

‘Celebrities also suffer from the economic crisis’: Broke celebrities and neoliberal narratives from Spain’s Great Recession

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Abstract: During the years of the economic crisis, ‘broke celebrities’ attracted the attention of the Spanish media. The main aim of this paper is to analyse how these narratives of celebrities in bankruptcy fostered a neoliberal definition of the economic crisis and legitimised austerity policies. In these narratives, the crisis was represented as a social equaliser, affecting all social groups evenly; the causes of the crisis were individualised and celebrities were identified as the epitome of irresponsible citizens who have ‘lived beyond their means’; and citizens were encouraged to do ‘whatever it takes’ to find a job. Nevertheless, our paper also shows how audiences contested some of these values in online comments, challenging the narratives conveyed by Spanish media.

Keywords: neoliberalism; austerity; broke celebrities; Great Recession; *schadenfreude*

Introduction

Following the 2007 financial collapse, Spain endured a severe economic crisis from 2008 to 2015 that had harsh consequences for citizens, such as massive home evictions, a high unemployment rate (up to 27.16% in 2013) and an increase in poverty and social inequalities (Álvarez de Andrés *et al.* 2015, Marti and Fernandez 2015). Just like in other European countries, the Spanish government responded with austerity measures, pressured by the EU institutions after the 2012 bailout (Mateos and Penadés 2013).

Dovetailing with the economic crisis, the figure of the ‘broke celebrity’ became prominent in Spain’s celebrity culture. Television programmes, magazines and newspapers were populated with stories about famous singers, dancers and actresses who had to renegotiate their mortgages or sell their houses (Marín 2012, Otero 2012a, de Diego 2014, Ruiz 2015); interviews with former reality TV stars and well-known designers who were out of work (Molina 2013, *Sálvame Deluxe* 01/04/2013, Diéguez

2015, La Vanguardia 2015); and lists of celebrities in bankruptcy (Otero 2012a, 2012b, ABC 2013).

Tales of celebrities who went from riches to rags are not new (Dyer 1979, p. 44, Duncan 2013). Nevertheless, the frequency with which we could find this kind of story in the Spanish media during the economic crisis is what makes this case study significant. If stars and celebrities embody the tensions of their time (Dyer 1979, Negra and Holmes 2008), we will argue that 'broke' celebrities personify Spanish society's anxieties and debates regarding inequality, unemployment, poverty and downward social mobility during the years of the economic crisis. Thus, the main aim of this paper is to analyse how these narratives of celebrities in bankruptcy convey a particular definition of the economic crisis: one that fosters neoliberal explanations of the recession and legitimise austerity policies. Although these media narratives of broke celebrities reflect a specific national context and its particularities, the results of this article point to the existence of common traits in the narratives and imaginaries of recession and austerity across Western countries.

Celebrity culture, social inequality and capitalist values

The relationship between celebrity culture and capitalist and neoliberal values is well established. Stars and celebrities are usually portrayed as examples of upward social mobility, individuals who have achieved a privileged position thanks to their talent, hard work and luck (Dyer 1979, p. 42, Gamson 1994, p. 28-33, Littler 2004). Thus, they embody the 'myth of success', the idea that capitalist societies are 'sufficiently open for anyone to get to the top, regardless of rank' (Dyer 1979, p. 42). By doing this, celebrity culture legitimises social and economic inequality (Cross and Littler 2010, p. 396) and promotes meritocracy, a core value of neoliberalism (Littler 2013). In other words, celebrity culture tells us that anyone can 'make it' if they dream big enough, have

enough talent and work hard enough. The structural causes of social, gender and racial inequalities are hidden behind stories of a 'heroic individual who succeeds against the odds' (Mendick *et al.* 2015, p. 167).

Obviously, not all celebrities fit this narrative of 'earned' social ascent. Since the development of mass media and advertising, there has been tension between two explanations of celebrity: celebrity as the product of (media) manufacture versus celebrity as a consequence of talent and work (Gamson 1994, p. 15-54, see also Dyer 1979, p. 10-19). This tension has deepened since the popularisation of reality TV, a genre that has introduced into the 'popular public sphere' celebrities who are 'lacking some of the fundamental discourses of the success myth, largely the emphasis on work and traditional conceptions of talent' (Holmes 2004, p. 119). This 'undeserved' celebrity is usually perceived as a challenge to the idea that capitalist societies are fair, and as symptomatic of a crisis in (meritocratic) values (Gamson 1994, p. 6-10).

Tensions related to the relationship between celebrity, social ascent, work and merit are embodied in the well-known distinction between 'achieved celebrity', which 'derives from the perceived accomplishments of the individual in open competition'; 'attributed' celebrity, which is 'the result of the concentrated representation of an individual as noteworthy or exceptional by cultural intermediaries'; and 'ascribed celebrity', which is related to lineage (e.g., royal families) (Rojek 2001, p. 17-18). Nevertheless, we should keep in mind that definitions of talent and work are profoundly gendered, classed and racialised (Mendick *et al.* 2015, see also: Biressi and Nunn 2005, p. 144-155, Tyler and Bennet 2010). This means that the distinction between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' celebrity serves to construct certain classed, gendered and racialised bodies as worthy and others as unworthy and abject (Tyler and Bennet 2010).

Moreover, in recent years, several authors have further explored the connection between celebrity culture and capitalist values by analysing how celebrities embody and promote the current 'austerity culture', which justifies welfare cuts and presents neoliberal policies as 'common sense' (Hall and O'Shea 2013, Jensen 2014, Jensen and Tyler 2015). Current celebrity culture promotes thrift and retreatism through public figures such as Kate Middleton (Allen *et al.* 2015) or 'austere' celebrity experts (Hamad 2013), and neoliberal values such as discipline and individual responsibility are embodied by athletes such as Katie Taylor (Free 2015). Meanwhile, D-List celebrities convey the idea of doing whatever it takes to succeed in a time of economic hardship (Kokoli and Winter 2015). Other celebrities such Kim Kardashian or 'celebrity chavs' such as Kerry Katona are represented as 'undeserving recipients of wealth' through which an anti-welfare common-sense is constructed (Tyler and Bennett 2010, Allen *et al.* 2015). Through both 'desirable' and 'abject' celebrities, celebrity culture is seen as one of the stages upon which the cultural politics of austerity are constructed.

Nevertheless, the role of the broke celebrity in conveying the neoliberal narratives of the economic crisis has never been analyzed. If celebrities personify the opportunities that capitalist society offers individuals, how did the figure of the 'broke celebrity' embody Spanish society's debates during the crisis? This figure, which is paradigmatic of recent celebrity culture in Spain, can also shed light on the relationship between celebrity and narratives of inequality and meritocracy and thus contribute to the existing literature on celebrity culture and capitalist and neoliberal values.

Financial crisis and austerity imaginaries

Despite the initial claims of a hypothetical 'refounding of capitalism' and a return to Keynesianism (Blyth 2013), the crisis has instead led to a deepening of neoliberal discourses, which have prescribed individual solutions to the recession based on

entrepreneurship and self-help (Peck 2013, Steinkopf and Bond 2013, Banet-Weiser 2014). This is consequence of a shift in the discursive construction and representation of the crisis:

The current dominant image of its locus has been moved from the private to the public sector (from the financial services industry to public spending). It has been transformed from a financial crisis to a fiscal crisis (centred on government debt) (Clarke and Newman 2012, p. 300).

In this context, 'austerity' is presented as the only possible recovery strategy. This concept is a euphemism that refers to cutbacks to the welfare state and the deepening of neoliberal policies. These measures have been implemented in several Western governments, causing a deepening in inequality (Clarke and Newman 2012, Peck *et al.* 2012, Blyth 2013, Peck 2013, Conway 2014). Moreover, 'austerity' points to a specific explanation of the financial crisis: as the aftermath of an 'age of irresponsibility' in which both the State and individual citizens have been 'living beyond their means' (Bramall 2013, Bramall *et al.* 2016). This discourse, which can be found in different European countries, including Spain (Alonso *et al.* 2011), shifts the interpretative frame of the crisis from the political and economic field to the domain of domestic life and moral values.

Austerity has also been linked to the creation of an anti-welfare common-sense: in this context, 'the welfare state was re-imagined as fostering toxic forms of "welfare dependency" amongst citizens, itself considered to have a stagnating effect on economic growth and national prosperity' (Jensen and Tyler 2015, p. 472). This anti-welfare common-sense is legitimised through figures such as the *chav* (Tyler 2013) and the 'benefit brood' family (Jensen and Tyler 2015), as well as media representations often called 'poverty porn' (Jensen 2014). Through these negative stereotypes, the working-class is constructed as abject, and the structural causes of inequalities are hidden.

Nevertheless, concurrent to the development of austerity policies, social movements such as 15M (also known as the ‘indignados’) and Occupy Wall Street have emerged and expressed dissent with neoliberal policies. They share a critique of capitalism, welfare cuts and inequality and demand a more participative democracy and redistributive policies (Castells 2012, Shrivastava and Ivanova 2015, Guillén *et al.* 2016, Bramall 2016, Bramall *et al.* 2016). In Spain, the emergence of PAH (Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca, or ‘Mortgage Victims Platform’) in 2009 was especially important in challenging the dominant neoliberal narratives of the crisis. PAH’s actions went against the individualisation of the causes of and solutions to the recession to instead demand changes in eviction laws, claiming that the thousands of Spaniards who could not afford their mortgages anymore were not irresponsible consumers but the victims of the abusive conditions imposed by the banks. Moreover, PAH carried out communal actions such as occupying bank offices and halting evictions (Álvarez de Andrés *et al.* 2015, Marti and Fernandez 2015).

Popular culture has encapsulated these debates by legitimating austerity and neoliberal recipes. For example, several authors have linked the proliferation of post-apocalyptic fiction in cinema and television to imaginaries of the crisis (Boyle and Mrozowsky 2014, Gurr 2015, Sugg 2015), fostering an individualisation of society and contributing to developing the metaphors of the crisis as a catastrophe and natural disaster, a representation which can also be found in the news media and political discourses (Bickes *et al.* 2014, Steinkopf and Bond 2014, Arrese 2015).

Popular culture has also helped ‘to mobilise emotion and to allocate blame’ (Negra and Tasker 2014), pointing to the distinction between ‘scroungers’ and ‘strivers’ (in the UK) and ‘takers’ and ‘makers’ (in the US) (Peck 2014). Thus, against the backdrop of the dependent, financially irresponsible citizen, recessionary popular

culture promotes thriftiness, entrepreneurship and self-interest as a remedy for the problems citizens face in both fiction and reality TV (Rubin 2013, Negra and Tasker 2014, Huws 2015, St John 2015). As seen in the previous section, celebrity culture has also contributed to this imaginary.

In Spain, the crisis has been represented in factual entertainment programmes and, to a lesser extent, in television series (Ruiz *et al.* 2013). In these popular culture texts, the crisis is portrayed mainly using a comic tone, which is a way of containing the popular resentment. Films such as *Chispa de la vida* and *5 metros cuadrados* explore the consequences of the Spanish crisis for ordinary people, leading to audience empathy (Allbritton 2014). Likewise, the presence of real-life stories of ordinary people affected by the crisis have appeared in the news (Labrador Méndez 2012). Both Allbritton and Labrador Méndez highlight how these narratives construct a sense of shared precariousness and vulnerability and the promise of a community that can band together under these shared experiences. Nevertheless, while Labrador Méndez argues that this shared vulnerability can lead to dissenting social movements such as 15M, Allbritton claims that Spanish crisis cinema often ‘cast[s] optimism, hope and sympathy as stand-ins for any action that might effect a real change upon the world’ (2014, p. 112).

As we will show, narratives of broke celebrities connect and reinforce neoliberal explanations of and solutions to the crisis that became ‘common sense’ in Western countries, fostering recessionary imaginaries that have been constructed in other popular culture genres as well. Thus, this article seeks to contribute to the existent literature on how the crisis is portrayed by popular culture.

Method

The main aim of this article is to identify how the Spanish economic crisis is represented in the media narratives of broke celebrities and how these narratives

reinforce or challenge the cultural politics of austerity. To fulfil this aim, we assembled a sample of 98 articles and interviews published in Spanish magazines and digital newspapers and broadcast on television from 2008 to 2016. All the items in the sample contained the term ‘arruinado’ (bankrupt) and/or ‘crisis’ and referred to a celebrity.

The sample includes a broad range of media: general-interest national newspapers such as *La Vanguardia*, *El Mundo* and *ABC*; celebrity gossip magazines such as *Lecturas* and *Diez Minutos* (two widely-read weekly magazines that cover news on a broad range of mainly Spanish celebrities using a respectful tone); as well as television programmes and their websites, especially *Sálvame* [‘Save Me’, Telecinco, 2009-], a programme that has devoted considerable attention to the figure of the broke celebrity. *Sálvame* is a celebrity gossip programme broadcast daily from 4 pm to 8 pm (*Sálvame Diario*, ‘Save Me Daily’) as well as Fridays during prime time (*Sálvame Deluxe*, ‘Save Me Deluxe’) on the commercial channel Telecinco, which is one of the television channels with the largest viewership in Spain. The programme is hosted by Jorge Javier Vázquez and Paz Padilla, and celebrity gossip journalists and celebrities appear on it regularly. It combines celebrity news features (mainly focused on Spanish celebrities) and interviews with principally D-List celebrities, and it is known for its characteristic harsh and ironic tone towards celebrities alternating with a melodramatic register. In Spain, *Sálvame* is seen as the epitome of ‘trash TV’ (Oliva 2014, Besalú et al. 2018), which explains why almost only D-List celebrities agree to be interviewed on the programme.

We also analysed the comments discussing the sampled media stories to see how the audience responded to the narratives of broke celebrities constructed by the media. To compile these comments, we considered both the comments sections and social media such as Facebook. Of course, online comments are not representative of the

audience; furthermore, social media discussions tend towards polarisation and negativity (Williams *et al.* 2015, del Vicario *et al.* 2017). Nonetheless, the social media are another platform where celebrity is discussed and constructed, and analysing online forums will let us 'get a better sense of the way discourse works, and of how people are engaging with neoliberal frames and agendas and reworking their common sense in response' (Hall and O'Shea 2013, p. 16, see also Stanley *et al.* 2016).

The sample of articles, interviews and comments was analysed qualitatively, guided by the following questions: a) How is the crisis represented? b) What causal explanations of celebrities' economic situation are presented? c) What solutions are suggested to celebrities in order to improve their circumstances? d) How is celebrity represented in these narratives? In our analysis, we draw from the existing literature on austerity, neoliberalism and celebrity culture (see previous sections) in order to see how narratives of broke celebrities connect with the cultural politics of austerity and the construction of consent.

The economic crisis as an equaliser

The Spanish media use the economic crisis as a *theme* to frame the narratives of celebrities with financial problems: in the articles and interviews analysed, the crisis is constantly mentioned, and every economic problem that affects celebrities is related to the economic crisis, even when they are not caused by it (for example, celebrities who lost their money by being conned by a close associate). Media stories of 'broke celebrities' are constructed as evidence that celebrities 'also suffer from the economic crisis' (Otero 2012a). The Spanish media state repeatedly that 'the economic crisis does not distinguish between famous and anonymous people' (Otero 2012b) and point out the 'similarities' between celebrities' situations and what regular Spaniards are experiencing. For example, in an article published by *La Otra Crónica* (LOC), a

supplement of *El Mundo* newspaper devoted to celebrity news, we are told that the flamenco singer and actress Lolita Flores'¹ 'debts have been accumulating and work has not been as abundant as she expected. Basically, the same thing that has happened to all Spaniards during the crisis' (Del Río 2015). Unemployment, evictions, poverty and debt are evoked in narratives of celebrities who are out of work, are forced to sell their house, have lost part of their fortunes or owe money to the Spanish Tax Office or the bank. Thus, they echo the 'real-life stories' of anonymous Spaniards experiencing the economic crisis that can be found in the media (Labrador Méndez 2012).

By emphasizing the idea that celebrities are *also* affected by the crisis, these articles and interviews represent the crisis as a global phenomenon that touches everyone, regardless of their socioeconomic position. This conceptualisation of the crisis connects with the representation of the crisis as a 'catastrophe' or 'natural disaster' (Bickes *et al.* 2014, Steinkopf and Bond 2014, Arrese 2015), a metaphor also developed in the post-apocalyptic fiction that has proliferated in cinema and television (Boyle and Mrozowsky 2014, Gurr 2015, Sugg 2015). The economic crisis is portrayed as a socioeconomic equaliser, an opportunity to end the social hierarchies symbolised by celebrities. We are told that Spanish society is more equal because of the crisis: everyone seems to be equally affected by it (even celebrities). This representation is in tune with other Spanish media representations of the crisis, such as TV series in which 'the Crisis can happen to anyone and is happening to everyone' (Allbritton 2014, p. 104).

¹ Besides being a singer and actress, Lolita Flores is also the daughter of Lola Flores, a well-known flamenco singer and actress. She regularly appears in celebrity gossip media, including the high-end celebrity magazine *¡Hola!*, that in Spain is a marker of legitimacy among celebrities (Gallego 1990).

The implications of this approach are twofold. On the one hand, narratives that point to a 'shared vulnerability' can strengthen the communal sense of Spaniards (Labrador Méndez 2012, Allbritton 2014). On the other hand, these narratives conceal the fact that social inequality during the economic crisis increased in Spain, not decreased (Martínez-Celorrío and Marin Saldo 2016, p. 11-17), and that different social groups were affected by the crisis differently. From 2007 to 2011, the annual income of the poorest 10% of the Spanish population decreased 12.89%, while the income of the wealthiest 10% only decreased 1.45% (OECD 2015); from 2007 to 2012, both the Gini index² and the Palma index³ rose: the former from 0.324 to 0.335 and the latter from 1.10 to 1.48 (Martínez-Celorrío and Marin Saldo 2016, pp. 11-17). As a result, Spain has become one of the most unequal countries in the EU (OECD 2015, 2016, Martínez-Celorrío and Marin Saldo 2016)⁴.

² The Gini index measures the income gap in the population, 0 meaning everyone has the same income and 1 meaning that one person has all the income

³ The Palma index compares the income of the wealthiest 10% of the population with the income of the poorest 40%.

⁴ It is difficult to know the actual scale of inequality between stars and celebrities on the one hand and ordinary Spaniards on the other since no research into the economics of Spanish celebrity culture has been published to date, and celebrities' monetary agreements are usually confidential. Moreover, there is a great deal of variability between the earnings and wealth of A-list celebrities (such as global film stars, singers and footballers) and D-List celebrities, such as former reality TV contestants. For example, the singer Julio Iglesias, the only celebrity on the list of the 350 wealthiest Spaniards, allegedly has a fortune of more than €900 million (El Mundo); a television personality such as Belén Esteban earned a wage of €780,000 in 2017 for working as a contributor in *Sálvame* (La Vanguardia 2018); and D-List celebrities made from €6,000 to €12,000 per week for appearing on the celebrity reality TV show *Supervivientes* (the Spanish version of *I'm A Celebrity... Get Me Out Of Here!*) (El Mundo Deportivo 2018). In contrast, in 2016 the average salary in Spain was €23,156.34 per year (INE 2018).

Thus, by arguing that ‘everyone is affected by the crisis’, these articles fail to note the existence of a socioeconomic elite that has been not affected by it, which constitutes a ‘structuring absence’ (Storey 2009, p. 73-75) in these narratives. The hyper-visibility of stars and celebrities serve to veil the existence of plutocrats, magnates and other members of the 1% that escape from public scrutiny. This highlights the ambiguous and contradictory relationship between power, visibility (‘visibility-as-recognition’ Brighenti 2007, p. 338, Couldry 2001) and invisibility:

Power can be conceived as a form of external visibility (visibility of effects) associated with internal invisibility (invisibility of identification): the effects of power are visible to everyone, but what power is in its essence, where it is really located, will not be disclosed (Brighenti 2007, p. 338).

Moreover, articles on and interviews with bankrupt celebrities are published alongside other pieces devoted to celebrities that are *not* broke and conspicuously show off their economic capital. These articles contradict the idea that the crisis affects everyone and encourage the audience to look for individual explanations of the downward social mobility experienced both by broke celebrities and anonymous Spaniards during the years of the crisis (as we will see in the next section). This is further emphasised by the fact that most (although not all) broke celebrities are portrayed as ‘undeserving’ of their celebrity. Thus, the fact that the gap between the wealthy and the poor has broadened during the crisis is simultaneously concealed and legitimized through a meritocratic rhetoric (Littler 2013).

Causes: ‘Living beyond our means’

The articles and programmes analysed frequently cast doubt on celebrities, since there are suspicions that they are responsible for their own economic situation. For example, in *Sálvame Deluxe*, a former *Big Brother* contestant and television personality (Chiqui)

is asked: 'There may be people who ask to themselves "how did Chiqui spend the money she earned on TV?"' (*Sálvame Deluxe*, 01/01/2013), and in the magazine *Lecturas*, a former model, actress and singer (Malena Gracia) is asked: 'Malena, you must have earned a lot of money. Didn't you save?' (Nemolato 2016, p. 36). Celebrities' expensive lifestyles are usually mentioned. For example, an article published about the financial situation of a well-known television host (Jesús Quintero) in the quality newspaper *La Vanguardia* claims that he owned a 'Hummer H3, decorated by the designer Custo Dalmau' and that 'he bought an entire building on Placentines street with a view of the Giralda, and rode around the city in a fluorescent orange Bentley' (Ruiz 2016, see also *La Vanguardia* 2016). Another interesting example is how *Sálvame Diario* approached the economic problems of a well-known celebrity gossip journalist and regular contributor of the programme, Karmele Marchante (11/18/2015): the programme stated the exact sums of money that Marchante earned during her 30-year career, arguing 'it would be reasonable to think that Karmele has a big fortune (...). Nevertheless, her reality is otherwise'.

Thus, broke celebrities are portrayed as figures that embody the discourse of 'living beyond our means' (Alonso *et al.* 2011) as the cause of the economic crisis and Spanish debt. These narratives contribute to an imaginary of years of revelry, unlimited credit and excessive spending. This idea is captured by the expression 'living beyond their means', which was explicitly stated in several audience comments: 'They [*celebrities*] should have saved for worse times. If they hadn't bought those houses that were beyond their means they wouldn't have these mega-mortgages now. Deal with it!' (del Pino 2013). This explanation of the economic crisis places the blame on the individual citizen (a strategy that connects with neoliberal discourses; see Vass 2013) and fosters a moral explanation of the crisis. According to this point of view, austerity is

the necessary punishment for financially irresponsible citizens, a form of 'moral justice' (Ntampoudi 2014). Stars and celebrities are portrayed as the paradigmatic examples of the 'age of irresponsibility' (Bramall 2013) that led to the 2008 financial crisis, since they are traditionally linked to imaginaries of 'conspicuous consumption' (Dyer 1998, p. 38-39) and 'displaying success through material possessions' (DeCordova 1990, p. 108-110).

Following the idea proposed by Spanish media that celebrities' situation is similar to that of 'any other Spaniard', in some of the audience's comments, celebrities' excesses are viewed as representative of regular people's excesses:

And like them [*celebrities*], many other anonymous, brainless people (we all know a few of them in our circle of friends) have enjoyed huge cars, have taken on big mortgages for dreamlike designer houses (...) and are now participating in anti- eviction demonstrations... (Encastilla 2013).

Interestingly, the author of this comment frames evictions as the consequence of Spaniards' irresponsibility, trying to delegitimise PAH's discourse, which refuses to accept the neoliberal and individualizing narrative of 'living beyond our means'. Here we can see a tension between individualised and structural explanations of (and solutions to) the economic crisis. Narratives of broke celebrities are another example of the idea that celebrity culture creates 'a cultural regime which trains us to detect the deficient citizenship of individuals, a task whose occupation works as a shield for the deficiencies of the state' (Allen *et al.* 2015, p. 920).

But not all comments portray ordinary people and celebrities as similar, accepting the premise that celebrities are experiencing the same problems as regular Spaniards. In other comments, celebrities and their excessive lifestyle are contrasted with 'regular people' who have lived (and must continue to live) an austere life. Here

the alleged representativeness of celebrities is called into question, as is blaming ordinary citizens for the financial crisis:

If he [*the designer Javier Mariscal*⁵] has not managed to save money the way regular workers are forced to do, fuck him. I have never handled as much money as he has but I don't have a bad life, and I make an honest living as a plumber. (Muñoz 2015).

What all these media narratives and audience comments have in common is that they legitimate austerity as a principle by which to lead one's life. Citizens are encouraged to be thrifty, self-regulating and moderate, and austerity is framed as 'the moral thing to do' (Alonso *et al.* 2011), coinciding with what has been identified in the UK by Bramall (2013) and Allen *et al.* (2015). Here we have to keep in mind that 'austerity' is a twofold concept which legitimises welfare cuts and at the same time also points to anti-consumerist values that question neoliberalism and capitalism and promote alternative economic practices such as cooperatives, bartering networks and recycling (Castells *et al.* 2012, Bramall 2013). The popularisation of these practices during the years of the Great Recession, creating what Bramall has called 'austerity chic' (2013), shows not only the widespread acceptance of austerity as a moral attitude, but also the existence of a discursive struggle around this concept.

Solutions: Doing whatever it takes

In media interviews, celebrities are regularly asked what they are willing to do to find a job. Celebrities are expected to say that they are willing to take *any* job and do 'whatever it takes' to earn money and resolve their situation. On the one hand, this idea

⁵ Javier Mariscal became well-known in Spain for having designed Cobi, the mascot of the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games.

connects with *schadenfreude* (delight in others' misfortunes), since the audience is invited to enjoy imagining celebrities mopping floors and serving coffees (see next section). On the other hand, it legitimises the notion that citizens must sacrifice morality and personal dignity to overcome economic hardship. Doing 'whatever it takes' forms part of the imaginaries of the recession, as Rubin (2013) shows in his analysis of zombie literature such as *The Walking Dead*.

Neoliberal prescriptions in which unemployed citizens are encouraged to accept any job (no matter how precarious) along with a decrease in status and salary (Standing 2011, Jensen and Tyler 2012, Rubin 2013) are evoked here. For example, in an interview published in *El Mundo's LOC*, a cinema and television actress (Loles León⁶) was asked: 'With all the experience you have, do you find it difficult to find a job? Might you be asking for too much money?' (Diéguez 2015). This same idea appears in several comments targeted at the designer Javier Mariscal: 'You should use your talent in order to do what we all do, lower prices, work more to earn less and forget that you used to be a star' (katakrack 2015); 'Look Mr. Mariscal, you should learn that you cannot make a living in your profession... Maybe you could in the past ... Go to the dole queue and find a job' (delite39 2015). The loss of labour rights and the increasing job instability that citizens are facing are framed as inevitable and something Spaniards must endure (Standing 2011, Jensen and Tyler 2012), especially at a time when unemployment was one of the main problems facing citizens.

When a celebrity shows reluctance to take just *any* job, it creates tensions, such as in this telling excerpt from an interview with a former contestant in the first season of

⁶ Loles León became well-known for appearing in several critically acclaimed films, such as Pedro Almodóvar's *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* and *Átame*, Vicente Aranda's *Libertarias* and Fernando Trueba's *La niña de tus ojos*. She also had prominent roles in successful television series such as *Aquí no hay quien viva* (Antena 3, 2003-4).

Big Brother, Marina Díaz, on the TV programme *¡Qué tiempo tan feliz!*⁷ (Telecinco 03/18/2012):

Tamara Gorro (programme contributor): If someone calls you right now and tells you ‘ok, you can get a job as... whatever, as a street sweeper’, I assume your answer would be yes.

Marina Díaz: Well... maybe not exactly... (...)

María Teresa Campos (host): Marina, you are probably going to find what I’m going to say terrible, but you are a person with privileges (...) Many people in the audience would like to come to the TV studio, sit down here and explain that they are in a situation like yours [*to earn money*].)

Marina’s answer, implying that she does not want just *any* job, prompts a negative reaction in the host of the programme, María Teresa Campos, who not only censures Marina’s answer but also inadvertently contradicts the idea fostered by the programme that Marina’s situation was similar to that of millions of Spaniards. Marina’s unwillingness to play her part in the narrative of the broke individual who must do ‘whatever it takes’ to better her circumstances creates a situation in which the contradictions embodied by the claim that celebrities are just like any other Spaniard are rendered visible.

In this context, being interviewed about their personal problems or taking part in a reality TV programme are framed as humiliating ways to earn money: ‘Desperate, bankrupt or out of work. Why did they take part in “GH VIP” [*Celebrity Big Brother*]?’

⁷ *¡Qué tiempo tan feliz!* (2009-2017) was a television programme hosted by María Teresa Campos and broadcast Sundays from 6 pm to 9 pm on Telecinco. The programme had a nostalgic feel and included interviews and features about songs and films from previous decades interspersed with interviews and performances by current singers and other celebrities.

(02/03/2016). Another interesting case is that of Lucía Etxebarria⁸, a Spanish writer who took part in a reality TV show called *Campamento de Verano*⁹ ('Summer Camp', Telecinco 2013). On her Facebook page, she explained that she decided to participate in that programme because she owed money to the Spanish Tax Office (Hacienda) and reflected on whether by making this decision she was debasing herself:

Yes, I know that I'm going to a trashy and sensationalist TV programme. (...) I know that it seems unworthy of me. (...) You should know that what they pay me per week beats what I was paid for *Liquidación por derribo*, a book that it took me several months to write and years to collect all the documentation. (...) I'm not happy to go to *Campamento* and become cannon fodder, but I'm very lucky that I am able to go there (...) (Etxebarria 2013).

This post received 1,406 comments on Facebook, several of which approved Etxebarria's decision because she was doing 'whatever it takes' to keep afloat: 'You are so brave... taking part in something opposed to your principles. I would have done the same thing. When in need, one must swallow their own principles...' (Gutierrez Sanchez 2013).

In addition, family and friends are represented as another solution for palliating the consequences of the economic crisis. On the one hand, several celebrities portray economic problems as a source of isolation and shame, since they claim that they did not want to tell their friends and relatives about their situation. On the other hand, friends and family are also used to invoke communal values: journalists usually urge

⁸ Lucía Etxebarria is a well-known Spanish writer who has authored several top-selling books (*Amor, curiosidad, prozac y dudas, Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes*) and has won the most important Spanish literary prizes (Planeta, Nadal, Primavera).

⁹ *Campamento de Verano* was a celebrity reality TV show similar to *I'm A Celebrity... Get Me Out Of Here!* (Granada Television/ITV, 2002-present). The programme featured D-List celebrities and was framed by the press as a low-quality programme (Oliva forthcoming).

celebrities to ask them for help. Again, precariousness and vulnerability are portrayed as a way to strengthen a sense of community and solidarity among Spaniards, a way to overcome neoliberal individualisation. Moreover, the appeal to family connects with Spanish values, since the family has traditionally played a central role in protecting and assisting citizens (Del Pino 2005, p. 4). Nevertheless, a closer look shows how society is viewed as made up of isolated clusters, i.e., families that must take care of their own members (Rubin 2013), like individualised communities. Families are presented as the ones that must do what the welfare state is no longer doing: serve as a safety net and take care of citizens in need (Jensen and Tyler 2012).

Schadenfreude: Outrage against inequalities

The Spanish media's attitude towards broke celebrities is ambivalent. A number of the news articles and TV interviews analysed use a dramatic tone, trying to awaken compassion in the audience and pointing to the idea of 'shared vulnerability' and precariousness (Labrador Méndez 2012, Allbritton 2014). In some of these cases, the deserving nature of the celebrity in trouble is mentioned by framing the situation as 'unfair'. Nevertheless, the economic problems of 'undeserving' celebrities' are also constructed as 'dramatic situations', 'tough realities' or 'real dramas' by some media. Other articles use an ironic tone and show delight in celebrities' hardship, regardless their 'claims to fame'. Thus, there is not a unanimous argumentation in the media regarding whether bankrupt celebrities should be pitied or whether established distinctions between deserved and undeserved celebrity are relevant when reacting to their economic hardship.

Regarding the audience comments, most of them showed a high degree of emotionality, expressing delight in celebrities' economic problems. Interestingly, these comments do not distinguish between D-List celebrities such as former reality TV

contestants and 'deserving' celebrities such as a designer. All celebrities were viewed as unworthy of empathy:

Without a doubt, this man [*Javier Mariscal*] made a lot of money, more than whatever the people who are being evicted can make in a year, and now he is trying to make us feel pity for him? Poor guy who can't find a job... I'm sorry but if he didn't know how to manage his money don't come crying now. There are 6 million unemployed people, go to the [*dole*] queue (Aifon6, 2015).

Do you think that you are the only one with these problems [*Ana Toro*¹⁰]?? Go cry to the dole queue and look for a job just like everyone else does!! (...) 'Real drama' ... doesn't make me laugh! (Alba Olmedo 2013).

These comments, in which celebrities are imagined in the dole queue side by side with ordinary citizens, are examples of *schadenfreude*: expressions of delight in celebrities' problems that reveal uneasiness at the inequalities embodied by celebrities (Cross and Littler 2010, Harvey *et al.* 2015). Nevertheless, *schadenfreude* has a limited potential for challenging inequalities since does not substantially question their structural causes (Cross and Littler 2010, p. 400): it is just a form of 'levelling through personal humiliation'.

The vitriolic comments hurled at broke celebrities are justified through two different arguments, as exemplified by the previous excerpts: one fostering 'the living beyond our means' narrative discussed in previous sections ('they should have managed their money better') and/or the other argument based on the fact that their situation is not exceptional ('they are not the only Spaniards experiencing economic problems'). This latter response to narratives of celebrities' downward social mobility is ambiguous, since it is not clear whether celebrities are scorned for exaggerating their problems

¹⁰ Ana Toro is a former *Big Brother* contestant who was interviewed on *Sálvame Deluxe* (01/11/2013) because she claimed that she had been out of work for two years and had no money left to feed her child.

(which are not considered equivalent to those experienced by anonymous Spaniards) or for not resigning themselves to their new social position (fostering the idea that citizens must endure the new situation without complaining).

A number of comments also questioned whether the media should give visibility to (and demand empathy for) broke celebrities. For example, the interview on *Sálvame Deluxe* with Julián Contreras Jr.¹¹ was perceived as especially infuriating by the audience:

Lots of people have these same problems and even worse, and they are humble and hardworking people... There are a lot of evictions; a lot of people are homeless and hungry... Why don't you make a programme to help all those people who are not celebrities? (Ferreira 2014)

These comments express outrage at what is perceived to be an unfair and unequal media system that gives visibility to celebrities while the 'real victims' of the crisis are forgotten. Visibility is acknowledged as a form of capital (Driessens 2013) that can be exchanged for economic capital (i.e., the media should give money to anonymous citizens rather than celebrities) and symbolic value (i.e., anonymous citizens should be recognised as the *real* victims of the crisis). By asking the media to focus on stories of 'ordinary people', these comments are asking for a redistribution of this capital that goes beyond *schadenfreude*.

¹¹ Julián Contreras Jr. is the youngest son of Carmina Ordóñez, a late Spanish socialite. His status as a celebrity is twofold: on the one hand, he is featured regularly in the glossy high-end celebrity gossip magazine *¡Hola!* (which, as stated in note 1, is a marker of celebrity status), while on the other, his fame is 'ascribed' and detached from legitimate definitions of talent and work.

Celebrity as a privilege and a burden

Discussions about bankrupt celebrities shed light on the backstage of the manufacture of fame, specifically the exchange rates between celebrity capital (visibility) and economic capital (Driessens 2013) and their relationship with the ‘fame cycle’ (Deller 2016).

Celebrities are asked about the money they earned, negotiations about exclusive reports are revealed, as are some celebrities’ difficulties maintaining their celebrity capital.

Audience comments also focus on the relationship between celebrity and economic capital, highlighting celebrity privilege and rejecting the frame fostered by the media that celebrities ‘also suffer from the economic crisis’ and that their situation is similar to that of any other Spaniard:

Sálvame Deluxe should be called Dole Deluxe. When they [celebrities] have nothing left, they go to the programme and then they earn some money to get by for a little while. (Albaladejo Sáez 2013)

Interestingly, this comment equates *Sálvame Deluxe* with unemployment benefits: both are viewed as illegitimate ways of making money, which connects with the current ‘anti-welfare common-sense’ (Jensen and Tyler 2015) that is also penetrating the Spanish imaginary (Alonso *et al.* 2011).

Nevertheless, some D-List celebrities deny their privilege and present celebrity as a burden. For example, Marina Díaz, Chiqui and Ana Toro (as stated above, former *Big Brother* contestants) argued that they did not have as many opportunities to find a job as anonymous citizens did precisely because they were celebrities (or more precisely, D-List celebrities). In their interviews, they portray celebrity as a short-lived opportunity that has negative consequences in the long run: being a D-List celebrity is a stigma, because they are perceived as either untalented, lazy people who do not deserve a job or as wealthy people who do not need one:

Marina: I've been out of work for a long time and my situation is now desperate. My life is hell because on the one hand there is no work available, while on the other when I go to a job interview people connect me with *Big Brother* and they don't give me a chance.

Narrator: For Marina, her appearance on television is a burden when looking for a job. (*¡Qué tiempo tan feliz!* 03/18/2012).

The narrative of these three D-List celebrities is presented as a *cautionary tale* about the perils of celebrity detached from legitimised definitions of work and merit. If Gareth Palmer (2005) argued that society expects D-Listers to 'return quietly to their roots and manage their inevitable decline with a certain dignity', Marina, Chiqui and Ana Toro claim that this is not as easy as it may seem and that D-List celebrities may end up in a limbo between celebrity culture and the ordinary world.

Concluding remarks

This article contributes to the current debate on the relationship between celebrity, neoliberal values and austerity culture in post-recession Western countries. While most of the academic work on this subject has focused on Anglo-American celebrities, celebrities from other cultural contexts have not yet been sufficiently studied. Thus, this analysis furthers current knowledge on celebrity culture by identifying both the specificities of the situation in Spain (high visibility and centrality of narratives of broke celebrities that parallel the acuteness and length of the economic crisis) and its commonalities with Anglo-American imaginaries (neoliberal explanations of and solutions for the crisis), which points to the existence of a cross-national 'common-sense neoliberalism' [Hall and O'Shea 2013]).

Our analysis shows that media narratives of 'broke' Spanish celebrities reinforce and legitimise the neoliberal discourses on the economic crisis that have become hegemonic: the economic crisis as an equalizing catastrophe that affects every citizen;

the discourse of 'living beyond our means', which holds individual citizens responsible for the crisis; austerity; and individualised practices such as 'do whatever it takes' as solutions for indebtedness and unemployment (promoting the idea that citizens must adapt to an increasingly precarious labour market). These arguments act as discursive 'common-places' that the media use to make sense of and narrativise Spanish celebrities' economic problems.

Within the context of southern Europe countries, these explanations powerfully connect with the narratives of shame and guilt that identify the government (*and* citizens) of countries such as Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain -which have regularly been referred to as PIGS- as irresponsible and corrupt:

The eurozone crisis is perceived as the logical result of systematic misconduct in the South. (...) PIGS are compelled to do their 'homework', which in this case means to conduct rigid austerity measures (...) [*which*] are additionally framed as a 'fair' compensation for years of 'fraudulent decadence' (Murray-Leach 2014, p. 14)

Narratives of 'broke' celebrities in the Spanish media mirror these other narratives of irresponsible citizens and governments by identifying celebrities as the paradigmatic examples of Spanish citizens. Nevertheless, audience comments are ideologically ambivalent and do not fully accept this notion. On the one hand, they reinforce the neoliberal discourses of 'living beyond our means' and 'doing whatever it takes'. On the other hand, they reject the idea fostered by the media that celebrities are like ordinary citizens: by casting their austere lives against an imaginary of excess and luxury, they challenge the argument that ordinary citizens are responsible for the crisis.

Moreover, the widespread, vehement rejection of celebrity expressed by both the media and the comments analysed point to some particularities of the Spanish imaginary and values. Spain has been identified in the academic literature as 'an

egalitarian and statist country' (Noya Miranda 1999, p. 186) in which redistributive policies have a broad support among citizens, in spite of the introduction of neoliberal values and policies in recent years (Del Pino 2005, García Cívico, 2014, Martín-Artiles et al. 2016). There are, of course, contradictions within the Spanish value system, such as ambivalences between individual and structural explanations of poverty, as well as between merit and necessity as criteria to determine a fair distribution of wealth. Nevertheless, in Spain 'the dominant value is equality and the conflictive one is individualism' (Noya Miranda 1999, p. 196). These traits, which are shared with other Mediterranean and Catholic countries such as Italy, set Spain apart from Anglo-American countries (Noya Miranda 1999, Martín-Artiles et al. 2016).

Both the Spanish media and the audience comments show a profound unease towards celebrities as characters that visibly embody inequality and privilege. The delight in the economic problems of both 'deserving' and 'undeserving' celebrities, coupled with the refusal to make 'distinctions' between types of celebrity, convey the egalitarian values of Spanish society. Nevertheless, this overall rejection of celebrity is combined with other arguments that reveal some of the ambivalences mentioned above, especially between merit and necessity as criteria of distributive fairness, which is a typical trait of countries with a strong Catholic tradition, such as Italy and Spain (Noya Miranda 1999, p. 208-212). Thus, on the one hand, several of the comments analysed cast show-business and cultural professionals against 'real' work, including both working-class professionals such as plumbers and middle-class professionals such as doctors. This criticism draws upon meritocratic values, identifying celebrities' wealth and status as not being a consequence of merit or effort and thus undeserved. In other cases, necessity (not merit) is mentioned as the right criterion to assign visibility and

economic capital, such as in comments arguing that the media should interview not celebrities but poor families that need the money more than the former do.

Finally, the narratives and comments analysed also have a degree of reflexivity regarding celebrity and its manufacture, ranging from openly discussing economic fees they earn to appear in the media (and thus discussing the convertibility of capital in celebrity culture) to debates about the economic motivation behind media appearances, how celebrity cycles work and how *schadenfreude* is an integral part of contemporary celebrity (Cross and Littler 2010).

In conclusion, broke Spanish celebrities connect with the anxieties and debates of Spanish society today regarding the consequences of the economic crisis. They serve as a catalyst to embody common-places about the crisis and discuss inequalities in Spain without referring explicitly to the consequences of the Great Recession on Spanish citizens.

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