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Suggested Citation:

Kretz, V. E. (2020). McDreamy is McDead: Fan responses to a parasocial break-up. *The Journal of Fandom Studies*, 8(2), 147-163. https://doi.org/10.1386/jfs_00014_1

Abstract

Grounded in scholarship regarding post-object fandom, parasocial breakups, and parasocial grief, this research explored tweets regarding the death of a long-running, central character on the TV show *Grey's Anatomy*. A theory-driven thematic analysis revealed five major themes including: emotional expressions of grief, recovery and coping, advocating, not wanting to watch, and memorializing, each encompassing various subthemes. Fans expressed these responses with varying levels of intensity. The results suggest that there are fan responses to a parasocial breakup, especially a parasocial death, not suggested in prior studies that should be examined in future research. Furthermore, a parasocial breakup can be a powerful experience for fans even disrupting their everyday lives.

Keywords: post-object fandom, parasocial relationships, television, thematic analysis

McDreamy is McDead: Fan Responses to a Parasocial Breakup

Few television shows have the staying power of *Grey's Anatomy*. In September 2017, the medical drama began its fourteenth season, making it the longest-running scripted series on ABC (Goldberg 2017). *Grey's Anatomy* enjoys this longevity because of its devoted viewers. The show's 13th season was ranked in the Top 10 of all scripted series on broadcast and cable amongst a coveted younger demographic (Bianco 2017), and it has received numerous awards including five People's Choice Awards for favorite TV drama (IMDb 2018). Fans are further engaged with the show on social media. *Grey's Anatomy* has over 23 million likes on Facebook and over 4 million followers on Twitter. Week after week fans tune in order to catch up with the staff of Grey Sloan Memorial Hospital. In fact, the show's likeable and multi-faceted characters have been regarded as one of its strengths from the start (Smith 2005). While the ensemble cast has changed over the years, there are characters that have been featured on the show from the beginning. Dr. Derek Shepherd *was* one such character. Derek Shepherd, a.k.a. 'McDreamy,' appeared in season 1, episode 1 of *Grey's Anatomy*, which aired in March 2005, and he was killed in season 11, episode 21, which aired in April 2015. Over 10 years, Derek appeared in nearly every one of *Grey's Anatomy's* 241 episodes to that point. He was one of the show's main characters and part of a romantic storyline (between him and Meredith Grey) that was at the center of the show. He was also seemingly invincible, having survived life-threatening situations including being shot and in a plane crash. Given these factors, it is unsurprising that his death was considered shocking (Blickley 2015) to the episode's 9.5 million viewers (Baron 2015) and that many took to social media to respond (Kimble 2015). The purpose of the current study is to explore fans' reactions to this beloved character's death through a thematic analysis of related tweets. The concepts of post-object fandom and parasocial breakup provide the foundation for

this research. The present study broadens our understanding of viewers' parasocial grief experiences by examining their immediate, self-reported responses in an under-investigated context, the death of a long-running, fictional character. This broadening of knowledge is facilitated by the use of a qualitative approach, which allowed viewers' reactions to inform the analysis. I now turn to describing the concepts of post-object fandom and parasocial relationships and relevant research.

Parasocial Relationships, Breakups, and Grief during Post-Object Fandom

Fandom scholars, such as Williams (2011), have explored how fans respond when the target of their fandom becomes "dormant," that is, when no new associated media will be released, like when a band breaks up, a TV show is cancelled, or a celebrity dies. Once dormancy begins, Williams suggests that fans enter a period called post-object fandom. In her work on "big" endings, such as the end of an entire TV series or movie franchise, Williams (2015) found that some fans reiterate their relationship with the object of their fandom while others reject it. The notion of reiteration is also evident in others' scholarship, such as Adams, Ernestes, and Lucey's (2013) work on the Grateful Dead fandom. They found that since Jerry Garcia's passing, many Deadheads still engaged with his music and connected with other fans online or in person. On the whole, these fandom studies indicate that responses to losing the object of one's fandom may vary from context to context and fan to fan. Williams (2015) also examined post-object fandom in relation to "small" endings that happen when a specific element is discontinued, for example, when an actor leaves a TV show. That work explores the connections that fans have with specific media figures, which are often called parasocial relationships.

One aspect of fandom is forming a connection with a real or fictional media figure (Earnhardt & Haridakis 2009, O'Donovan 2016). Rooted in social psychology, the resulting

bond is known as a parasocial relationship (PSR) (Giles 2002). Although these relationships are characterized as one-sided (fan to media figure), PSRs are similar to real-world relationships in many respects. For example, PSRs are thought to be developed over time (Horton and Wohl 1956). They also vary in closeness, as implied by scholars' numerous attempts to quantify the intensity of individual parasocial connections (see Dibble et. al (2016) for a review and critique). Because of the strong bonds that some users form with media figures, scholars have examined how viewers respond when a PSR ends, a phenomenon frequently referred to as a parasocial breakup (Cohen 2003).

Parasocial breakups may occur when a program goes off the air, when a media figure dies, or when a character is written off a show through death or other narrative means. In early work on the subject, Cohen (2003) asked fans to consider how they would react to a hypothetical parasocial breakup scenario using statements adapted from research on real-life breakups. He concluded that fans might experience feelings of loneliness, sadness, disappointment, and anger related to a parasocial breakup. He also suggested that fans might respond behaviorally, seeking out other ways to maintain the PSR or to compensate for its loss. Since that initial study, further research on parasocial breakups has focused on predictors and correlates of actual parasocial breakup reactions, often using the same adapted scale (Cohen 2004, Eyal and Cohen 2006, Lather and Moyer-Guse 2011, Ellithorpe and Brookes 2018). This research indicates that parasocial breakups function somewhat similarly to real-world ones. For example, survey studies showed that the stronger a parasocial bond and commitment to maintaining it, the greater the distress the viewer experiences when a PSR ends (Eyal and Cohen 2006, Lather and Moyer-Guse 2011).

The deaths of characters and media figures have also been explored in the parasocial breakup literature. When a parasocial breakup is due to death, fans may experience what is sometimes referred to as parasocial grief (Sanderson and Cheong 2010). Grief is often characterized as a process that involves several stages (e.g., Kubler-Ross 1969). Although there are relatively few published studies on the topic, research regarding parasocial grief suggests that the experience of grieving in PSRs and real-world relationships may take similar forms. Several studies have looked at fans' experiences of grief following a celebrity's death. A thematic analysis by Sanderson and Cheong (2010) investigated whether Kubler-Ross' (1969) stages of grief were present in fans' social media posts regarding Michael Jackson's death. They found that while denial and acceptance were often reflected in the messages, fans infrequently expressed anger, bargaining, and depression. A similar study by Radford and Bloch (2012) regarding the death of Dale Earnhardt, Sr. found evidence of all five stages in fan forums with the most commonly expressed stage being depression. The authors also suggested that fans used forums to commiserate and demonstrated a desire to buy memorabilia related to the celebrity. Additionally, they noted that whereas fans' responses were passionate, they were also short lived.

More recently, a few studies have examined viewers' responses to the deaths of fictional characters. One such study, by Daniel and Westerman (2017), examined the possibility of fans going through Kubler-Ross' stages of grief by content analyzing 951 tweets made after the death of Jon Snow on *Game of Thrones*. All five stages were represented in their sample with depression being the most frequent and denial and anger following closely behind. Notably, in this case, the death of the character was not presumed to be permanent because it took place in a fantasy realm wherein characters are sometimes resurrected, which influenced fans responses. In

another study, DeGroot and Leith (2015) conducted a thematic analysis of a Facebook memorial site for Lawrence Kutner of the show *House, M.D* after his unexpected death. The themes the authors identified in 720 posts were emotional expressions of grief, reminiscing about the character, memorializing the character, and advocating for the character. Finally, in her research on post-object fandom, Williams (2015) conducted a survey of twelve fans about the death of the character Cordelia on the TV show *Angel*, a death that many viewers anticipated. She concluded that fans expect writers to “do justice” to beloved characters, providing them with a fitting end, and that if fans are dissatisfied with the character’s ending they may respond with more anger and less sadness and grief. Then they may assuage their negative feelings by distancing themselves from the show. On the whole, these studies indicate that fans may experience parasocial grief even when the target of their PSR is fictional. However, fans’ responses may vary based on the circumstances surrounding the character’s death.

The discussed scholarship regarding post-object fandom and parasocial grief also highlights the role that social media can play in dealing with the loss of a fan object. Whether through Facebook (Sanderson and Cheong, 2010, DeGroot and Leith 2015), Twitter (Sanderson and Cheong 2010, Daniel and Westerman 2017), or fan-specific forums (Radford and Bloch 2012, Williams 2015), viewers are increasingly connecting online to those with shared interests or simply using social media to express their views about traditional media. Thus, social media sites have provided opportunities to investigate post-object fandom and, more specifically, fans’ spontaneous reactions to parasocial breakups and their parasocial grief.

To summarize, fans may form connections with media figures known as parasocial relationships. When these relationships end, a parasocial breakup occurs, and when that breakup is due to death, the viewer may experience parasocial grief. Research on parasocial breakups is

most often quantitative in nature, relying upon possibly incomplete conceptions of the breakup experience, especially Cohen's (2003) parasocial breakup scale. This is in part due to the fact that such research has often examined predictors and correlates of parasocial breakup reactions (Cohen 2004, Eyal & Cohen 2010, Hu 2015), not the nature of the parasocial breakup experience. The present study thus expands on prior research regarding parasocial breakups by examining fans' spontaneous responses in a qualitative, inductive way, not limited to preconceived categories.

Additionally, the focus of the present study is on parasocial breakup through death, and prior research on that topic, while valuable, is limited by the methods, conceptions, and contexts studied. Research on parasocial grief has often focused on celebrity deaths (Sanderson and Cheong, 2010, Radford and Bloch, 2012, Harju 2015, Van den Bulck and Larsson 2017), not the deaths of fictional characters. Whereas a few studies have examined fan responses to the latter, the circumstances surrounding a character's death, whether it was expected or unexpected, perceived to be fair or unfair, permanent or temporary, and so on, may lead to differences in fans' reactions. Thus, research involving additional cases, such as the present one, can add to our knowledge of the fan experience. Specifically, the current study examines a case wherein the character had been developed over an exceptionally long period of time, and his death was unexpected, perceived to be unjust, and permanent. These features differentiate the present case from those investigated in prior research (Williams 2011, DeGroot and Leith 2015, Daniel and Westerman 2017). The present analysis examines fans' Tweets made shortly after the characters' death. Thus, this study also sheds light on the ways that fans express their grief using the limited number of characters (140) afforded by Twitter.

Research Objective

The specific goal of the present study was to explore fans' responses to the death of Dr. Derek Shepherd on the television show *Grey's Anatomy*, which occurred during the episode 'How to Save a Life.' The theoretical construct investigated is parasocial breakup. The present study relies upon thematic analysis, analyzing unsolicited fan responses. This method may broaden our understanding of parasocial breakups by determining whether fans' spontaneous reports are consistent with those suggested by the measures used elsewhere, especially Cohen's (2003) parasocial breakup scale, and also whether fans respond in ways not previously described. Furthermore, the present study investigated the phenomenon known as parasocial grief, adding to the limited literature regarding how fans respond to the deaths of fictional characters. This was accomplished through an analysis of emotional and cognitive responses reported via Twitter where many fans shared their immediate reactions to the death of Dr. Shepherd.

Methods

Context

During season 11 episode 21 of *Grey's Anatomy*, after witnessing a car crash, Dr. Derek Shepherd treated survivors on the scene. He then went back to his car, which was hit by a semi-truck while he was distracted by his mobile phone. The accident itself did not kill him; rather, the hospital to which he was taken was not prepared to receive accident victims and, in an ironic twist, their mistakes caused the 'brain death' of the neurosurgeon. His wife Meredith later consented to disconnecting him from life support. The episode aired during prime time on Thursday, April 23, 2015.

Data Collection and Analysis

I used the Twitter Archiving Google Sheet (TAGS) macro (Hawksey n.d.) to archive tweets that included #GreysAnatomy. TAGS relies upon the Twitter Search API, an application

programming interface that makes available a limited number of tweets deemed most relevant to the search criteria. I archived the tweets three times in a 24-hour period to allow for more viewers to watch the show and respond. After conducting some initial cleanup, such as removing duplicates, I decided to remove three categories of tweets: re-tweets, tweets with links, and directed tweets (@username), except for those directed towards the show, the show's creator, and the primary actors. Re-tweets were removed because I was focused on viewers' spontaneous reactions, tweets with links were removed because the linked pages or images were often unavailable at the time of coding, and directed tweets were excluded because they were often part of a conversation and thus difficult to interpret on their own. With an eye to my research objectives, I then considered the remaining tweets. Ultimately, I determined that those most relevant to my goals made mention of the main character, Derek. I reduced the sample accordingly (allowing for misspellings and other variations such as #MerDer, which is the nickname for Derek and Meredith as a couple, commonly used by shippers). As I coded these tweets, I eliminated further irrelevancies, primarily tweets that were clearly made before Derek's death. The final sample included 740 tweets.

To address my research objective, I conducted a thematic analysis of the tweets in order to identify different types of fan responses. The unit of analysis was the tweet, but the possibility that each tweet could contain multiple themes was allowed for. The software nVivo was used to facilitate the coding. First, I put the tweets into categories with a focus on two conceptions of parasocial breakups discussed in the extant literature but with openness to emergent themes. The first conception considered was a description of the means of coping with the death of a parasocial target proposed by Sanderson (2009) and investigated further by DeGroot and Leith (2015). The themes suggested by the latter's research were emotional responses including

sadness, shock, longing, love, and confusion; reminiscing about the character; memorializing or paying tribute to the character; and advocating for the character. The second conception considered was Cohen's (2003) suggested parasocial breakup responses, which is not specific to loss through death. While there are overlapping themes indicated by Cohen's work and that of DeGroot and Leith, especially in regards to expressions of grief, the former suggests several notable additions. In terms of emotional responses, these include anger and feeling like one has lost a close friend, which implies a more intense expression than just 'sadness.' Additionally, Cohen's version of advocating was expressed more specifically as, 'trying to do something to change the situation' like writing to the network, which would be an option for Twitter users. Finally, Cohen's research also suggests that after a parasocial breakup viewers may become less excited about watching television. Next I analyzed the tweets in each category using a constant comparative methodology (Glaser and Strauss 1967). For example, within the initial category of 'Advocating,' I compared tweets, and was able to identify several specific themes, including advocating for the character who died, as suggested by previous scholarship (Cohen 2003), but also advocating for the show and for the character's wife or them as a couple. As with Advocating, each of the initial categories were clarified and refined until new observations failed to add significantly to the existing categories.

Results

There were five major themes that I identified within the sample: emotional expressions of grief, recovery and coping, advocacy, not wanting to watch anymore, and memorials. Table 1 shows the percentage of tweets that contained each theme (broken down by subtheme where applicable). Presumably fans did not comprehensively describe their reactions to Dr. Shepherd's death within their tweets. Rather each tweet contains one or more aspects of the parasocial

breakup experience as described by a fan. Thus, percentages are provided for the purposes of comparing the relative frequency of each theme / subtheme within this sample, not quantifying the frequency of specific responses across the *Grey's Anatomy* fandom.

Table 1

Frequency of Themes

Theme	Percent of Tweets
Emotional Expressions of Grief	
Sadness	38%
Heartbreak	12%
Anger	4%
Outrage	9%
Shock	13%
Recovery and Coping	
Denial	2%
Time elapsed	5%
Can't cope	4%
Never get over it	3%
Coping mechanisms	1%
Other fictional deaths	1%
Advocating	
The character	8%
The show	7%
The wife or couple	2%
Not Wanting to Watch	6%
Memorializing	26%

Themes may have been expressed in hashtags (#), in expanded text, or through emojis¹.

Viewers' expressions related to parasocial grief varied in their intensity, but it was evident that fans were deeply affected by the death of Dr. Shepherd, which speaks to the strength of parasocial relationships that many *Grey's Anatomy* fans developed with this long-time character. A detailed discussion of each theme follows with connections made to the two conceptions used as background for the analysis (Cohen 2003, De Groot and Leith 2015).

Emotional Expression of Grief

Viewers in this sample expressed a range of negative emotions. Positive responses were negligible. I found evidence of sadness and anger, and I also observed that many viewers were shocked. However, I saw scant representations of longing, which is not surprising given that these responses were tweeted within 24 hours of the episode's original air time.

Sad and heartbroken. Sadness and heartbreak were the most commonly expressed themes overall. I took note of sadness and heartbreak separately because they seem to indicate different degrees of the emotion. As suggested by Cohen (2003), viewers may feel like they lost a close friend after a parasocial breakup, and feeling heartbroken better speaks to that sense of loss. Although of the two, sadness was the more commonly expressed theme. Fans most frequently communicated their sadness via statements and emojis related to crying. For example, one wrote, 'I can honestly say I have never cried as hard as I just did at a tv show 🥹🥹🥹.' Heartbreak was also often communicated verbally (e.g., #heartbroken) or through emojis (e.g., ).

Furthermore, viewers expressed these emotions with varying intensity. Whereas one viewer expressed their sadness using #sad, others suggested far more severe reactions like, 'I've never sobbed this much in my entire life.' Likewise, whereas some fans expressed heartbreak in a mild form, others expressed it much more fervently, for example, 'I AM DEVASTATED.' That said, more fans expressed strong reactions than mild ones. The single tear ('crying face') emoji was used far less frequently than the streaming tears ('loudly crying face') emoji.

Anger and outrage. Viewers also reacted to the loss of Dr. Shepherd with expressions of anger and outrage as expected based on Cohen's (2003) work. Similar to sadness and heartbreak, some fans expressed their anger mildly (e.g., 'McPissedoff') while others expressed it more

vehemently, often with indignation, constituting outrage. Additionally, while some fans voiced their anger more generally, others directed their anger, particularly at the showrunner, Shonda Rhimes. For this reason, outrage and advocating (discussed below) commonly occurred together. For example, one viewer tweeted, ‘How the heck you going to kill Derek off Greys Anatomy Shonda Rhimes! That's PETTY 🙄 I'm mad AF!’ This particular tweet also demonstrates three ways that fans commonly expressed their anger: 1) using emojis like the one above or 😡 2) using all capital letters, a common convention, and / or 3) using a variation of the ‘f-word.’

Shock. The final major emotional response I identified in the sample was shock. Based on the work of DeGroot and Leith (2015), viewers may theoretically feel shock after a character’s death. However, as Williams (2015) alluded to, whether or not fans are shocked depends on the context because sometimes an actor’s exit is announced in advance. In this particular case, Derek’s death was ‘spoiled’ by *Entertainment Weekly* in an article that announced, ‘The doctor is out,’ earlier in the day (Variety Staff 2015). Whereas the print article had limited delivery, the announcement spread online via social media. Nevertheless, fans did somewhat frequently indicate that they were shocked. Whether they were shocked that Derek died or the manner by which he died is somewhat unclear. Furthermore, some audience members expressed their shock very directly (e.g., ‘#iminshock’ or 🤯), whereas others indicated that they were shocked indirectly. For example, one fan tweeted, ‘OMG! THEY KILLED OF DEREK SHEPPARD?!?!?! OMG! WHY?!’ Sometimes, as in this example, viewers used capitalization to emphasize just how taken aback they were, and, as this tweet suggests, the character’s death was not only shocking but was a lot for fans to process.

Recovery and Coping

Based on my analysis, the death of Dr. Shepherd elicited intense, negative emotional responses for many fans in the sample. This was expected based on extant scholarship regarding parasocial breakups and grief (Cohen 2003, DeGroot and Leith 2015, Williams 2015). However, I recognized an additional trend in my analysis. Fans often commented on how they were dealing with (or not dealing with) the death of the character over time, and these sentiments indicated that they predicted their grief would not necessarily be short-lived.

Denial. Denial played a role in a few fans' responses. These viewers tweeted that they did not accept the events that took place. For example, one fan wrote, 'I keep telling myself that Derek is still in Washington and life is beautiful!' while another wrote, 'No, Derek is not dead. I refuse to believe it.' Denial seems to have been a coping mechanism for some fans, a way to keep Derek alive in their minds. Additionally, a couple of fans in the sample explicitly referenced denial as a 'stage of grief.' For example, one wrote, 'I'm still in denial stage I guess.' As this tweet implies, some fans recognized that grieving would be a process for them.

Time elapsed. Other fans' tweets included explicit references to the fact that their grief was ongoing. Many expressed this by saying that they were *still* 'crying,' 'depressed,' 'traumatized,' or the like. Other fans mentioned specific timeframes, for example, 'Almost 24 hours later and I still cant get over the death of Derek Shepherd...' and 'It's been 22 hours since I have watched #GreysAnatomy and I still haven't recovered.' Still others anticipated how the death of the character would affect them in the future, for example, 'I think that episode ruined my weekend...' and, 'Can someone cover my shift tomorrow. I am still mourning the death of the beloved Derek Shepherd.' Undoubtedly the intense emotions that many viewers experienced did not pass immediately.

Can't cope. There were also some fans who acknowledged that they did not know how to cope with the loss of the character or that they were not effectively coping. The gravity of these sentiments varied and were sometime difficult to interpret in terms of their earnestness. For example, while one viewer tweeted, 'I can't focus because Derek Shepard is dead it's ruining my life,' many others were much less specific, tweeting sentiments like, 'Just watched Grey's. I can't even handle it.' Others gave indirect indications of their lack of coping, for example, 'Mom- "Why did you make a 60 on your English test today?" Me- "I was too devastated by Derek dieing I couldn't focus."' In fact, there were multiple instances of students who indicated that their studies were hampered by their reactions to Derek's death. Another example includes, 'When McDreamy gets killed off right before finals week, thanks for ruining my gpa Shonda #GreysAnatomy #toomuchgriefftostudy.' Again, this theme reinforces that the effects of Dr. Shepherd's death on fans were not fleeting, but are more consistent with Cohen's (2003) notion that a parasocial breakup can feel similar to the loss of a close friend.

Never get over it. In fact, there were some viewers who indicated that their lives would be forever changed or that they would never get over Dr. Shepherd's death. For example, one fan tweeted, 'A little piece of me died when Derrick died,' and another, 'my life is incomplete w/o him.' Several also acknowledged that even though the character was fictional they were nonetheless impacted using some variation of the phrase 'Fictional Death I Will Never Get Over.'

Coping mechanisms. In contrast, there were a few fans who mentioned specific ways that they were coping with Dr. Shepherd's death. Most of these were in the form of eating and, more prevalent, drinking. For example, one fan wrote, 'Well now that I watched last nights

episode of #GreysAnatomy... I need a glass (or 5) of wine.’ Another mentioned, ‘I’m eating carbs and that’s all Shonda Rhimes’ fault.’

Other fictional deaths. Another way that some fans within the sample expressed how they were (or were not) coping with the loss of this character was by comparing the situation to other fictional deaths. Several viewers compared *Grey’s Anatomy* to *Game of Thrones*, another show well known for killing off characters. For example, one fan tweeted, ‘You think GoT is killing your favorite characters? Grey’s Anatomy killing off my favorite characters since 2005!!’

Advocating

Advocating was another prominent theme within the sample. Whereas the work of Cohen (2003) suggests that in response to a parasocial breakup viewers may advocate on behalf of a character, for example writing the show in protest, I found that fans advocated not only for the character who died, but also for the show and for the character’s wife or them as a couple.

The character. In regards to advocating for the character, many viewers objected to the way in which Derek was killed, stating that he deserved better. These tweets were often directed at Shonda Rhimes or the show itself (either explicitly using the @ symbol or implicitly using their names). As an example, one fan tweeted, ‘So Derek dies because he went to a crappy untrained hospital ????!!!! #GreysAnatomy @shondarhimes COME ON!’ Other fans argued that the character could have been written off the show in a way other than death, sometimes acknowledging that the actor leaving the show was an inevitability. For example, one fan wrote, ‘I DONT CARE IF PATRICK WANTED TO MOVE ON DEREK DIDNT HAVE TO DIE.’ As the capitalization in these examples exemplifies, fans frequently advocated passionately for the character. Furthermore, it is clear from these types of statements that viewers were not just

reacting to a sad storyline, but that fan responses stemmed from strong parasocial relationships with Dr. Shepherd.

The show. Almost as prevalent as advocating for the character, many fans advocated for the show, expressing that the loss of Derek Shepherd would be a detriment. For example, one fan tweeted, ‘The show was always about Meredith and Derek at the heart. Cut half the heart out and you're left with not a whole lot.’ Some fans indicated that Derek’s death would mean the demise of the show, for example, ‘Things just will never be the same. This is the one death I don't think the show can really recover from.’ Even though *Grey’s Anatomy* has an ensemble cast and other characters were written out of the show by death or other means before, these fans seemed to indicate that the characters have a hierarchy of importance. Furthermore, their responses demonstrate that *Grey’s Anatomy* fans may not feel the same level of closeness with all of the principal characters.

The wife or the couple. Less frequent, there were also fans who advocated for Meredith Grey. One such viewer tweeted, ‘What about Meredith and his two kids!’ Another wrote, ‘If you make Meredith pregnant next episode I'll lose my shit.’ (Meredith was indeed revealed to be pregnant in a subsequent episode.) Other fans advocated for Meredith and Derek as a couple. For example, one fan tweeted, ‘MerDer was supposed to get their happy ending!!!!’ From these tweets we see that Derek is not the only *Grey’s Anatomy* character with whom fans developed a parasocial relationship.

Not Wanting to Watch

Cohen (2003) suggested that another response to a parasocial breakup might be the viewer becoming ‘less excited about watching TV’ (195). Whereas this precise sentiment was not reflected in the sample, many fans did indicate that they would not want to watch *Grey’s*

Anatomy after the death of Dr. Shepherd. Some fans seemed to be in the process of deciding whether they would stick with the show, while others were adamant that they would no longer watch. For example one fan tweeted, ‘I used to commit every Thursday to @GreysABC but I don't think I can anymore,’ while another wrote, ‘Safe to say after last nights episode I'm never watching greys again!’ Many fans who expressed these thoughts did so succinctly using quips like, ‘Mcsteamy, Mcdreamy, Mcdone,’ ‘#ByeGreysAnatomy,’ or simply, ‘✌️.’ Viewers in this sample did not seem to be turned off to TV in general but rather to *Grey's Anatomy* in particular. In fact, several viewers mentioned looking for other shows to fill the void. While some viewers may have actually stopped watching *Grey's Anatomy* it seems safe to say that they did not leave the fandom in droves. There was no change in the ranking of *Grey's Anatomy* amongst the top rated broadcast shows from the episode wherein Derek died to the week after, and even if some fans tuned out, viewership is still strong with ratings for more recent episodes at similar levels to what they were in 2015 (TV By The Numbers). It appears that while many fans needed a chance to grieve for this particular character, they may have nonetheless stuck it out with the show.

Memorializing

Finally, as expected based on De Groot and Leith (2015), many fans responded to Derek's death by building social media monuments to him. In fact, memorializing was one of the most frequent themes found across all of the tweets. These sentiments were expressed as tributes or remembrances. The most often used memorial was ‘#RIPDerek.’ The hashtag ‘McDreamyForever’ was also popular. Other fans tweeted sayings that Derek was known for such as, ‘It's a beautiful day to save lives.’ Still others indicated that he would be missed. Some fans wrote lengthier tributes, for example, ‘He of the amazing hair, beautiful face, and skillful hands that saved many a life in the operating room. Goodbye #GreysAnatomy #DerekShepard.’

Again, these tweets point to the depth of relationship that fans of *Grey's Anatomy* had with this particular character. The show would go on, but fans wanted to make sure he was remembered.

Discussion

This thematic analysis explored fans' experiences of parasocial breakups and grief in the context of a (plausibly) long-term, committed parasocial relationship. This analysis was unique in that it examined reactions to a character's death that was generally considered unjust, unexpected, and permanent, a combination of circumstances not investigated in prior studies (De Groot and Leith 2015, Williams 2015, Daniel and Westerman 2017). Fans expressed their grief on Twitter using both text and emojis in ways that conveyed the meaningfulness of their experiences with Dr. Shepherd. While some of the themes discovered here were consistent with the scholarship of Cohen (2003) and DeGroot and Leith (2015), which provided a foundation for the present exploration, other new themes emerged. In some cases, these themes also fit with Williams (2015) work on post-object fandom. I now turn to the implications of the present study including how it connects with the extant literature.

Emotional Responses to a Parasocial Breakup

The emotional reactions that fans in this sample expressed were sadness / heartbreak, anger / outrage, and shock. These emotions were found in some parasocial breakup and grief studies but not others (Cohen, 2003, Sanderson and Cheong, 2010, Daniel and Westerman 2015, Williams 2015, De Groot and Leith 2015, Van den Bulck and Larsson 2017). Additionally, as in De Groot and Leith's (2015) investigation of responses to Dr. Kutner's death on *House*, emotional responses varied in intensity amongst viewers.

Unsurprisingly, sadness was a prevalent emotional response to Derek Shepherd's death. Most frequently, fans in the present study expressed intense sadness, referring to crying

unusually hard or for lengths of time or expressing their sadness as heartbreak or devastation. Given that parasocial relationships are expected to develop over time, this may speak to the strength of the connections that fans had with Dr. Shepherd, who was on air for over 10 years.

Anger was also a prominent theme found within this sample. Anger was not reported in DeGroot and Leith's (2015) study, but it is consistent with parasocial breakup theorizing by Cohen (2003). Perhaps the inconsistency between DeGroot and Leith's (2015) study and the present one is due to the circumstances surrounding the characters' deaths. While both deaths were unexpected, Dr. Kutner died through suicide while Dr. Shepherd was killed as the result of a hospital's inadequacy. In her study of fan responses to the death of Cordelia on *Angel*, Williams (2015) noted that fans expect writers to do justice to their characters when writing endings and that fans feel angry when a viewing experience falls short. The findings of the present study are consistent with that contention. Fans felt that Derek Shepherd's death did not do justice to the character, so they were outraged and angry. For this reason, anger also frequently occurred with advocating for the character in this study. Fans frequently expressed outrage while also saying that the character should have been treated better.

The final emotional response that was evident in this study was shock. This finding is consistent with DeGroot and Leith's (2015) study. Because both Dr. Kutner and Dr. Shepherd's deaths were unexpected, it is unsurprising that viewers expressed shock in both cases. Furthermore, in the present study, other contextual factors most likely led to fans feeling shocked. Dr. Shepherd was a key character on the show and had survived numerous other life-threatening events. Many fans likely thought that Derek Shepherd was invincible, so they felt shocked when he died.

Taken together, fans' emotional responses to Dr. Shepherd's death support the contention of Cohen (2003) and others that the experience of a parasocial breakup can be similar to losing someone in real life. One might experience sadness, anger, and shock. Additionally, when considering the findings of this study alongside others regarding fictional characters (Daniel and Westerman 2015, De Groot and Leith 2015, Williams 2015) it points the importance of context. Fans' responses may vary depending on the manner of death, whether it was perceived to do justice to the character, whether it was anticipated, and whether it was thought to be permanent.

Recovery and Coping After a Parasocial Breakup

A theme that emerged in this study was 'recovery and coping.' In contrast to analysis by Radford and Bloch (2012), which suggested that fan reactions to the death of a celebrity are fleeting, many fans in this sample implied that they would be impacted in significant, potentially longer-term ways by the death of Dr. Shepherd. Some acknowledged that their grieving would be a process, referring to the 'denial stage.' Others mentioned that they were still grappling with the death of the character even after a period of time (granted, these were still within 24 hours). Some mentioned ways in which their everyday lives were impacted, such as not being able to concentrate or to go to class. Still others suggested that they would never get over the death of the character. Based on this analysis, it may be that in some parasocial breakup cases there is a recovery period, again reinforcing the argument that losing a parasocial relationship can be similar to losing a real-world one. Also similar to grieving a person close to you, some fans in this sample employed coping mechanisms like eating and drinking alcohol.

De Groot and Leith (2015) argued that mourning a fictional character's death is likely to be a form of 'disenfranchised' grief or grief that is considered illegitimate by others. For example, friends and family may question why a fan responds so strongly to the death of a

person who was not real. This could be problematic given the need for recovery and coping found in this study. Similarly to how scholars have worked to legitimize parasocial relationships, which were once seen as pathological (Giles 2002), scholars should endeavor to legitimize fans' experiences of parasocial grief.

Post-Breakup Online Advocacy

I expected to find advocating for the character within this study as suggested by the work of both Cohen (2003) and DeGroot and Leith (2015). That theme was indeed present in this sample along with two emergent themes: advocating for the show and advocating for the character's wife or them as a couple. Twitter is a noteworthy medium for the study of advocacy because fans can directly message the show (e.g., *Grey's Anatomy*) and its creator (e.g., Shonda Rhimes). In fact, many fans within this study did so, mainly to express their displeasure. Fans frequently indicated that the character deserved better than the death he was given, which reflects the strength of the parasocial bond many had with Dr. Shepherd. As previously alluded to, this finding is also consistent with Williams' (2015) suggestion that fans want justice for their favorite characters. In this way findings of the present study replicate Williams' findings in a different context and with a larger sample.

Other viewers expressed their concern for the show, suggesting that it would not be the same or could not survive the death of this character, which reflects a commitment to the show itself. The theme of advocating for Derek's wife or 'MerDer' as a couple was also noteworthy. It demonstrated that some fans are concerned for those left behind when a character dies, again thinking about the future of the show, but also reflecting parasocial relationships with additional characters and attachment to particular couples. This reflects that fans can have a complex network of parasocial bonds with different characters in the same show.

Breaking Up with the Show

Cohen (2003) suggested that viewers may become less excited about watching television as a result of a parasocial breakup. That exact sentiment was not represented in this sample, but many fans did say that they would not want to watch *Grey's Anatomy* in particular. This finding is consistent with research by Daniel and Westerman (2017) regarding *Game of Thrones* and research by Williams (2015), which suggest that fans sometimes distance themselves from a show after the exit of a favorite character. Along with expressing not wanting to watch, many fans mentioned how consistently or for how many years they had been watching the show. Fans seemed to be saying that while they *were* committed to the show this episode made them so sad or angry that they would leave the fandom. Interestingly, whereas breaking up with the show was a popular sentiment within the sample, the ratings for *Grey's Anatomy* remained relatively high and the show continued to be renewed long after the character's death (Goldberg 2017). Whereas some fans probably did abandon the show, it is possible that others were venting without any real intention of tuning out or that the show captured fans' attention again with new storylines.

In Memoriam

Another common theme within this sample was memorializing Derek Shepherd. This finding is similar to DeGroot and Leith's (2015) findings regarding the Facebook memorial page for Dr. Kutner. Whereas memorializing was often expressed as 'rest in peace,' there were other longer form memorials posted as well. Many fans paid tribute to the character while also expressing their feelings about his death. It may be unsurprising that fans respond to celebrity deaths with rest in peace messages (Sanderson and Cheong, 2010, Radford and Bloch 2012, Harju 2015, Van den Bulck and Larsson 2017), but the findings of this study further confirm that those sentiments are extended to fictional characters as well. Again, this theme points to the

potential for individuals to respond to the death of fictional characters in similar ways to death in the real world.

Conclusion

Many fans' reactions to the death of Dr. Derek Shepherd were intense, which speaks to the depth of the parasocial relationship viewers had with this particular character as well as the possibility for parasocial grief to be a profound, sometimes even disruptive, experience in fans' lives. Given these findings, future studies might investigate how long it takes fans to recover after a parasocial breakup and which strategies are effective for coping with parasocial grief. It is clear that fans use online spaces to discuss their experiences, and it seems plausible that fans legitimize each other's grief, even in the case of fictional characters, which could be beneficial. Whether online memorials do in fact help fans to work through their grief is a potential subject for future studies. Future research may also connect the immediate parasocial breakup experience with post-object fandom behaviors in the longer term. For example, it would be of interest to know whether fans seek out old episodes of a show or avoid them when dealing with a parasocial breakup. Re-watching old episodes could be a form of reminiscing and could help fans to deal with emotions like sadness, anger, and shock.

In terms of cases for future investigation, the present study illuminates the usefulness of examining the death of a character that was well established. Characters that viewers have particularly strong relationships with can provide particularly poignant examples of the parasocial breakup experience. Additionally, this study highlights the importance of context. Fans' responses may vary depending on the manner of ending, whether it was perceived to do justice to the character, whether it was anticipated, and whether it was thought to be permanent.

Scholars should continue to explore fan responses to different situations to provide a broader and deeper understanding of how fans react to parasocial breakups.

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¹ All emojis that appear in this paper are part of the Apple Color Emoji font and resemble those that were downloaded from the Twitter API. The images of emojis within the paper were retrieved from Emojipedia (n.d.).