

Media portrayal and public response to celebrity scandal: Joe Jonas and Sophie Turner divorce

Viivi Peltola
Bachelor's thesis
English
Language and literature
Faculty of Humanities
University of Oulu
Spring 2024

Abstract

Musician Joe Jonas and actress Sophie Turner began divorce proceedings in September 2023 after four years of marriage. Tabloid magazines and people on social media took interest in the divorce, and rumours about reasons for the divorce began circulating soon after. This thesis examines how narratives are built in tabloid articles and how the public react to divorce scandal by analysing TMZ tabloid article narratives and five social media posts on platform X commenting on the divorce. Social media users comment on information originating from TMZ articles, which have been reposted on to social media platform X, formerly Twitter.

Narrative analysis was used as the main research approach for this thesis. The aim was to study what kind of narrative is present in tabloid articles and how these narratives portray Jonas' and Turner's public image. Further development of the narrative was studied in how social media users react to possible narratives and form their opinions based on tabloid reports. A complimentary research approach applied in this thesis was multimodal discourse analysis, which studies the combinations of multiple forms of communication, such as image and text, and the meaning these forms of communication create together. In this thesis, multimodal discourse analysis was used to analyse if and how pictures featured in tabloid articles and social media posts add meaning to the text they are included in.

The analysis found that, as often is in highly public divorce cases, the narratives built through tabloid reports guided the public to take sides between the couple. A majority of the public sided with Sophie Turner, most probably because information released on tabloids made her seem to be on the receiving end of Joe Jonas' team's intentional and negatively toned press releases. Turner received sympathy from the public, while Joe Jonas and his team received critique for their public handling of the divorce, and for being instigators for scandal.

Tiivistelmä

Muusikko Joe Jonas ja näyttelijä Sophie Turner aloittivat avioeroprosessin syyskuussa 2023 neljän vuoden avioliiton jälkeen. Juorulehdistö ja ihmiset sosiaalisessa mediassa kiinnittivät huomiota avioeroon, ja huhut eron taustalla olevista syistä alkoivat pian levitä. Tässä kandidaatintutkielmassa tarkastellaan, miten juorulehdistön tietojen muodostamat narratiivit rakentuvat, ja miten yleisö reagoi eroskandaaliin. Tutkimuksessa tarkastellaan juorulehti TMZ:n artikkelien narratiiveja eron liittyvässä uutisoinnissa, sekä viittä sosiaalisen median julkaisua, jotka kommentoivat eroa X-

viestipalvelussa. Sosiaalisen median käyttäjät kommentoivat TMZ-artikkeleista peräisin olevia tietoja, jotka on uudelleenjulkaistu X-viestipalvelussa, joka tunnettiin aiemmin nimellä Twitter.

Tutkimuksessa käytettiin narratiivista analyysia ja tutkittiin, millaisia narratiiveja juorulehdistön artikkeleissa muodostuu, sekä sitä, kuinka nämä narratiivit esittävät Joe Jonaksen ja Sophie Turnerin julkisuuskuvan. Narratiivin edistymistä tarkasteltiin sosiaalisen median käyttäjien reagoinnissa mahdollisiin narratiiveihin ja siinä, kuinka he muodostavat mielipiteensä juorulehdistön raportteihin perustuen. Analyysiä täydennettiin hyödyntämällä multimodaalista diskurssianalyysiä, joka tutkii eri kommunikaatiotapojen yhdistelmiä, kuten esimerkiksi kuvan ja tekstin yhteyttä, ja niiden yhdessä luomia uusia merkityksiä. Multimodaalista diskurssianalyysiä käytettiin tässä kandidaatintutkielmassa tutkimaan sitä, miten juoruartikkelien tai sosiaalisen median julkaisujen yhteydessä olevat kuvat luovat uutta merkitystä tekstin sisältöön.

Tutkimuksessa selvisi, että juoruartikkeleista rakentuneet narratiivit ohjasivat yleisöä valitsemaan puolensa pariskunnan osallisten välillä, kuten usein käy julkisten avioerotapausten kanssa. Suurin osa ihmisistä asettui Sophie Turnerin puolelle, todennäköisesti siksi, että lehdistössä julkaistut tiedot antoivat vaikutelman, jonka mukaan Turner joutui syyttä Joe Jonaksen ja hänen tiiminsä negatiivissävytteisten lehdistöjulkaisujen kohteeksi. Turner sai myötätuntoa ihmisiltä, kun taas Jonasta ja hänen tiimiään kritisoitiin avioliiton käsittelystä julkisuudessa sekä skandaalin alullepanosta.

Table of contents

1. Introduction.....	5
2. Previous research on tabloid journalism.....	6
3. The Jonas & Turner divorce.....	8
4. Research materials.....	9
5. Research approach.....	11
5.1 Narrative analysis.....	11
5.2 Multi-modal discourse analysis.....	12
6. Analysis.....	13
6.1 Divorce coverage on tabloids.....	13
6.2 Public response to divorce on social media.....	14
6.2.1 In support of Turner: Source games.....	15
6.2.2 In support of Turner: Turner’s post-birth struggle.....	16
6.2.3 In support of Turner: Joe Jonas as a Wife Guy.....	18
6.2.4 In support of Turner: Intertextuality in comments.....	20
6.2.5 In support of Jonas: Responsible parent.....	21
6.2.6 Side-taking and neutrality.....	23
7. Findings.....	24
8. Conclusions.....	26
References.....	28

1. Introduction

This thesis studies media portrayal of celebrity scandal by analysing the tabloid journalism coverage of the recent Joe Jonas and Sophie Turner divorce. This thesis also aims to analyse the public's response to the scandal. Public response arose after the release of information about the divorce on social media platforms, and therefore this thesis focuses on the beginning of the divorce and scandal, that being the announcement of the divorce and following tabloid releases in September 2023, which caused notable public reaction.

Tabloids often focus on celebrities' romantic relationships, and divorce news are popular features. Tabloids make divorces into public spectacles, as the curiosity of the public prompts them to search for sensitive information. Generally, news of divorce create divide between the public, with people siding with either one of the divorcees, which can be seen with the reactions to the Jonas and Turner divorce as well. Internet users express their opinions about the divorce news through social media. How these opinions are built, and which aspects of the commentary point to taking a certain side, are topics of research in this thesis.

Trends in celebrity divorce publicity seem to be changing. As Christopher Melcher, a family law attorney, states in an entertainment news piece (Snodgrass, 2023) divorce lawyers have often advised their celebrity clients to not speak about their divorce while the proceedings are still ongoing, but in the current age of social media, this does not always happen. Some celebrity PR-teams or other outside sources may give out information to spread to the media, where from public opinion often decides who has done right and wrong in the divorce proceedings (Snodgrass, 2023). In the article by Snodgrass (2023) family law attorney Holly Davis states the Johnny Depp and Amber Heard defamation trial, which happened in 2022, to be an example of this newer method of going through a highly public divorce and its handlings after. The trial became an infamous case in media, and fans' opinions on this case and its two parties created a narrative that changed the public image of both Depp and Heard with varying outcomes. Davis (2023) also states that celebrities may have started to become braver with their statements about less advantageous parts of their divorce, hoping that they will receive acceptance in the public eye by building intentional narratives. This approach can also be seen in Joe Jonas and Sophie Turner's divorce case.

Lighter entertainment, such as tabloid news, work as a distraction from a constant flow of different media with large amounts of information. Focusing on the life of a celebrity, who is unattainable and unfamiliar to the public, distracts from struggles in a person's own life. Celebrities' public image is

also protected and carefully upheld, so scandals like divorce make celebrities seem more like the relatable, non-perfect common person. People tend to be naturally curious of others' lives, and tabloid journalism makes celebrity news attainable, allowing for a look inside celebrities' lives behind a well-kept image.

The media as an overall term consists of a wide spectrum of different ways of mass communication. For this thesis, the media used consists of articles in tabloid magazine TMZ and one article from Vanity Fair, as well as social media, specifically X, formerly Twitter. These articles and social media posts detail and comment on early developments in the Jonas and Turner divorce case during September 2023 when the divorce was first announced. The research questions this thesis addresses are what kind of public commentary there is regarding this divorce and which aspects of these comments suggest side taking. This thesis also addresses how the narratives of tabloid articles are constructed so that people end up taking sides between parties, and how narratives present Joe Jonas and Sophie Turner's public image.

This thesis adapts narrative analysis as a research approach, using it to study what kinds of narratives are built in research materials, and how the narratives affect public perception of the scandal. Multimodal discourse analysis will be featured as an additional research approach in finding meaning between combinations of images and text in tabloid articles as well as social media posts regarding the divorce.

This thesis consists of eight sections, with sections 2 and 3 detailing previous research on tabloid journalism and explaining Joe Jonas' and Sophie Turner's divorce developments. Sections 4 and 5 introduce key points in research approaches as well as the materials used to conduct research. Section 6 includes the analysis of research materials divided into further sections on brief analysis of tabloid articles and on analysis of public response to the scandal. Sections 7 and 8 conclude the thesis with discussion of main findings and conclusions on topics the thesis discusses.

2. Previous research on tabloid journalism

This section of the thesis discusses tabloid journalism and its typical features. It also includes a brief section on problems within tabloid journalism and the ethics of celebrity news.

Some consider celebrity focused tabloid journalism to fall under the field of lifestyle journalism. The area of lifestyle journalism is quite broad, and lines between what is and isn't considered lifestyle journalism blur. According to Hanusch (2018, p. 434), tabloid journalism, belonging to celebrity

news, has aspects of lifestyle journalism in it. It is often viewed as so called soft news, that being news of lesser importance, writing of lighter issues in the private lives of, in this thesis, celebrities. Hanusch (2018, p. 435) continues by stating that tabloid journalism is an emerging field of study of the recent years, gathering more interest as a topic for analysis. Tabloid journalism can be found both in physical magazine form and online form and is mostly read for entertainment (McNair, 2006, p. 28 in Hanusch, 2018, p. 434).

According to Dubied and Hanitzsch (2014, pp. 138-139), tabloid journalism tends to contribute to the scandalisation and drama of news and is at times overly obsessed with celebrities' private lives. Tabloid journalism, as any other journalism, can affect the views of the general public depending on what approach the tabloid takes in their coverage. Celebrity divorces tend to become highly public, which does raise the ethical question of whether it is fair for news outlets to share information about sensitive events such as a divorce. Dubied and Hanitzsch (2014, p. 141) argue further that tabloid journalism and celebrity news cause issues within professional codes of conduct as well as media laws, as lines blur on what is and is not acceptable to report on. There is also a general lack of respect for privacy at times, as tabloids search for stories regarding sensitive matters, and personal affairs. Dubied and Hanitzsch (2014, p. 141) also suggest that celebrity news tends to have issues with reliability, as gossip and rumour are prominent in writing, which in turn asks the question of professionalism among tabloid magazine news reporters. Regardless, at least official court documents, such as divorce papers, are often publicly attainable and hence available for all who may have interest in seeing them.

Celebrity news is a problematic area of entertainment at times due to these reasons, and it can be difficult to view it as respectable journalism. However, it does often cause notable reaction in the public, which I find interesting as a point of study. The reactions and comments of the public to scandal news are interesting due to the development of narratives in storylines, as well as the general need people have to be involved in strangers' lives. Statements featured in tabloid articles can build narratives with the tone and word choices which with they write of celebrity news, and the public on social media then react to this news and in turn to the possible narratives built by tabloids.

People tend to feel that they have a claim to information about celebrities' lives, possibly due to the fact that many celebrities share parts of their lives willingly on social media and through interviews, which gather attention and a large following on social media platforms. Because celebrities are, in this sense, already in the public eye, people easily expect them to share private details as well. Forming parasocial relationships with celebrities blurs boundaries and can result to unrealistic

expectations of a celebrity's responsibility over their fans. According to Forbes Health (2023), parasocial relationships, in short, mean a "one-sided connection in which an individual imagines a personal bond with someone in the public eye". When a parasocial relationship forms, fans often feel they are allowed to ask about details of a celebrity's life, or that they have a right to comment on it. It can be difficult to determine what is and is not a parasocial relationship, as public commenting on celebrities' lives is a common occurrence, and not necessarily always parasocial behaviour.

In relation to Jonas and Turner's case, although elements of fans forming parasocial relationships are not clearly visible in X responses, they do play into people's curiosity and even need to know private details about the divorce, as well as their claim for commentary on issues brought public. Parasocial relationships bring a new edge to interactions between fans and celebrities, and further to the question of privacy in celebrities' lives. In Jonas and Turner's case, the pair's respective PR teams are presumably responsible for sharing private, either negative or positive details, about the pair's life, so not only the fans are responsible for searching for private details. Fans and other social media users comment on released issues in good and in bad, and this discourse affects public perception of the divorce. It could be argued that at the start of the scandal, when the pair's PR teams were taking a more aggressive approach to releasing information, parasocial behaviour from fans may have even benefited them. The couple's PR teams used the public's curiosity to their advantage, causing widespread reaction with reports.

3. The Jonas & Turner divorce

This section provides a brief look at the background of the Joe Jonas and Sophie Turner divorce, aiming to give context to current proceedings in it in order to better understand the media attention the divorce has gotten.

Joe Jonas, born in 1989, is an American singer, songwriter and actor, who gained recognition from being a part of pop band Jonas Brothers together with his brothers Nick and Kevin Jonas. The band was formed in 2005 and are still active in 2024. Sophie Turner, born in 1998, is an English actress, known for her role as Sansa Stark in Game of Thrones. The couple got married in 2019 and have two children together, born in 2020 and 2022.

According to an article by Kelsie Gibson (2023), Jonas filed for divorce on September 5th, after which tabloid sites such as TMZ broke the news to the public. Various news outlets have been covering updates on the divorce proceedings since. Jonas and Turner released a brief shared statement

themselves regarding the divorce on social media platform Instagram, where they asked the public not to speculate on reasons for the divorce and asked for privacy for their family. Gibson (2023) continues that on September 21st, Turner filed a lawsuit in Manhattan that asked for the couple's children to be returned to England with Turner. According to Gibson (2023), Jonas held the children's passports, and was unwilling to allow them to go to England. Jonas' representative responded to the claims stated in the lawsuit by saying that the couple had had a meeting regarding the children, and that Jonas was under the impression that the couple were in agreement. Later, on September 25th, the couple agreed to have their children live in New York throughout the duration of the divorce proceedings, coming to a temporary custody agreement on October 10th. According to an article by Charna Flam (2024), Turner gave up the lawsuit regarding Jonas wrongfully keeping the couple's children in the US, and a parenting agreement in the UK was approved January 11th. This thesis focuses on the early phase of this divorce, to when news of the divorce first broke in September 2023. Reporting on the case was most active during the month of September, and releases from TMZ were at a peak.

4. Research materials

Research material for this thesis includes an image from a tabloid article, as well as five posts and two comments on social media platform X. These materials have been collected from a month-long time period, from September 6th to September 22nd, 2023. The data collected from X includes quote posts as well as comments left on posts. Quote posts allow X users to reference and comment a post made originally by another user so that it appears as an attachment to their post. I will study one image from Vanity Fair in detail, and other images will be included in social media posts but not analysed closely, as they carry similar features to the Vanity Fair image.

TMZ broke news of the divorce on September 5th, after which more TMZ articles came out and commentary on the case started on social media. The building of a narrative started from TMZ articles, which presented information gathered from unnamed sources near both Joe Jonas and Sophie Turner. Some of these statements initiated scandal, as their tone was perceived negative towards either Jonas or Turner. Quotes from the TMZ articles were then posted onto social media platform X by accounts like Pop Base, which report on events in popular culture. On X, people commented on the content of the articles and shared their opinions based on their perception of the narratives being built. As more articles were published and the narrative continued to develop into complete storylines, social media users were able to take sides between the couple and form further opinions on the case.

The X posts are referencing TMZ articles released about the divorce, thereby including the TMZ articles as part of the analysis, however they will not be focused on in detail. Although the content of tabloid articles will be in lesser focus in the materials, I wanted to include them in order to get overall coverage of how media has portrayed the divorce. As people's commentary on this divorce heavily bases itself on tabloid reports, it is critical to add examples from tabloids, especially statements that have caused the most reaction in the public.

It should be noted that TMZ is not always considered a reliable source and requires the reader to be critical about the information they receive through the tabloid. For this thesis the focus is on people's responses to the information shared on TMZ regardless of its reliability as a source. This thesis will analyse purely the response and not the source itself. These pieces of information released by TMZ created public reaction and acted as a starting point for wider discussion on the divorce online.

Alleged reasons for the divorce have not been disclosed by Jonas or Turner personally and are not their official statement regarding the divorce. The rumours regarding reasons behind the divorce were distributed by TMZ, where the origin of the information is stated to vaguely be sources close to either one of the parties. It cannot be confirmed from who or from whom these statements come from exactly, but most social media users suspect that PR teams from both Jonas' and Turner's side are intentionally giving information to the press. In order to avoid repetition, I will from now on assume that information released by TMZ are intentional PR releases, as it seems to be the consensus among the public.

According to Milano (2021) PR, meaning public relations, is a way to manage a celebrity's or other public persons public image, to do possible damage control and increase a celebrity's visibility. A public relations team is often in charge of creating connections for a celebrity, as well as organizing events that the celebrity is a part of and creating a brand for the celebrity. PR teams pay attention to what kind of an image they wish to maintain of a celebrity and promote their client accordingly. Milano (2021) states that social media has become an important way for PR teams to promote a celebrity in the 21st century. It offers for a possibility to connect with fans and inform them and other valuable followers on updates regarding the celebrity. In Jonas and Turner's case, PR team's information released on TMZ gave visibility to both parties and prompted people to begin taking sides in the divorce.

5. Research approach

I will be adapting two different approaches to discourse analysis for this thesis. This thesis focuses largely on internet discourse and different narratives built by tabloids and how they are understood by social media users, which is why discourse analysis is a suitable research approach. The research approaches will be further introduced in this section.

5.1 Narrative analysis

Narrative analysis, an approach to discourse analysis, will be used as the main research approach for this thesis. Narrative analysis will be used to analyse narratives built both in statements in tabloid articles as well as how these narratives affect social media posts regarding the articles. The study of social media is a relatively new addition to narrative analysis, which has previously focused more on newspaper articles and other more traditional forms of text. Page (2015, p. 330) explains that the newer approach of studying online text coming from social media sites differs from offline texts in that online texts are reshaped by the site the text is posted on, as well as the fact that this form of discourse is a “digitally enabled narration in an online context”.

Social media is a multimodal form of communication, often combining text with image or video, depending on the format of the platform. As Page (2015, p. 330) states, social media is also intertextual. It gives users the ability to interact with others as a network, and to categorize information through features such as timelines. Page (2015, p. 330) also discusses different types of change in the style of social media content compared to earlier content. The data analysed for my thesis consists mostly of what Page calls familiar based content. According to Page (2015, p. 330), familiar content is content that already exists, and is reposted to a platform, such as the tabloid articles by TMZ that have then been posted on X by different accounts. Hence, the nature of the content is not entirely new, simply new to the platform it is posted on. The core idea in familiar content in relation to media featured in this study is that people’s reactions and comments regarding the articles do not change the original content of the article but can reshape new narratives that build further as a result of the commentary social media users make. Statements in tabloid articles build narratives, which affect how the public views a scandal, and hence narratives can promote desired perception of a celebrity for readers.

5.2 Multimodal discourse analysis

Adapting further on the field of discourse analysis, multimodal discourse analysis will be used as a secondary research approach for this thesis. Multimodal discourse analysis combines the analysis of language with other modes of communication, such as image, sound, gestures and action. According to an article by Kay. L. O'Halloran (2021, p. 249), researchers have become more interested in multimodal discourse analysis in the recent decades. In order to understand the goals of multimodal discourse analysis, it is important to understand the meaning of core concepts included in the research. O'Halloran (2021, p. 249) explains that a commonly used term in the field is medium, which stands for the materialisation of multimodal modes, such as a newspaper, computer, or other physical objects. Semiotics mean the study of meaning and symbols in communication, such as the meaning of a word or image, which are relevant to this thesis (Merriam Webster, n.d). Multimodal discourse analysis studies semiotic resources, those being images and other forms of media, and the semantic expansions that happen as these combinations of semiotic resources form in multimodal phenomena (O'Halloran, 2021, pp. 249). This means that the images and text or other media, such as video or sound combine together, creating semantic expansions, which mean expanding meaning of something that already exists, such as information in a tabloid article.

According to O'Halloran (2021, pp. 262-263), it is sometimes difficult to completely analyse a multimodal phenomenon due to their complexity and intersemiotic qualities. Because different medias often require different approaches to analysis, it is important to recognise what sort of media is in question. The material for this thesis comes from online platforms, those being the TMZ website and social media platform X, where combinations of text, image and video can create complex narratives to follow, but also complement each other.

Multimodal discourse analysis will be used to analyse images included in the articles discussing the divorce, as well as combinations of images and text in social media posts. The articles featured are in online form. The goal of using multimodal discourse analysis to study data in this thesis is to find out if and how images included in articles or social media posts add to the meaning or narrative of statements. I am looking especially at how notable word choices in the data text combine with images to strengthen meaning. Not all data includes images, but because intertextuality and multimodal expressions are a core part of media, both modern social media and news media, their analysis is important to the thesis.

6. Analysis

This section of the thesis focuses on the analysis of research materials, beginning with tabloid news coverage of the divorce in section 6.1, and continuing with analysis of the public’s response in section 6.2. The analysis of social media posts commenting on the divorce focuses especially on wording and phrases that are of interest in studying how people express their opinion and side in the scandal, and how narratives are built by tabloids and celebrity PR teams so that side-taking happens. Section 6.2 is further divided into sections separately analysing each piece of data.

6.1 Divorce coverage on tabloids

The images featured on tabloid articles regarding this divorce offer added graphic features of a rip or a split between the former couple in photos, as seen in figure 1, featured in a Vanity Fair article on the divorce (Vanity Fair, 2023). Divorces or breakups can be referred to as a “split” in everyday language, which the split graphic visually characterizes. This can also be seen in the text section of the Vanity Fair article, as the article features the title “splits” before the main headline. The images in articles regarding the divorce are of the former couple together, usually taken at red carpet events or paparazzi images of the couple. They are posing together in the pictures, looking stylish and put-together. These pictures present Jonas and Turner in a neutral way, not furthering the shock-effect of a divorce report.



Figure 1. Picture of Joe Jonas and Sophie Turner with a split graphic.

Most media coverage takes a neutral stance. In overview, most magazines, such as People, give updates on the progress of the divorce case with objective, general information, not discussing rumours about personal details. TMZ, however, has published articles revealing information about rumoured reasons for the divorce. One of such articles stated that the pair were divorcing due to differences in lifestyles, claiming that Jonas likes to stay at home, while Turner likes to party (TMZ, 2023). The rumours became more scandalous, with another article stating Jonas had heard Turner say or do something on a Ring home security camera that acted as the final reason for filing for divorce (TMZ, 2023). These articles began creating a narrative of negativity and disagreements between the pair, prompting the public to assume the divorce was not amicable.

When it comes to building a narrative, the TMZ articles state the quotes given to them directly, or state that their information comes from a source close to either party in the divorce. The TMZ articles do not appear to side with either Jonas or Turner, and the tabloid publishes positively and negatively perceived information on both sides. The magazine acts as a gateway for the releases but does not develop the narrative themselves by discussing matters reported on in a further sensationalising manner. However, because TMZ shares this information, they are responsible for spreading the source's desired narrative, even if they are not directly involved in creating it. Celebrity divorces, like this Jonas and Turner case, are popular content among readers of tabloid media, so reporting on it is advantageous for TMZ.

6.2 Public response to divorce on social media

TMZ (2023) confirmed Jonas and Turner's divorce on September 5th, 2023, citing the couple's difference in lifestyles as one reason for the divorce. The article stated that Jonas likes to stay home, while Turner likes to party, making Turner seem the more irresponsible of the two. Another article that provoked scandal was released on September 6th, where TMZ reported sources close to Jonas making statements that presented Turner negatively. According to TMZ (2023), Jonas had witnessed Turner say or do something on a Ring home security camera that made him begin divorce proceedings. This prompted public reaction, resulting in speculation on reasons behind the divorce as well as the content on the Ring camera (TMZ, 2023). On the same day, the pair released a joint statement on Instagram confirming their divorce to be a joint decision. (Instagram, 2023) On September 7th, 2023, TMZ released another article, which stated that Jonas had not been supportive of his wife after the birth of their second child. The public took this as Turner's team's response to previous articles that painted her negatively.

These narratives from both sides create a complicated situation of one person’s word against another. As the sources are also vague, it is difficult to put blame, so to speak, on any participant in these publicised events. There are many posts regarding the divorce on X, and many comments discussing the events attached to these posts, as tends to be with how wide-ranging social media platforms are. In order to provide some examples of discussions and reactions to the news, I have chosen five posts or comments as data. This data will be analysed to find what kinds of narratives people have taken on in their commentary, and how the divorce is viewed in the public eye.

6.2.1 In support of Turner: Source games

In response to sources releasing statements which portrayed Turner in a negative light, statements that in turn portrayed Jonas in a negative light were released. This statement shared by TMZ and further user Pop Base on X states that problems in the marriage began when Jonas wasn’t supportive of Turner after the birth of the couple’s second child.



Figure 1. Quote post on X by @lesbiantheninth

The statement prompted response in social media users, where many sided with Turner. X user @lesbiantheninth (2023) in figure 1 has quote posted the Pop Base post, stating “she can play the sources game too”. The post refers to the statements that portrayed Turner in a negative light as a game of sources, suggesting that the two are playing a sort of game, going back and forth in

statements. Because a majority of these statements either promote Jonas or Turner in a positive way or attempt to give a negative impression of the opposite side in the divorce, the social media publicity ends up looking like a game, where both sides attempt to win public favour.

The post also features a gif of Olivia Wilde. Wilde's expression in the gif is positive, with a wide smile and a nod, which is considered to be an expression of agreement. Users on X use this gif often, and it has become a meme of its own on the platform. This picture gif and the text statement in the post combine to create meaning as supporting Turner, viewing her positively. X user @lesbiantheninth and others in their responses encourage Turner or her team to respond to Jonas' teams allegations, although she has also been praised for staying silent at the start of Jonas' PR-team's statements. It is interesting that Turner's PR team has been able to, in this way, change approach to the scandal without disapproval from the public. The narrative that comes across from this post views Turner as defending her honour, and Jonas as the negative instigator of scandal.

6.2.2 In support of Turner: Turner's post-birth struggle

Another X user, @jelevision, reacted to the same post in figure 1 by Pop Base by criticizing Jonas' alleged actions, while also supporting Turner as did the user in figure 1. They express their support by stating that they are glad Turner's PR team is responding to previous allegations, hence again assuming that these statements were planned PR posts. The user feels compassionate about Turner's struggle after giving birth and criticizes Jonas' lack of support for her. People expect partners to be supportive of one another in difficult situations, and this report makes Jonas look irresponsible in that regard.



Figure 2. Quote post on X by @jelevision.

When analysing choices in words or phrases that point to user @jelevision's support of Turner, my focus is on adjectives that highlight negative or positive stance, as well as phrases affecting the tone of the post, such as smear campaign here. Oxford English dictionary defines a smear campaign as "a plan to discredit someone or something, or to destroy a reputation, by means of smears" (Oxford English dictionary, n.d). This X user calls negative statements regarding Turner Jonas' smear campaign, which suggests that these statements were released to TMZ to purposefully create a negative image of Turner, which in turn would favour Jonas in the public eye. The post also criticizes Jonas' alleged actions towards Turner, using a strong negatively perceived adjective, "vile", meaning something extremely bad, or morally wrong (Merriam Webster, n.d). These words and phrases set a negative tone in the post. The public has criticised Jonas for his treatment of Turner, as well as his PR team's releases. He is perceived to be immature and unfair towards Turner for deciding to go to tabloid press with personal matters in a sensitive topic. Again, the narrative this post supports is in Turner's favour, portraying her as defending herself and Jonas negatively.

Although the TMZ articles have not embellished the narratives set by direct quotes from sources close to Jonas or Turner, one article pertaining to Jonas wearing his wedding ring amid rumours of the divorce featured a sentence on Turner's mental health issues. This remark is compelling, because it does not have much to do with the article itself in its context, noting simply that Turner has been open about her struggle with depression (TMZ, 2023). The article alludes to Turner's mental health issues being in part due to issues in the couple's relationship. The same topic resurfaces in the TMZ report

in figure 2. The sentence starts with FYI, for your information, suggestively urging the reader to make a connection with the statement in context to the article.

Issues with mental health, or health struggles in general, often generate sympathy and even pity in the public. The TMZ article mentioning Turner's mental health issues in connection to relationship struggles and divorce presents her as vulnerable, while Jonas is made to look in part responsible for Turner's health issues. TMZ uses Turner's mental health to cause more speculation in the public, which is further seen in articles such as the one in figure 2. Because the information in figure 2 comes from Turner's PR team, it can be seen that Turner's own team is also highlighting her struggle in comparison to Jonas' actions, because it sets Turner in a vulnerable position easy for fans and social media users to sympathise with.

6.2.3 In support of Turner: Joe Jonas as a Wife Guy

In response to a TMZ report discussing Jonas' attempts at saving the couple's marriage, X user @oliverquicks comments on the claims. The post uses the term "A Wife Guy", which refers to a man who focuses especially his online presence on his wife, his marriage and how great their life is. Wife guys who form much of their personality around their wives often gain internet fame, or even career advancements. People online interact with posts made by wife guys, because they find constant posting about a wife funny, or even embarrassing, which then builds internet popularity for these men (Elliott, 2022). The X post in figure 3. insinuates that Jonas has intentionally built a positive image for himself by portraying himself as a loving husband and father, the post using the phrase "build your brand". Building a brand helps the public to associate a celebrity with certain themes, which in turn makes the celebrity more recognizable and visible.



Figure 3. Quote post on X by @oliverquicks

According to Elliott (2022), the wife guy trend can portray serious issues underneath a lighthearted surface. Anthony McIntyre, featured in the article (2022), suggests that men of public status sometimes use their wives as a way to further their own career and to build a positive public image that benefits them. Elliott (2022) uses Ned Fulmer, a content creator known for his participation in the Try Guys –YouTube group, as a recent example of a wife guy. Fulmer built his public image heavily around his wife, showing their relationship to the public actively. In 2022, Fulmer was caught cheating on his wife, which ruined his public image. The scandal garnered disappointed reactions from fans, as they found out at least part of Fulmer’s adoration for his wife and family was only performative.

Elliott (2022) argues that wife guys often ask for social validation and acceptance with their content, which in itself would not be harmful behavior, if it weren’t done by using their wives as a tool for their own gain. Though Jonas is not as intensely a Wife Guy as some other famous wife guys are, calling him as a wife guy in this post in figure 3. likely is refers to Jonas often appearing at official events lovingly at his wife's side, and the two of them having a generally positive public image as a couple and family. With the couple’s divorce, this brand Jonas and his team have built no longer applies.

Other interesting word choices in @oliverquicks post include using the idiomatic phrase “throwing your wife under the bus”, meaning to blame or criticize someone in order to gain an advantage or to avoid blame themselves (Merriam Webster, n.d). Many social media users blame Jonas and his team for doing this, as is also seen in figures 1 and 2.

The post also refers to Jonas' and his team's released TMZ reports as a "misogynistic hate campaign", further referring to these TMZ reports being a planned strategy, a campaign. The X user emphasizes the negative tone of Jonas' and his team's releases by calling them misogynistic hate, both heavily negative terms. Misogyny, defined by Merriam Webster (n.d) as hatred of, or prejudice against women, insinuates that Jonas' approach to this divorce scandal stems from hatred towards his wife. This seems to be an extreme deduction to make from such a short statement, but it does indicate how the public views Jonas' actions and their deep disapproval of them.

6.2.4 In support of Turner: Intertextuality in comments

User @forkslore_ (2023) in figure 4. is referencing Sophie Turner's role in HBO television series Game of Thrones, where she portrayed Sansa Stark, who was crowned Queen in the North in the final episode of the series' eighth season. An interesting phrase also included in this quote post originating from the Bible expresses support for Turner. The quote is from Isaiah 54:17, although the original Bible phrase is slightly different depending on which version of the Bible is viewed, stating "and every tongue that accuses you in judgement you will condemn" (New American standard Bible, n.d).



Figure 4. Quote post on X by @forkslore_

In the post, this phrase is used in style unrelated to its origins in the Bible, as a lexicalised phrase also functional in everyday language use. Here, Jonas and his team are the tongue rising against the queen, Turner. The post hereby expresses that they think Jonas' PR team's attempt of building a negative

narrative of Turner will not succeed. The wording of the post creates a dramatic, higher tone to the statement and referring to Turner as her character in Game of Thrones makes her seem like her character – someone of power, unbeatable and being above her opponents, in this context Jonas. Many other posts refer to Turner as the Queen in the North as well, it being a nickname given to her by fans of Game of Thrones. Posts on social media often include intertextual elements, such as these references to Game of Thrones character Sansa Stark as well as the Bible originated phrase. In this post, these intertextual references combine to create a positive image of Turner.

Throughout TMZ rumour releases Turner has been received with support from social media. On the contrary to reaction to Jonas and his PR team's statements, people seem to encourage Turner and her team to release information about her side of the narrative. This creates an interesting double standard in that social media users accept Turner's PR team's contributions to the scandal, but do not accept them from Jonas' team. This is likely caused by the timing of TMZ releases, as statements from Jonas' team were released first, and hence started the chain of rumours. People see Turner's team's responses as her rightfully defending herself against claims started against her.

PR teams and publicity management have an important role in the early phase of the scandal in this divorce. They, presumably together with Jonas and Turner, started the public commentary by sharing information to TMZ. By helping develop the scandal themselves, the PR teams may be able to control narrative development better. Portraying celebrities in a favourable light on tabloids and on social media is often the PR team's responsibility, and their position in managing scandals is highly important. Being well received in the public eye is critical for success in a celebrity's career. In Jonas and Turner's divorce, this more aggressive PR approach of both teams painting a negative image of the other divorcee seems to have worked in the early developments of scandal in September 2023, but both teams have taken a calmer approach since.

6.2.5 In support of Jonas: Responsible parent

This Page Six article posted by Pop Base is an attempt of portraying Jonas in a positive light. Words and phrases of interest in this post are the use of adjective “salvage”, meaning to rescue or to save, which in this context highlights Jonas being the one to work for the couple's marriage. It is also mentioned that Jonas made the decision based on what is good for their daughters, again giving a positive image of Jonas as a caring father. Other words that strengthen meaning can be found in the statement, such as “last resort” and the use of “never” in “never wanted to”. Both of these phrases

highlight that divorce is a choice Jonas considered carefully, and that he approached divorce reluctantly, again promoting an image of him as a good husband and father.

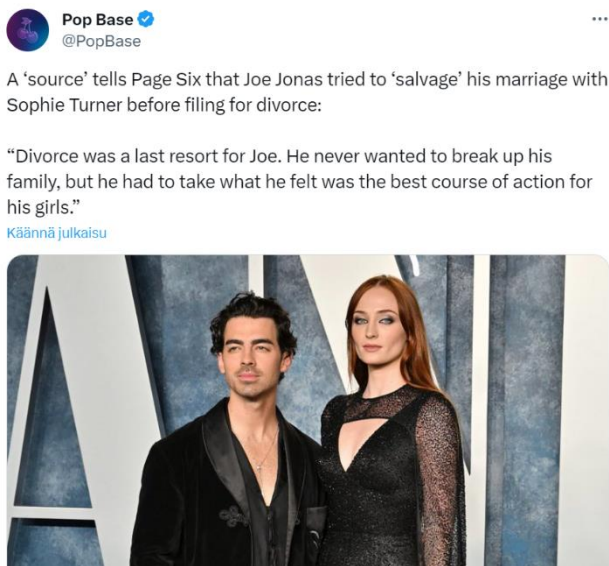


Figure 5. Post on X by @PopBase

Although much of the narrative in media pertaining to the divorce comes to favour Turner, reports like figure 4 promote a positive image of Jonas as a good father. He has been criticised by social media users for his treatment of Turner, but regardless much of the public value Jonas as a responsible father. Narratives can become complex as they are shaped by social media commentary and other's opinions, and as is seen here, neither participant of the divorce is viewed as entirely good or bad.

In contrast with figures 1-4, some X users support Jonas as well, as often occurs with any two-sided debate. User @younghavok commented on a post regarding Turner's lawsuit for the custody of the couple's children that Jonas should get custody of their children, as well as pointing out that the children have been with Jonas during the divorce announcement. The comment implies that Turner does not take as much responsibility over the children, and reasons that this is why Jonas should get custody of their children. This comment supports a narrative that views Jonas positively, highlighting his position as a responsible father making decisions for the whole family's benefit, especially the pair's children.

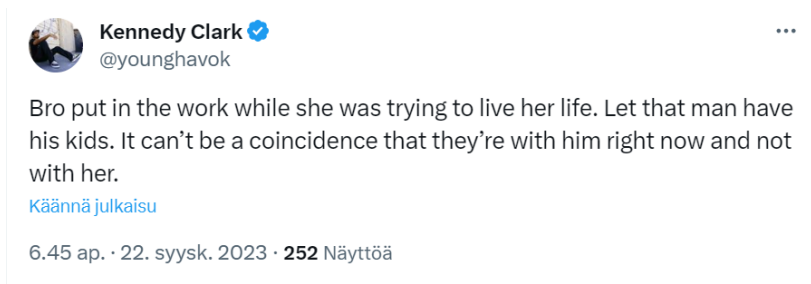


Figure 6. Comment on X by @younghavok.

Because the couple's children and their custody are a key part of the divorce disagreement, social media users tend to focus on who out of the couple is more responsible as a parent and use that as a quality to determine who wins public opinion. Children are in an important position in divorces in general as well, often used as a marker for the divorcee's responsibility and correct morals. According to traditional values, caring and responsible parents are seen as good people, good adults, which also reflects to this divorce. People online encourage Jonas and Turner to make the right decisions for their children's sake.

6.2.6 Side-taking and neutrality

Overall, most people responding to TMZ news shown in figures 1-4 support Turner and criticise Jonas. This reaction may be affected by the fact that negative statements made about Turner began circulating first, hence making Jonas' team seem like the instigator who started the dispute. That is, if it is to be believed that both parties' PR teams were behind these statements. People often support the person who receives negative feedback seemingly unprompted, in this case Turner.

News outlets also took part in commentary regarding the TMZ statements. Kat Tenbarge (2023) reported that Turner had won the PR battle of their public divorce. According to the article, a review of social media users' content regarding the divorce showed that a majority of social media users support Turner. Tenbarge (2023) focuses on Turner not addressing negative narratives built of her by sources close to Jonas as being the reason why she is perceived positively. Later, Turner's team did address the narratives with similar TMZ reports regarding Jonas. However, the public's response seems to not have changed, as many now support Turner and her team responding to claims and protecting Turner's image.

If the public's assumptions are correct, and Jonas' PR team is behind the information given to TMZ, their attempt of portraying Turner in a negative light has been reversed, causing the public to view

Jonas negatively instead. If the goal of these public claims is to win over public opinion on one side or the other, while the public's opinion varies slightly, a majority of social media users side with Turner.

Some users also take a neutral stance, hoping for a solution to the couple's divorce and criticising the fact that the divorce has been reported on so publicly. Many wish that the couple can proceed with the divorce and custody agreements without media disturbance, hoping for the proceedings to continue more privately. The custody battle has started in early 2024, and the couple have taken a private approach after the initial scandal spread in September 2023 due to the TMZ reports. Others directed the blame towards Jonas and Turner themselves, instead of the tabloids, with one X user writing in response to a TMZ report posted on X: "Why they talking to us like we decide who gets the kids" (@foroverkji, 2023). This is interesting, because although the public does not directly have impact on the custody of the children, public opinion can affect the image of either or both parents. If one parent is perceived by the public to be better than the other, this can reflect onto court proceedings. Both parents will want to build an image of themselves as responsible, caring parents. However, if general opinion on social media and tabloids is negative, this can be hard to achieve. Because Jonas and Turner have taken an amicable approach to custody proceedings now in 2024 and seem to both want shared custody, it is beneficial for them to appear co-operative in proceedings.

7. Findings

This thesis studied the early developments of the Joe Jonas and Sophie Turner divorce case in September 2023. Through complicated narratives created by rumours and accusations in the media, the public finds their side to support. Tabloid reports from TMZ act as a starting point for scandal, reporting on the private, less advantageous sides of divorce. Social media platform X, on the other hand, acts as a way for fans and other interested internet users to discuss and gossip, so to speak, about the public scandal. Users express their opinions through intertextual and varying styles, creating narratives based on the ones tabloids present and further, creating a general opinion of the public eye.

The pair's respective PR teams had an aggressive approach in releases at the start of the scandal but have taken a calmer approach after the initial speculation on social media slowed down. After initially going back and forth in statements in TMZ articles, the PR teams of both participants have begun supporting amicable relations between the divorcees, not wanting to give reason for further scandal. PR team approach is affected by commentary from the public because the public acts as the judgement

for a celebrity's public image, which a PR team aims to preserve. Especially when Jonas' team received negative reactions on their handling of the divorce and people saw him as the instigator for the scandal that formed, his PR team seemingly reacted by no longer giving out information to TMZ. The public also criticised the pair in general for making the divorce highly public, which can be argued to have caused PR teams to take a calmer approach.

Side-taking happens, and social media users on X side more with Turner. It is significantly less common to find commentary siding with Jonas, which is in part related to the timing of information released to TMZ. Reports began releasing from Jonas' PR team first, and instead of supporting the narrative of him being the better of the two, they ended up portraying him negatively, as Turner's silence on the matter made her seem more mature. Hence, because Jonas' PR team was the first to begin releasing rumours, the public saw Jonas as the one out of the couple to resort to gossip and rumours in winning public favour. When Turner's team released their own information, the public justified this as them rightfully defending Turner's image. Narratives in tabloid reports, mainly gossip released by TMZ, do not immediately determine which side the public takes. Here, the effect of the tabloid narratives garner strong reactions, but side taking is affected by the order and timing of the information released by PR to the press.

The main narrative that formed during the research period of the scandal in September 2023 was that Jonas was an instigator in the negative portrayal of Turner in media, while Turner was seen as innocent and defending her image. Although TMZ articles used attention grabbing headlines to attract readers, the tabloid themselves did not significantly aid the narrative negatively or positively on either side. Articles often featured direct quotes from sources or stated that information came from a source close to either Jonas or Turner.

Jonas and Turner's children and their custody are a key part of this divorce and its proceedings. Divorces affect the lives of not only the couple divorcing but their children as well. Because the children are innocent participants, their benefit is often most important to the divorcees as well as their families. In the case of a highly public celebrity divorce, media and internet users also share their opinions on what is best for the children. Therefore, the couple's children and their position in the divorce can be used as leverage for building positive or negative narratives about the divorcees. The parents' treatment of the children and who is a better parent according to the public affects side taking in public divorce cases and can act as a way for either one of the sides to win favour in the public eye. In Jonas and Turner's divorce, PR teams on both sides have brought up that the two are responsible parents and care about their children. Custody of the children has divided the public in

taking sides between the couple, some believing Jonas to be a more suitable parent, while others believe Turner to be so instead.

As Jonas' and Turner's divorce and custody court proceedings are still ongoing, it cannot be said how their case ends. It will be interesting to see if the attention brought to the couple through divorce news reports has a lasting effect on either of their public image, and how the narrative develops from here. At the current moment, in February 2024, it seems that there is fewer social media commentary and tabloid reports regarding the couple, and interest in the scandal is beginning to lessen.

8. Conclusions

Celebrity news is a topic that interests the general public, and people can easily share their thoughts regarding scandals and other news through social media. As this thesis shows, divorce is a widely reported on topic among tabloids, and taking sides between parties in a divorce is common. Tabloid journalism struggles with credibility, as lighter news like celebrity news struggle with the proper ethical conduct of reporting on private matters and such news are also often viewed to be of lesser importance. Modern age celebrity divorces can become highly public spectacles, where public opinion largely affects the public image of the celebrities involved.

Although many scandals, like celebrity divorce, begin with rumours in tabloid reports, social media seems to be rising as the main platform for spreading news as well as discussing them. Articles from tabloids get reposted to social media, such as X, where from users of the platform then build their own opinions of the divorce. Tabloids remain the main source for such scandals, but social media has become a domain for further commentary and spreading the news to a wider audience. The public's curiosity in the private details of a divorce scandal increase with easily accessible gossip on social media. This public curiosity is an interesting phenomenon in celebrity scandal, because it seems to be quite a natural reaction. People simply have an interest in other's lives, and a need to be involved in those lives especially in moments of scandal.

PR teams have a critical role in controlling the brand and public image of a celebrity, which is highlighted in scandal, such as a divorce. It is interesting to see how PR teams utilise the press for their clients benefit by appealing to tabloids with rumours that tabloids can then scandalize and sell to consumers. Publicising private details of a relationship can be a risky pursuit, as narratives built by tabloids can mislead or misinterpret the original goal of the releases.

For further research on the topic of media portrayal of celebrity scandal, it would be interesting to study the ethics of tabloid journalism, and the unclear boundaries of reporting on the lives of public figures. It can be argued that because public figures are already in the public eye, sharing private details from their lives is acceptable. On the other hand, public figures are still private individuals in their personal lives, and hence deserve privacy like any other private person. In connection to this, the phenomenon of parasocial relationships that fans form to celebrities is also interesting from an ethical perspective in studying what kind of fan behaviour crosses boundaries and can even be unhealthy. Studying these topics from the perspective of modern-day tabloid journalism may offer for a look inside future developments in celebrity news and the relationship between celebrity and fan.

References

- Bryant, K. (2023, September 5). Joe Jonas reportedly files for divorce from Sophie Turner. *Vanity Fair*. <https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2023/09/joe-jonas-sophie-turner-divorce>
- Danu [forkslore_]. (2023, September 7). *Every tongue that rises against the queen in the north shall fall*. [Post]. X. https://twitter.com/forkslore_/status/1699826596176155039
- Downing, J. & Degregory, P. (2023, October 3) Trial set for next year in Sophie Turner, Joe Jonas child custody battle. *The New York Post*. <https://nypost.com/2023/10/03/trial-set-for-next-year-in-sophie-turner-joe-jonas-custody-battle/>
- Dubied, A. & Hanitzsch, T. (2014). Studying celebrity news. *Journalism* 15 (2). 137-143.
- Duszynski-Goodman, L. (2023). What are parasocial relationships – and are they healthy? *Forbes Health*. <https://www.forbes.com/health/dating/parasocial-relationships/>
- Flam, G. (2024, January 18). Sophie Turner drops ‘wrongful retention’ claim against Joe Jonas 3 months after reaching custody agreement. *People*. <https://people.com/sophie-turner-drops-wrongful-detention-claim-against-joe-jonas-after-reaching-custody-agreement-8431150>
- Elliott, V. (2022). I’m a Good Guy, Like and Subscribe. *Wired*. <https://www.wired.com/story/wife-guy-try-guys/>
- Gibson, K. (2023, October 11) A complete timeline of Joe Jonas and Sophie Turner’s divorce. *People*. <https://people.com/joe-jonas-and-sophie-turner-divorce-timeline-7973197>
- Hanusch, F. (2018) Lifestyle journalism. Vos, T. P. (Ed.) *Journalism*. De Gruyter Mouton. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501500084> pp. 433-450.
- Jela [@jelevision]. (2023, September 8). *Pressuring someone to go out to events when they’re dealing with postpartum depression is such a vile thing to do*. [Post]. X. <https://twitter.com/jelevision/status/1700126759365071026>
- Kennedy Clark [@younghavok]. (2023, September 22). *Bro put in the work while she was trying to live her life. Let that man have his kids*. [Post]. X. <https://twitter.com/younghavok/status/1705065786816229543>
- McNair, B. (2006) What is journalism? De Burgh, H. (Ed.) *Making Journalists: Diverse Models, Global Issues*. London: Routledge. pp. 25-43.
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d) Misogyny. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/misogyny>
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d) Vile. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vile>
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d) Semiotics. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/semiotics>
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d) Where does the expression “throw someone under the bus” come from? <https://www.merriam-webster.com/wordplay/why-do-we-throw-someone-under-the-bus>
- Milano, S. (2021, February 16). What does a celebrity’s public relations representative do? *Chron*. <https://work.chron.com/celebritys-public-relations-representative-do-22353.html>

- Nate [@lesbiantheninth]. (2023, September 7). *She can play the sources game too*. [Post]. X. <https://twitter.com/lesbiantheninth/status/1699836848825327860>
- Nece [@foroverkji]. (2023, September 22). Why they talking to us like we decide who gets the kids. [Post]. X. <https://twitter.com/foroverkji/status/1704965305511129369>
- New American standard Bible. (n.d) Isaiah 54:17. <https://www.bible.com/bible/100/ISA.54.17.NASB1995>
- O'Halloran, K. L. (2021). Multimodal discourse analysis. Atkinson, D., Hyland, K., Paltridge, B., & Wong, L. L. C. (Eds.) *The Bloomsbury handbook of discourse analysis* (Second edition.). Bloomsbury Academic. Pp. 249-266.
- Oxford English dictionary. (n.d) Smear campaign. <https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=smear%20campaign>
- Page, R. (2015) The narrative dimensions of social media storytelling: options for linearity and tellership. De Fina, A. & Georgakopoulou, A. (Eds.) *The handbook of narrative analysis*. Wiley. Pp. 329-347.
- Pop Base [@PopBase]. (2023, September 6). A 'source' tells Page Six that Joe Jonas tried to 'salvage' his marriage with Sophie Turner before filing for divorce. [Post]. X. <https://twitter.com/PopBase/status/1699232372687024590>
- Ryan [@oliverquicks]. (2023, September 6). I'm just confused as to why you would build your entire brand around Being A Wife Guy. [Post]. X. <https://twitter.com/oliverquicks/status/1699234724437479846>
- Snodgrass, E. (2023, October 22). The celebrity divorce playbook has changed: Expect more leaks and less sexism. *Insider*. <https://www.insider.com/celebrity-divorce-playbook-changed-messy-sophie-turner-joe-jonas-2023-10>
- Tenbarge, K. (2023, October 6). How Sophie Turner won the battle of public perception in her divorce from Joe Jonas. *NBC News*. <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/internet/sophie-turner-joe-jonas-divorce-children-rcna118604>
- TMZ (2023, September 6) Joe Jonas, Sophie Turner, Ring camera video/audio was lynchpin to divorce. *TMZ*. <https://www.tMZ.com/2023/09/06/joe-jonas-sophie-turner-divorce-ring-camera/>
- TMZ (2023, September 4) Joe Jonas wearing wedding ring despite looming divorce. *TMZ*. <https://www.tMZ.com/2023/09/04/joe-jonas-wears-ring-at-concert-despite-looming-divorce/>