



Discussion

Anonymity, amplification, and credibility

Platforms like Twitter and, to a lesser extent, *Wikipedia*, claim to give every user a voice and the potential for an audience; users do not have to tie their accounts to their “real-life” identities, and amplification allows content to reach further than one individual user’s followers. Such platforms are, generally speaking, an easier place to originate counter-hegemonic ideas (such as Spears’ conservatorship being an indicator of the many ways disabled people are systematically oppressed and excluded). Anonymity allows users to speak about issues they might not otherwise be able to discuss (Bodle, 2013), and amplification makes the spread of progressive ideas possible.

For the same reason, though, these platforms are also places where extremely harmful narratives can exist and proliferate. On *Wikipedia*, anonymous edits relating to forcible reproductive control of Spears were fairly common in the 2000s, for example — a narrative that then played out, disturbingly, in Spears’ actual life. Platforms that have the potential for counter-narratives to arise also have the potential for more extreme hegemonic narratives to surface. These extreme ways of thinking about Spears, and people like her, are frequently incubated and given space on platforms that afford for anonymity and amplification.

Because anonymity and amplification are generative, though, removing these affordances from platforms will not make them better spaces for ideas to arise and spread. Moderation, which is generally much more widespread and frequent on *Wikipedia*, allows users to report and remove harmful content. *Wikipedia*’s focus on “credible sources” elevates the same ways of knowing that the academy does, however. In discouraging “original research” and “anecdotes,” for example, *Wikipedia* may make its scientific articles more likely to be correct and credible, but at the cost of elevating individuals’ experience and situated knowledges. Some of the Twitter threads on Spears’ case’s relation to disability rights was heavily informed by their authors’ own experiences, and the concrete examples given by the authors made their arguments more compelling.

Twitter as a generative space

Perhaps owing to the affordances discussed earlier, the “movement figurehead” framing remained visible on Twitter after the #FreeBritney hashtag was introduced, but its visibility fluctuated with the public visibility of Spears’ case. Overall tweet volume increased when something important to Spears’ case, such as the release of the “Framing Britney” documentary, occurred, and much of that increase was driven by the proportion of discussion related to the “movement figurehead” framing. We contend that, in this discourse, Twitter acts as a point of origin (*RQI*) for the #FreeBritney movement; it originated the hashtag in its 2019-era incarnation and remained a place where discussion of Spears’ conservatorship and autonomy occurred alongside mockery in the tabloids and *Wikipedia* discussion that chose to focus on Spears as an artist in the name of neutrality.

Throughout Spears’ conservatorship’s periods of widespread public notoriety, Twitter remained a bastion of support for Spears’ freedom, and a generative one at that. For example, we noted in our critical discourse analysis that discussion in the disabled community arose using Spears’ conservatorship as an example of the ways in which disabled people are systemically stripped of their autonomy and rights. Coverage of Spears’ alleged mental illnesses and autonomy generally failed to consider the substantial disability rights aspect of her conservatorship case, largely focusing on her mental illness as a public spectacle instead.

Who has reason to peddle hegemonic narratives?

Decision-making in online for-profit media is driven, first and foremost, by engagement metrics: clicks, reads, and shares. Stories that confirm hegemonic understandings of the world generate less cognitive dissonance and are easier to digest and disseminate; moreover, they underline the myth that following the rules (hegemonic norms) will lead to success or, at least, relative safety. Online media markets profit from scandal and outrage, manufactured or not, where out-of-control people become spectacles. Crowd-sourced media is not immune to this profit motive, either. When *Wikipedia*’s notions of credibility require that a source be an established publication, the set of possible stories we might see reified by inclusion in a *Wikipedia* article shrinks dramatically. Established publications are ones that have succeeded in the online media market and, therefore, are adept at publishing ideas that drive engagement; this is notably not necessarily synonymous with challenging patriarchal structures within society or amplifying marginalized people’s voices.


Limitations & future work

This paper is limited by the accessibility of its data; most notably, the data from *TMZ* is incomplete, which may affect the completeness of our understanding of the narratives spread by the publication. In future work, we hope to generalize this approach to portrayals of other celebrities in situations of crisis or controversy to see if the same flow of narrative holds. We would also like to examine the role of mockery in keyword-based approaches to narrative or frame detection.

Ethics statement

Collecting social media data can be a fraught process. Users have the fundamental right to not be counted in datasets, lest their online speech be connected to offline identities, for example, or lead to harassment online. They can avoid harms by locking accounts to non-approved followers or deleting tweets; meanwhile, researchers can mitigate the harms of collecting data by reporting results in aggregate whenever possible. Our results are largely conclusions drawn from aggregate analysis; we include limited quotes from the dataset in order to illustrate common ways in which narrative threads are articulated on various platforms. We do not quote social media posts *verbatim* in this work, choosing to summarize them instead to avoid searchability and possible exposure for their authors. *Wikipedia* and tabloid content is intended explicitly for public consumption, so we use *verbatim* quotes when illustrative. We also note that the work of writing about issues of autonomy, misogyny, and disability carries with it a responsibility to make explicit, and then challenge, harmful norms that might otherwise go unquestioned.

Conclusion

In this paper, we present our analysis of the narrative reach and framing of the #FreeBritney movement in a few critical bursts of activity from 2019 to 2021, across various media. We find that while counter-hegemonic narratives originate, at least in part, on social media, they do eventually come to some prominence in tabloid publications. However, these more traditional media sources may subvert or fail to sustain those narratives. *Wikipedia*, though theoretically promising, is slower to adopt these narratives, perhaps as a consequence of its editorial processes. A truly inclusive media environment might contain authors who seek out the sources of counter-hegemonic narratives and elevate their voices, but we are not there yet; instead, what we have is an ecosystem with limited flow of ideas and a taste for narratives that fail to challenge the status quo. While there is hope in the form of generative platforms like Twitter, work — in the form of institutionalizing a process of discovering and amplifying diverse narratives — remains to be done. Such “subversive stories” ground us in the “particular” (*i.e.*, Spears’ fight to be free of the conservatorship) while linking the individual’s story to the society we live in and the biases we still have yet to overcome. 

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Appendix

Codebook: Definitions of each coding category

Artist: References Britney Spears’ discography, business/financials, and career milestones.

Media spectacle: Discusses Britney Spears’ alleged/perceived scandals and “out-of-control” actions in her personal and professional life.

Movement figurehead: Includes hashtags related to the #FreeBritney campaign and vocabulary related to her conservatorship battle. Also encompasses adjacent discussions around social justice and personal autonomy.

Final keyword groupings

Artist: career, business affairs, godney, baby one more time, billboard, music, super bowl, finances, fans, singer, sing, perform, music video, voice, musician, britney bitch, pop, radio, pop star, toxic, entertainment, circus, womanizer, oops i did it again, work bitch, piece of me, slumber party, dance, femme fatale, mtv, grammy, icon, vegas, residency, worked, paid

Media spectacle: meds, mental health facility, drugs, bikini post, boyfriend, kids, social media, meds stopped working, stabilized, crazy, expose, mental facility, children, paparazzi, tmz, drugged, lithium, fox news

Movement figurehead: mental health facility, meds, father, mental health treatment, dad, documentary, trapped, conservatorship battle, conservatorship, judge, conservator, control, conservatorship case, social media movement, restraining order, mental health, savebritney, endtheconservatorship, britney army, helpbritney, britneysgram, britisstronger, end conservatorship, team britney, petition, stop conservatorship abuse, justiceforbritney, thebritneyarmy, movement, court, human rights, forced, abuse, freebritney protest, hearing, attorney, sole conservator, temporary conservator, freedom, aclu, framing britney spears, sorry britney, support, apology, wearesorrybritney, power, misogyny, reformprobatelaws, complicit, civil rights, court documents, conservatorship details, legal team, britney speaks, courthouse, human trafficking, believe britney, life back, iud, legal system, disabled people, disability rights, reproductive rights, courtroom, consent, privacy, injustice, gaslighting, conservatee, surprise witness, abusive, autonomy, dignity, free britney, freebritney campaign, neutral investigation, constitutional right

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