

## Article

# Exclusivity, Celebrity Culture, and the Pandemic: A Chessboard of Power and Privilege

Lan Huang<sup>1</sup> and Vicky Nie<sup>2,\*</sup><sup>1</sup> Canadian Chess Youth Club, Vancouver, Canada<sup>2</sup> School of Management, City University of Canada, Vancouver, Canada

\* Correspondence: Vicky Nie, School of Management, City University of Canada, Vancouver, Canada

**Abstract:** This paper offers an overview of the implications of exclusivity for the eradication of COVID-19. It argues that the socially constructed symbols of exclusivity contribute to the emergence of an inclination to belong to the exclusive group of celebrities, even in the context of the global health crisis. It argues that when it comes to changes in the public's behaviour, the key factor is exclusivity and how it is presented in the media, and there is a critical need to enhance or develop critical thinking skills and abilities that encourage a nuanced approach to consuming information, including that communicated by the media.

**Keywords:** Covid-19; celebrity culture; exclusivity; mass media

## 1. Introduction

Celebrity has long become an integral aspect of modern reality. Regardless of whether society members agree or disagree with it, individuals who are elevated to the rank of celebrities tend to have a significant impact on how other people think and behave. As Kurzman et al. put it, "celebrity is an omnipresent feature of contemporary society, blazing lasting impressions in the memories of all who cross its path" [1]. The researchers went on to say that as those who are "born out of capitalism and mass media," celebrities act as "members of the high-status group" asserting the right to financial rewards, privileges, and exclusive opportunities [1]. In fact, exclusivity has been and remains an inseparable feature of celebrity.

Much like a chessboard where each piece holds a fixed rank and role, the pandemic exposed how power and privilege in celebrity culture are unequally distributed, shaping who must follow the rules—and who can move freely. On this symbolic board, celebrities often act like queens: able to break boundaries, while others—pawns—stay confined. The COVID-19 pandemic along with the regulations implemented by the government forces to handle the spread of the dangerous virus made a considerable contribution to exposing the power of the culture of exclusivity. It was not difficult to find media reports of celebrities' attempts to flaunt the COVID-19 rules. This is what emphasizes the importance of measuring the impact of the phenomenon of exclusivity in celebrity culture on the public and its inclination to comply with lockdown, restrictions, and other rules introduced to limit or stop the spread of the coronavirus. This paper offers an overview of the implications of exclusivity for the eradication of COVID-19.

It argues that the socially constructed symbols of exclusivity contribute to the emergence of an inclination to belong to the exclusive group of celebrities, even in the context of the global health crisis. When it comes to changes in the public's behaviour, the key factor is exclusivity and how it is presented in the media, and there is a critical need to enhance or develop critical thinking skills and abilities that encourage a nuanced approach to consuming information, including that communicated by the media.

Received: 13 June 2025

Revised: 20 June 2025

Accepted: 03 July 2025

Published: 02 August 2025



Copyright: © 2025 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 2. Theoretical Framework: Symbolic Interactionism

Given the need to explore the interactions between different members of society, it is necessary to decide on a framework that applies to the selected case. It can be argued that the so-called symbolic interactionism theory is the most suitable for explaining how exclusivity influences how members of the public perceive themselves and respond to restrictive measures in the context of a serious public health crisis. Introduced by Herbert Blumer and based on the philosophy of George Herbert Mead, the theory of symbolic interactionism attempts to clarify how human beings impose subjective meanings on the objects they encounter, the events taking place in the world, and the patterns of behaviour one exhibits, as well as how interactions between individuals shape the society they form [2]. One of the underlying ideas of the selected theoretical perspectives is that “humans constantly are engaged in mindful action where they manipulate symbols and negotiate the meaning of situations,” which makes it possible to view society as “a continuing process” [2]. From this it follows that society is a dynamic entity that is socially constructed through the interpretations of its members. Overall, Carter et al. point to the existence of the three main premises for the perspective in question:

- 1) Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them.
- 2) The meaning of things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with others.
- 3) Meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by a person in dealing with the things he or she encounters [2].

So, when interacting with one another, humans work out the significance of the behaviours they encounter, and while relying on their interpretations, they participate in the formation of specific social bonds. This further implies that in accordance with the selected theory, society members do not merely react to what is going on around them.

In this connection, one should devote special attention to the notion of the definition of the situation as it plays an important role in the theory of symbolic interactionism. People’s interpretations of the behavioural patterns they notice are what help define the situation. As Crossman explains, “the definition of the situation is something that we learn through socialization, composed of prior experiences, knowledge of norms, customs, beliefs, and social expectations, and is also informed by individual and collective needs and wants” [3]. In a sense, the definition-of-the-situation concept refers to a specific knowledge that helps one navigate through different social scenarios, adapting their behaviours to society’s expectations. Using the appropriate definitions of the situation, one develops a necessary understanding of what roles are assigned to them and others and what their statuses are. After obtaining a sense of the situation, one will have an idea of what patterns of conduct they should use.

At the same time, it is of particular importance to keep in mind that human behaviour depends substantially on one’s beliefs, although objective truth also has a certain role to play in this regard. It is thus no secret that young people tend to experiment with illegal substances, even though research scientists and healthcare experts continue to emphasize the risks and dangers of drug abuse and addiction using objective evidence, but why would young people wish to risk their well-being and lives? The definition of the situation that younger generations create with regard to drugs is what justifies the use of drugs. It can be asserted that young people are extraordinarily knowledgeable about how drug usage affects the human body. However, they have a tendency to believe that taking drugs is cool and that by doing so, they can improve their social image, making their peers respect them. Arguably, young people’s beliefs regarding drugs are largely based on what they see in the media. It is common knowledge that drugs are popular among celebrities, who use them to boost their creativity, relieve the pressure put upon them by the industry, etc., and yet, they remain adored by their fans. When looking at the beautiful and famous people under the influence of drugs, young people accept the idea that substance use will

help them create an aura of exclusivity and coolness. In such a way, the symbolic meaning of taking drugs overrides the objective truth regarding this practice and its risks.

### **3. Symbolic Interactionism and Meaning Making of Exclusivity**

#### *3.1. Symbolic Meanings of Exclusivity*

After reviewing the basic principles of the theory of symbolic interactionism, it will be necessary to proceed with the discussion of how the symbolic meaning of exclusivity forms people's inclination to get closer to the high-status group of celebrities and the way in which this has shaped people's behaviours during the pandemic. Following the fundamental principles of the theory discussed in this paper, it can be assumed that for some people being famous means having an access to an exclusive "club." They can believe that they could become members of this club, too, if they behave in a certain way, while others may perceive the exclusive opportunities that celebrities enjoy as something that does not really interest them or something unattainable, and therefore, they do not focus on the need to get closer to that exclusive group of people. So, a lot depends on what meanings individuals ascribe to something [4]. In the given case, one gives meanings to exclusivity and celebrity.

#### *3.2. Interaction and Shifting Interpretations*

Based on the next principle, it can be assumed that interactions play a critical role in the emergence of various meanings concerned with exclusivity. When an individual learns something about the behaviours of those who retain membership in the exclusive group, their perception changes. The meanings, however, are not stable. As Battarbee et al. explain, they "are handled in and modified through an interpretive process with things (or behaviours) people encounter" [4]. When learning about celebrities and their engagement in certain behaviours, one starts to appreciate them. If those patterns of conduct are perceived in a negative light, one will have to come to terms with this situation. The fact, however, remains that the kind of symbolic meanings that will be given to exclusivity and celebrity will depend substantially on what one believes in. By analogy with drug usage, the symbolic meaning of exclusivity may override the facts regarding the inappropriateness of celebrities' behaviours. Based on the subjective meaning of those patterns of conduct, one will adjust the ways they act. This resembles a chess game, where players assign strategic meaning to each move, anticipating how others will interpret and respond. In the symbolic world of exclusivity, each action by a celebrity can be read as a move on the board—calculated, performative, and aimed at maintaining their unique status.

### **4. The Media and Skewed Meaning Making of Exclusivity**

As for the media, it traditionally plays an extremely important role in how media consumers perceive what is going on in the world and is actively involved in the construction of opinions regarding this or that specific issue. Since this paper is primarily interested in the pandemic and how the public's behaviors changed under the influence of the constructed symbols of exclusivity that are closely linked with the celebrity culture that shapes the world we live in, it will be necessary to examine how the media outlets captured exclusivity when reporting on celebrities and their attempts to break the existing COVID-19 rules and on cases when famous people demonstrated their adherence with the government's restrictions and regulations.

Notably, a general overview of the available mass media reports describing COVID-19 rules violations on the part of members of the most exclusive social group indicates that Japhe's Washington Post article, for instance, makes it clear that there exists "a separate set of rules" for high-profile members of society, and they do not hesitate to benefit from them. When describing how celebrities were able to reach destinations where strict measures such as travel bans were introduced to control the virus, the author makes it clear that celebrities' status was what allowed them to fly abroad to go on holidays or

perform job duties, whereas ordinary citizens could not enjoy such a privilege [4]. The overall tone of the article, in turn, makes one assume that the behaviours of high-profile travellers are far from being acceptable. Blomeley's article takes a much more critical approach to the issue of celebrities' disobedience campaign. Remarkably, the author of the article published on the website of the Crimson White makes the following statement:

In what many are touting as the end of celebrity culture as we know it, coronavirus has turned the public against the influencers and celebrities we once loved. From publicity stunts to hosting huge parties, celebrities may be doing more harm than good during the pandemic [5].

Based on the reading, it can be assumed that similarly to Japhe's article, it seeks to communicate the idea that celebrities' tendency to violate rules is one of the ways in which their exclusivity is manifested, and some people appear to be reluctant to tolerate this exclusive right. What is important here is that by breaking the rules, celebrities such as influencers send the wrong message that the global health crisis is not as serious as it is portrayed by the media. This eventually discourages members of the public to stick to the rules that are intended to protect them.

### 5. Exclusivity and Celebrity Influence on COVID-19 Rule Adherence

The impact of celebrities should not be underestimated. The available research indicates that "celebrities can have a significant impact on people's attitudes and beneficial behaviors in a crisis," and the recent COVID-19 pandemic is no exception [6]. At the same time, researchers noted significant divergences in the effectiveness of celebrities' attempts to advocate for safety measures such as social distancing. To be more precise, Abu-Akel et al. found that, unlike Tom Hanks, "media personality Kim Kardashian was the least effective spokesperson for social distancing, across age groups and countries" [7]. Arguably, the difference was due to Kardashian's failure to comply with the rules. Numerous reports indicate that the reality TV star violated the COVID-19 regulations by organizing a party on an island in French Polynesia [8]. According to Kirkpatrick (2021), "for some, Kardashian's party was a debacle; for others, it was an inspiration". It appears that some of the celebrity's followers and "colleagues" followed her example and broke the rules, too [8]. A lot of people, however, criticized Kardashian's behaviour, and there was a perception that not adhering to the rules was okay.

It is notable that news about cases connected with celebrities and their misconduct began to emerge over time. When it was clear that the pandemic was inevitable and strict COVID-19 policies were implemented, there was a general sense among society members, including celebrities, their followers, and others, that following safety protocols and guidelines was important [8]. It is also noteworthy that celebrities who promoted the need to adhere to rules managed to have a positive impact on the public's perception of the strict policies and readiness to adhere to the government's policies. Tom Hanks is a good example of a media personality whose membership in an exclusive community did not discourage people from violating the policies implemented by the government in an attempt to assume control over the spread of the coronavirus. As a spokesperson for safety measures such as mask-wearing and social distancing, the renowned Hollywood actor helped the public maintain a relatively high level of willingness to follow the new norms [7]. Instead of making use of his status and the exclusive opportunities that it includes, Hanks made an effort to communicate the idea that the crisis was serious and affected all, which is why people would need to join forces in the fight against the coronavirus.

In this case, adherence to preventive measures is depicted as exclusivity. As the actor himself pointed out, he has no respect for people who ignore safety protocols. This implies that the successful actor's respect is an exclusivity that can be achieved through compliance with the rules. In such a way, adherence is represented as another exclusivity that can also serve as a means for earning the respect of the famous person. This is exactly

what increases the likelihood that members of the public will wear facemasks, keep a distance, and engage in other practices in order to protect their own health and that of the people around them. In Cohen's view, however, it was the actor's illness that influenced his followers to take more care of themselves and others [9]. To be more precise, the researcher puts forward the idea that "parasocial attachment and wishful identification with Hanks" could have been involved in his case, increasing the public's adherence to the regulations. In this connection, it will be necessary to mention that more research and data are needed to develop a sufficient understanding of celebrities' influence on other people's perceptions of COVID-19, safety measures, and behaviours. Yet, there is a high possibility that people's interpretations of celebrities' actions and their subjective meanings play a decisive role in how society members behave in the time of the pandemic.

Given the strong influence that famous people have on the public, including media consumers, and the tendency to ignore and violate the existing policies and protocols, it is of particular importance to adopt a more critical perspective of celebrity and exclusivity. The example of Tom Hanks does show that celebrities can influence society's perception of the importance of issues such as safety measures and encourage one to comply with the rules, which, as the previous paragraph shows, can be viewed as a specific exclusivity. However, one can have the impression that the majority of individuals enjoying celebrity status have been unable to turn their influence into a positive force and promote the need to follow the rules and guidelines during the pandemic. As the media shows, many celebrities tried to yield benefits from the crisis and proved to be a bad influence on those who follow them, including young people, who are particularly susceptible to outside influences [5]. To eliminate the negative impact of celebrities on large masses of people, efforts should be made to teach media literacy and critical thinking skills. The former is what refers to "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media in a variety of forms" [10]. As for critical thinking, it is associated with the practice of skillfully analyzing, synthesizing, and applying the information one accumulates [11]. The development and active usage of relevant skills and abilities will enable media consumers and followers of celebrities to assume control over how they perceive what is going on in the world, develop a more objective view of other people's behaviours and responses, and limit the negative impact of celebrity culture. As Blomeley's article suggests, the pandemic has posed a serious challenge to this culture and made people question the role of celebrities in their lives [12]. Hopefully, they will continue to take a critical approach to celebrity influence in the post-pandemic period.

## **6. Conclusion**

It is thus clear that in the context of a serious health crisis, the public's behaviour depends largely on the subjective meanings that are imposed on patterns of conduct and how one interprets other people's actions. Celebrities have been and remain powerful influencers who shape the way people perceive reality and adjust their patterns of conduct. It is not, however, always the case that high-profile representatives of our society manage to have a positive impact on how people deal with the crisis. As one can see, there are few celebrities who lead by example in creating conditions conducive to the eradication of the coronavirus. As demonstrated in this paper, there are cases when, due to the media, adherence to the public safety measures introduced by authorities is presented as exclusivity, as a result of which media consumers tend to adjust their behaviours, observing anti-COVID-19 measures. At the same time, there is a tendency to portray celebrities' decision to flout rules as an exclusive right, which reduces compliance with policies. Hence, the public's behaviours are largely influenced by the approach that the media use to present exclusivity (one can present violation of rules or adherence to them as exclusivity). It is therefore essential to invest effort and resources in the development of essential skills that would enable the public to think critically about celebrities and their behaviours before changing their ways. In this metaphorical chessboard of pandemic-era culture, it is up to



the public to develop the critical thinking necessary to step back from the game, assess the rules, and choose whether to play along—or redefine the board itself.

## References

1. C. Kurzman et al., "Celebrity status," *Sociol. Theory*, vol. 25, no. 4, pp. 347–367, 2007. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9558.2007.00313.x.
2. M. J. Carter and C. Fuller, "Symbols, meaning, and action: The past, present, and future of symbolic interactionism," *Curr. Sociol.*, vol. 64, no. 6, pp. 931–961, 2016. doi: 10.1177/0011392116638396.
3. A. Crossman, "What Is the 'Definition of the Situation' — And Why It Matters," *ThoughtCo.*, May 30, 2019. [Online]. Available: <https://www.thoughtco.com/situation-definition-3026244> (Accessed: Jun. 30, 2025).
4. K. Battarbee and I. Koskinen, "Co-experience: Product experience as social interaction," in *Product Experience*, Elsevier, 2008, pp. 461–476. doi: 10.1016/B978-008045089-6.50022-8.
5. A. Blomeley, "How the COVID-19 pandemic is forcing a reckoning within celebrity culture," *The Crimson White*, Mar. 3, 2021. [Online]. Available: <https://thecrimsonwhite.com/79901/culture/how-the-covid-19-pandemic-is-forcing-a-reckoning-within-celebrity-culture/> (Accessed: Jun. 30, 2025).
6. J. Y. Lebni et al., "The role of celebrities during the COVID-19 pandemic in Iran: opportunity or threat?," *Disaster Med. Public Health Prep.*, vol. 16, no. 4, pp. 1292–1293, 2022. doi: 10.1017/dmp.2020.498.
7. A. Abu-Akel, A. Spitz, and R. West, "The effect of spokesperson attribution on public health message sharing during the COVID-19 pandemic," *PLoS One*, vol. 16, no. 2, p. e0245100, 2021. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0245100.
8. E. Kirkpatrick, "For every stage of the pandemic, there has been a celebrity getting in trouble for partying," *Vanity Fair*, Mar. 10, 2021. [Online]. Available: <https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2021/03/celebrities-getting-in-trouble-for-partying-in-pandemic> (Accessed: Jun. 30, 2025).
9. E. L. Cohen, "Stars—They're sick like us! The effects of a celebrity exemplar on COVID-19-related risk cognitions, emotions, and preventative behavioral intentions," *Sci. Commun.*, vol. 42, no. 5, pp. 724–741, 2020. doi: 10.1177/1075547020960465.
10. A. Shaw, "Media literacy - a critical 21st century skill," *LinkedIn*, Apr. 15, 2015. [Online]. Available: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/media-literacy-critical-21st-century-skill-anne-shaw> (Accessed: Jun. 30, 2025).
11. A. Graves, "Celebrity 'Activism' during Covid-19," in *Working-Class Rhetorics: Contemporary Memoirs and Analyses*, vol. 9, 2021, p. 208. doi: 10.1163/9789004501508\_017.
12. B. Japhe, "Celebrities are traveling where we're banned. These loopholes may be how," *The Washington Post*, Oct. 27, 2020. [Online]. Available: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/travel/2020/10/22/celebrity-travel-covid-19/> (Accessed: Jun. 30, 2025).

**Disclaimer/Publisher's Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of GBP and/or the editor(s). GBP and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.