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Constructing and Disciplining Celebrity: Journalism's Institutional Power in *Spice World*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the 1997 film *Spice World* as a cultural critique of tabloid journalism at the height of the celebrity press era. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study analyzes how the film represents journalism's institutional power to construct, discipline, and commodify celebrity. We identify three dominant discourses: journalism as narrative control, journalism as moral authority, and journalism as spectacle-driven surveillance. The film's fictional tabloid, *The National Event*, operates as an exaggerated yet ideologically accurate stand-in for the British press, dramatizing how journalists have claimed authorship over public narratives while shirking ethical responsibility. While often dismissed as pop fluff, *Spice World* offers a historically grounded critique of journalistic legitimacy, making visible the power dynamics, gendered framing, and affective consequences of press intrusion. In doing so, the film contributes to the public's understanding of journalism's cultural authority and institutional logic during the tabloid era of the late twentieth century.

KEYWORDS

Celebrity; gender; pop culture; Spice Girls; tabloid journalism

By the late 1990s, tabloid journalism had become a significant influence in shaping the public's understanding of fame. Sensational headlines, paparazzi surveillance, and a fixation on celebrity missteps defined the news culture of the time. In the United Kingdom, tabloid newspapers occupied a unique institutional space. They reached broad audiences, shaped national conversations, and blurred the lines between entertainment and journalism. This moment coincided with the rise of the Spice Girls, a British pop group that became a global sensation almost overnight. Their manufactured personas, mass appeal, and media saturation made them a frequent subject of tabloid scrutiny. In 1997, the Spice Girls released *Spice World*, a musical comedy that, beneath its colorful surface, aims at the very media institutions that helped propel and police their fame.

While often dismissed as frivolous or unserious, *Spice World* is worth reconsidering as a reflection on journalism's cultural role during the tabloid era of the late twentieth century. The film constructs a fictionalized media system in which journalists, editors, and photographers work not simply to report on celebrity but to shape it, defining who belongs in the spotlight and under what conditions. For example, the character of Kevin McMaxford, editor of the fictional *National Event*, is portrayed as controlling and performative, more interested in manufacturing a scandal than reporting the truth. Alongside him, other media

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figures in the film reinforce a model of journalism that thrives on intrusion, spectacle, and moral judgment. These portrayals are exaggerated, but they resonate with real anxieties about the power and ethics of tabloid reporting at the time.

This paper argues that *Spice World* offers a fictional but meaningful commentary on journalism's historical role in constructing and disciplining celebrity. Through its characters, storyline, and narrative interruptions, the film highlights the institutional authority of the press and its influence over how fame is produced and policed. Importantly, the Spice Girls served as writers on *Spice World*, thereby giving the film an insider's perspective on being the object of tabloid coverage.[1] By analyzing *Spice World* as a historical media text, this study sheds light on the broader cultural function of tabloid journalism in the late 1990s and its legacy in shaping the celebrity press as we know it today. In doing so, the paper contributes to the history of tabloid journalism by demonstrating how a popular cultural artifact can reveal deeper truths about the values, norms, and power structures embedded in journalism practice.

Historical Perspectives on Tabloids and Female Celebrity

The Spice Girls represent a moment in popular culture between the late 1990s and early 2000s that predates the rise of social media. Pop stars became brands that could sell almost anything, but with increased attention came intense media coverage focused on what they ate, how they dressed, and who they dated. Female celebrities, including Britney Spears, Brittany Murphy, Lindsay Lohan, Tara Reid, and Paris Hilton were frequent targets of tabloid media. While retrospective documentaries such as Netflix's *Britney vs. Spears* and HBO Max's *What Happened, Brittany Murphy?* have focused on the pressure of fame and the near-constant hounding by the press, they do not provide an insider's look at the experiences of these female celebrities. Despite its status as a musical comedy, *Spice World* offers a subtle political commentary on the relationship between female celebrities and tabloid journalism, a theme often overlooked in many recent retrospectives. To frame this conversation, we first address the institution of tabloid journalism. We then provide context for tabloids' historical representations of gender. Finally, we discuss how *Spice World* utilizes Camp as a gendered cultural critique of tabloids.

Tabloid Journalism: Understanding an Institution

The word "tabloid" did not originate in a newsroom. In 1884, Burroughs, Wellcome & Co. trademarked "tabloid" to market a concentrated pill; only later did the term migrate to journalism to name a condensed, time-saving mode of public storytelling.[2] Alfred Harmsworth (Lord Northcliffe) carried the metaphor across the Atlantic on January 1, 1901, editing a special *New York World* edition and promoting his "system of condensed or tabloid journalism" as a way to "gather the day's news in sixty seconds."[3] Historians typically trace five arcs of tabloidization that braid technology, markets, and narrative form: the penny press of the 1830s democratized price and topic; the late-nineteenth-century magnates (e.g., Pulitzer, Hearst) made sensation a profit engine; the Jazz-Age 1920s used compact formats to compete with radio; the illustrated "trash press" of the 1970s learned to joust with television; and the 1990s to the present accelerated tabloid logics across digital, electronic, and social platforms.[4] Read in sequence, tabloidization is less an aberration than a persistent strategy for making mass publics out of attention, affect, and time pressure.

The resurgence of tabloid journalism in the late twentieth century reshaped public expectations of news and redefined the relationship between journalism and power. Scholars have noted that tabloid news, while often dismissed as sensationalist, has played a central role in shaping audience perceptions of legitimacy, authority, and celebrity.[5] Rather than functioning on the margins of journalism, tabloids in the UK and elsewhere became deeply institutionalized, especially as they adapted to market-driven logics and audience demand for entertainment-focused content. The tabloid form, through its prioritization of soft news, focused on personality-driven storytelling and an often voyeuristic tone.[6] In this framing, the tabloid press becomes less a deviation from journalism and more a reflection of its evolving boundaries.

At the same time, scholars of media institutions have emphasized that journalism has long played a disciplinary role in constructing who is seen as credible, authoritative, or worthy of public attention. As some have argued, journalism is not only a profession but a cultural practice, shaped by narratives, norms, and assumptions about who counts as a public subject.[7] In the case of celebrities, these practices are especially potent. The press does not merely report on celebrity; it produces celebrity, both through coverage and through acts of judgment, surveillance, and interpretation. The celebrity becomes a media text, open to scrutiny and available for consumption, often at the cost of privacy or complexity.[8] These journalistic processes are not neutral. They are structured by institutional routines, commercial imperatives, and cultural norms that inform how stories are told and who controls the narrative.

Tabloid journalism also helped to broker in the twentieth century with an expansive view of culture. Tabloid journalism uses narratives more extensively than mainstream reporting, limits analytical modes of storytelling, and places greater emphasis on personal and human-interest stories.[9] Tabloid journalism can be understood in three ways.[10] The first is the output: there is a human-interest, soft-news bent to tabloid journalism, which can be perceived as oppositional to the serious, hard-news tradition. The second involves priorities: The focus is on adopting more entertainment-centered news values and shifting how a medium, such as television, positions its serious programming in the schedule. Lastly, the content: tabloid journalism appears more voyeuristic, exemplified by the styles of Jerry Springer and Rush Limbaugh. Tabloids' populist grounding and history of working-class readership position their evolution as an import serving the needs of the people and a pushback against elite systems.[11]

Class relations are historically intertwined with tabloid journalism. In their inception, tabloids were perceived as catering to the working class, while broadsheets were seen as a product of and for elites. The tabloid offered accessibility that the broadsheet did not. Tabloids were most commonly found on newsstands and in supermarket aisles. For a century, the British and their American counterparts developed deep class-centered connections and cultures associated with the tabloid.[12] As former tabloid journalist Charlie Beckett shares,

> [T]he tabloids are a welcome relief, for the middle classes they are a guilty pleasure. I suspect the real reason we love them is the same reason we love binge drinking and fox hunting; it's a national delight in base pleasure and ritual cruelty.[13]

But as print faced an economic decline, so did tabloid production. This meant tabloid journalism would also shift to the digital landscape. Unlike their traditional, mainstream

counterparts, tabloids would allow free access to their websites, attracting a considerable number of visitors.[14] Audiences expanded, and more people could read the news.[15]

Within journalism studies, tabloids have long functioned as a "journalistic other," a foil against which "quality" broadsheets perform their professionalism.[16] In that boundary work, broadsheets claim the rational public sphere of hard news, while tabloids are cast as purveyors of private life, human interest, and scandal.[17] Yet the borders have frayed. As legacy outlets scrambled for digital audiences, they imported tabloid repertoires (i.e., punchier headlines and decks, tighter visuals, personality frames), making the practical distinction between "serious" and "popular" far less stable.[18] At the same time, scholars caution against dismissing tabloids outright, reading them as venues for an alternative public sphere that surfaces working-class concerns and non-elite tastes elided by broadsheet conventions.[19] Inside those newsrooms, practitioners articulate an ethos keyed to weekly sales and creative risk: as one editor quipped, "satisfaction kills creativity"; every issue is a "new day to prove yourself."[20] All of this matters for our analysis, because "tabloid" names both a material format and a set of institutional practices through which journalism produces subjects, stories, and social order.

Fictional depictions of journalism provide a valuable means of understanding how these institutional practices are reflected, challenged, or satirized in the public imagination. Films, television shows, and novels often serve as informal critiques of journalism's role in society and provide a lens to understand journalists themselves.[21] Fictional accounts of the press are more than entertainment; they reflect shared assumptions about journalism's authority and ethical boundaries.[22] In recent years, scholars have increasingly turned to popular media to study journalism's evolving role in shaping public narratives.[23] Fiction allows for exaggeration, but it also opens space for critical reflection on journalistic norms like objectivity, detachment, and transparency. When popular texts center on media institutions, they often serve as a cultural site of metajournalistic discourse, offering insight into how journalism defines itself, how the public perceives it, and how its legitimacy is contested.

The use of populist rhetoric within tabloid journalism reflects a desire to challenge elites and the systems they create. This is no clearer than with Rupert Murdoch's conservative media empire.[24] On the other hand, cultural elites are not purely political. Often, tabloids are attached to celebrity culture. The interest in this type of news stems from a history of perceiving ourselves as ordinary people and those who are different as such.[25] Seeing someone *in the media* makes ordinary people seem less ordinary. The boundary between these worlds of normalcy and difference is significant to this study, which does not focus on how audiences perceive celebrities as separate from themselves, but rather on how journalism discursively produces a sense of separation. Through strategies of detachment, tabloid journalism constructs celebrity as an "other," an object of both fascination and discipline. Journalism asserts legitimacy not just through truth-telling, but through control over narrative distance.[26] Detachment becomes a boundary-building strategy that authorizes the press to surveil, judge, and commodify public figures while disengaging from relational or care-based ethics. This process sustains journalism's institutional authority by defining who counts as a subject worthy of protection and who can be reduced to spectacle. As Alberoni argues, stardom becomes possible only when public figures are removed from political relevance, their personhood deemed culturally significant but structurally unimportant.[27] *Spice World* dramatizes this construction, revealing not only how

journalistic discourse makes celebrity both hypervisible and politically void, but also how this phenomenon helps us to understand journalism's treatment of celebrity subjects in our current media environment.

Gender as a Cultural and Political Context

While this study focuses on journalism's institutional role in constructing and disciplining celebrity, it is essential to recognize that tabloid coverage frequently employs gendered strategies to frame public figures. Media representations of women, particularly in advertising, film, and celebrity journalism, have long emphasized their bodies, relationships, and emotional instability over professional achievements.[28] In the so-called golden era of newspapers, when the Penny Press drove public opinion, women themselves were a novelty. It was this environment that gave rise to "Sob Sisters" like Dorothy Dix and Winifred Black, and to "Stunt Girls" like Nellie Bly.[29] Early women journalists often found it challenging to balance being reporters with being a novelty in the stories they covered, adding to the spectacle of women in print media.

In addition to the American Penny Press, British tabloids in the late 1800s and early 1900s expanded coverage to include women journalists and women's stories; and the British historical context is essential to understanding how the Spice Girls understand themselves in relation to the tabloids in the film. *The Daily Express*, for example, recounted the harrowing adventure of Mrs. Stella Court Treatt, the first Englishwoman to accompany her husband on an expedition in Africa from Cape Town to Cairo.[30] Coverage of these women expanding the British Empire offered an interesting juxtaposition: the novelty of women bucking traditional gender norms while maintaining a sense of femininity. Such women were portrayed as adventurous, but not so much as to abandon their duties as wives and mothers on the frontiers. Late-Victorian sensational crusades made this clear. W. T. Stead's 1885 "Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon" in the *Pall Mall Gazette* drew on lurid rhetoric to expose child prostitution while dramatizing class conflict; he railed against the "vast tribute of maidens . . . levied by the vices of the rich upon the necessities of the poor" and cast vulnerable "country girls" as "human chattel."[31] From the get-go, tabloid technique in Britain linked gender, class, and reform.

By the turn of the twentieth century, British popular papers were also selling the novelty of women's exploits to mixed audiences. On the continent and in the US, that gendered market expanded. *Le Petit Journal* cultivated a large female readership while packaging moralized sensation;[32] Chicago's *Movienews* (1933–1937) targeted "middle-class women" with celebrity gossip, ads, and the voice of film critic Genevieve Harris.[33] Women were novelties but also served as morality tales, warning against straying too far from expected gendered roles. As elite newspapers later broadened their own "tabloid" portfolios (e.g., entertainment, lifestyle, fashion), women's images surged in published photos: a study of 1,252 news photographs from 1966 to 2006 found that as elites adopted tabloid topics, women appeared more frequently, their bodies and personas mobilized to carry the softer news shift.[34]

Tabloids and gossip blogs have historically positioned themselves as both glamorizing and mocking forces, revelling in the spectacle of fame while simultaneously working to dismantle it.[35] As Meyers writes, this dual function allows outlets to "mock celebrity fashion and lifestyle choices and generally break down the façade of the celebrity while

simultaneously revelling in the glamour of Hollywood."[36] By the late twentieth century, tabloids doubled down on this alignment of gender, spectacle, and moral heat. The 1980s daycare "Satanic Panic" became a national infotainment template that punished women's changing labor roles by pathologizing "bad mothering"; even medical experts revived nostalgic ideas about a missing "mothering imprint" while talk shows and tabloid TV amplified fear.[37] By the early digital 2000s, the "upskirt decade" (1998–2013) normalized an economy of non-consensual visibility in which famous women's bodies were treated as open access.[38] Britney Spears was praised for having "mastered the business of being an object," read through a "Humbert Humbert fantasy" of innocence and availability;39 Paris Hilton later described the circulation of her sex tape as being "electronically raped" by the tabloids. The prevailing logic—if a woman had previously been sexualized, she had "no reasonable expectation of privacy"—licensed new forms of extraction, with a tabloid press chorus ready to add the kicker: "If you can't keep your legs together . . . ." Even after #MeToo, as Ditum argues, "female suffering continues to be the product."[40] These episodes are both cultural anecdotes and evidence of a stable institutional repertoire. They show how tabloid detachment operates as a boundary strategy: professional neutrality is invoked to legitimate surveillance, moral sorting, and the conversion of intimacy into a commodity.

Within this framework, women in the public eye often become sites of journalistic scrutiny shaped by spectacle and moral judgment. Mulvey's concept of the male gaze helps explain how female celebrities have historically been reduced to visual commodities.[41] The press often emphasized their personal lives over their creative work, reinforcing a narrative of exposure and emotional volatility.[42] During the "golden age" of Hollywood beginning in the late 1920s and extending to the early 1960s, the press became a partner in developing careers and in destroying them with celebrity gossip, particularly tied to scandalous behavior for the time period, such as divorce or perceived sexual deviance.[43] For example, the press's treatment of Marlene Dietrich, particularly rumors surrounding her bisexuality, reflected both a fascination with and a policing of perceived deviance, all while reinforcing conventional gender norms of the late 1930s and early 1940s.[44]

This longstanding disciplinary impulse is especially visible in the late twentieth century coverage of Princess Diana. Her complicated relationship with the press became a defining case of media overreach, culminating in her death and the widespread belief that tabloid intrusion played a direct role. In response, figures like her brother, Earl Spencer, publicly condemned media institutions, accusing editors and publishers of encouraging dangerous behaviors in pursuit of sensational photographs.45 In the aftermath, mainstream journalism attempted to distinguish itself from tabloid practice. As Berkowitz shows, news organizations engaged in what he calls "paradigm repair," a self-corrective effort to restore journalism's legitimacy by disavowing the sensationalism of the tabloids and reasserting objectivity as the profession's core value.[46] A similar pattern emerged when Britney Spears' mental health struggles became fodder for relentless media coverage; the #FreeBritney and #ApologizeToBritney movements prompted renewed scrutiny of journalistic ethics. Spears' conservatorship and media vilification were not separate events but interconnected outcomes of the tabloid press's narrative construction.[47] The coverage she received illustrates how journalism, under the guise of public interest, can discipline celebrity subjects in ways that undermine autonomy and well-being.

These examples show how tabloid journalism constructs public narratives that reward certain behaviors while penalizing others, often employing gendered tropes. Through celebrity gossip ranging from the case of Marlene Dietrich's sexuality in the 1930s to Princess Diana's very public divorce from Prince Charles in the 1990s, tabloids would both revere "brave" women while also leveling critiques of their looks, their choice in sexual partners, and their bucking of tradition. These dynamics provide an important backdrop for understanding how journalism has historically functioned as a disciplining institution, especially during the height of the tabloid era depicted in *Spice World*.[48] The Spice Girls represent a moment in the 1990s, at the height of third-wave feminism, when women were trying to reclaim their mediated images. Female celebrities and girl groups emphasized the importance of "Girl Power" to reclaim control over their media coverage. Major media outlets such as *The Times* and *Fortune* shifted their media coverage and devoted pages to Girl Power. This discursive harnessing of Girl Power was particularly influential, as its positive, familiar nature made feminism more accessible and digestible to the masses.[49] Zaslow argues that the "girl in girl power media" effectively "shrink-wraps feminist sensibilities with feminine styling." In addition to believing she should be treated as an equal and have control of her own body, the girl

> . . . believes that she has a core inner (girl) power on which to draw as she combats oppression and directs her own life. But the girl of girl power culture also feels she has a right to enjoy her sexuality, to revel in the desire she elicits, and to have a future in which the care of a child and sometimes a husband, is of central importance.[50]

In other words, the late-century tabloid repertoire made femininity both spectacle and standard, and it is precisely this double bind that *Spice World* answers with "camp," an esthetic that exaggerates, mocks, and reclaims those terms on its own stage.

Camp as a Gendered Cultural Critique in Film

Camp is broadly defined as an esthetic style that celebrates the appeal of bad taste as a means of disrupting social forces that define high and low art. Susan Sontag defined camp as "love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration."[51] Sontag's take on camp is not without critique. In her book *Women, Camp, and Popular Culture*, Katrin Horn argues against Sontag's declaration that camp is apolitical. According to Horn, Sontag's essay represents an "ignorance of camp's roots in minority culture" as a means of negotiating politicized gender and sexuality.[52]

Camp is often associated with Queer culture, especially as a "passing strategy" that enables Queer audiences to enjoy heteronormative popular culture. Often in this form, camp is associated with extreme exaggeration of gender and sexual norms.[53] Camp as an esthetic language in film has long been a topic of research and discussion. Camp is identified as being a staple of the MGM movie musical that ruled the Golden Age of Hollywood in the 1940s and 1950s. In his book *Incongruous Entertainment: Camp, Cultural Value, and the MGM Musical*, Steven Cohen argued that the Queerness of the MGM musical was deliberate. While the films were made to appeal to a broad audience, it is undeniable that Queer culture has impacted the film industry from the outset. Benton Jay Komins argued that some of the earliest cinematic depictions of camp date back to the concept of kitsch, the "intersection between the irresistibly human and total spuriousness."[54] What he means is

that kitsch is not a necessity, but it is tied to some kind of very human earnestness in its presentation. In *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, Andrew Ross argued that camp functions as an operation of taste, taking on different uses and meanings depending on the groups and subcultures that utilize it.[55] Ross pushes further, arguing that understanding camp as a tool of political critique is important for examining both the group that uses it and the power structures it critiques, and that this approach emphasizes the importance of intersectionality. Ross's introduction of intersectionality to reading camp is valuable for extending camp as an analytical tool to examine politics beyond the media created by and for LGBTQIA+ audiences.

Horn identified three ways camp reemerged as a Queer political aesthetic in the late 1980s and early 1990s. First, Queer activism disregarded respectability and assimilation in favor of deviant and "distasteful" protest tactics and esthetics (most notably starting with Act-Up during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 90s). Second, Queer scholarship shifted from an essentialist to a performative understanding of gender, thanks to groundbreaking works by Judith Butler and others that prompted Queer theorists to use camp as an analytical tool for understanding culture. Finally, Horn argues camp reemerged as a Queer political tool because scholarship and activism began to decentralize the white cisgender male perspective in favor of including more classed, raced, and gendered Queer perspectives.[56] According to Horn, camp "can today be formulated as a subversive strategy in popular culture rather than just a taste for all things 'good because [they're] awful."[57]

Horn's construction of camp as a political esthetic is particularly useful for understanding how the creators of *Spice World* engaged in camp to critique media institutions. Horn argued that camp functions as a "detachment/attachment" political aesthetic. She defines camp "as an esthetic strategy, which relies on parody—often received through stylistic exaggeration, excessive theatricality, or other forms of over articulation—irony and humor to create incongruities and discrepancies within (popular) texts."[58] Essentially, reading camp, as a cultural practice, produces a constant state of detachment or attachment to political readings or meanings, and examining where the boundaries of jokes form helps understand a text's true meaning. What is exaggerated? Why? What is the incongruity in the text, and how is it coupled with our understanding of the subcultures, identities, or groups creating the text?

The framework of detachment/attachment allows researchers to explore boundaries that surround incongruities within a text. In the case of *Spice World*, the object of study—the Spice Girls—is both detached from and attached to their place within the broader popular culture of the time. Drawing on Horn's work, we argue that the Spice Girls employ camp esthetics to critique the British tabloid press in the 1990s by creating an ironic incongruity between their real lives and the Spice Girls' lives in the movie. We also argue that the Spice Girls regularly employed camp esthetics to create the 1990s Girl Power esthetic, which relied on an ironic, exaggerated portrayal of "girlish" style to assert female empowerment in the media.

To explore journalism's historical role in constructing and disciplining celebrity, this study asks: What does *Spice World* reveal about journalism's role in constructing and disciplining celebrity during the tabloid era of the late twentieth century? While not a traditional media artifact, the film offers a concentrated portrayal of how news institutions, particularly tabloids, have framed celebrity as a story to be shaped, managed, and at times, torn down. The value of *Spice World* also lies in the girl group's direct influence over

the film's production, including the soundtrack and script. Rather than treating the film as a parody alone, we approach it as a product of its historical moment, embedded with commentary about journalism's influence on public life in the late 1990s. Through its depiction of media characters, press institutions, and the mechanics of fame, *Spice World* provides insight into how journalism's authority is imagined and contested.

Engaging the Discourse of the Film

To examine how Spice World reveals journalism's historical role in constructing and disciplining celebrity during the late twentieth century tabloid era, we use Critical Discourse Analysis in the spirit of Reynolds.[59] She proposes CDA as a tool for analyzing journalism's institutional power by attending to how discourse is structured to reflect, reinforce, or resist dominant media ideologies. This approach emphasizes both the textual features of discourse, such as repetition, sourcing, tone, and language, as well as the broader ideological functions that discourse performs in legitimizing journalistic authority. By using CDA in this way, we treat *Spice World* not just as a fictional narrative but as a cultural text that performs ideological work about journalism itself. This method is particularly relevant because the film includes the Spice Girls' perspectives on their treatment in the tabloids at the height of their celebrity. Our goal is not to tally instances of bias against women, but to read the film as a metajournalistic text in which journalism's institutional power is performed, justified, and sometimes resisted. We retain a narrative style in reporting our process, while making the analytic path visible: what we looked for, how we coded it, and how we linked scene-level evidence to broader historical logics.

Our central object of analysis is *Spice World* (1997), a film co-created by the Spice Girls that merges fictional storytelling with recognizable references to celebrity culture and media institutions, as well as consistent breaking of the fourth wall. The film is particularly well-suited for discourse analysis because it dramatizes the press as a narrative force. It features named characters who represent media institutions (i.e., editors, paparazzi, reporters) and construct their roles through language, framing, and repetition. While the film is comedic in tone, its depictions of journalistic intrusion, manufactured scandal, and editorial power reflect broader social critiques of the tabloid press at the time. We viewed the film as a cultural text shaped by its historical moment and capable of producing insight into journalism's institutional discourse.

We began by treating the film's tabloid world as a discourse that was already familiar to audiences by the late 1990s. The literature review examines how tabloids transitioned from the periphery to the mainstream, how human-interest stories and voyeurism became normalized as news values, and how gendered and classed expectations influenced who was considered a legitimate public subject. With those histories in view, we identified recurring features in *Spice World* that stage that institutional repertoire: on-screen headlines and design cues attributed to the fictional tabloid *The National Event*; the speech and actions of named media figures when they articulate aims of control, surveillance, or judgment; the visual grammars of newsmaking such as spinning front pages, montage, and point-of-view shots; and the film's self-reflexive set pieces in which the Spice Girls voice frustration with their branding or enact counter-performances. These features served as our units of analysis, not because the film "represents reality," but because it dramatizes routinized practices that audiences recognize from the tabloid era.

Data collection proceeded across three close viewings. The first reacquainted us with plot, tone, and pacing, and helped us map where journalistic elements cluster. During the second and third viewings, each author independently produced time-stamped field notes and short analytic memos, marking scenes that foregrounded surveillance, scandal construction, moral or nationalist judgment, and explicit talk about the press. We then merged those notes into a single corpus. This corpus served as the basis for a two-cycle coding process, adapted from Saldaña via Reynolds, using CDA.[60] In the first cycle, we used descriptive labels that mirror tabloid logics documented in the scholarship: editorial omnipotence, ridicule headline, nationalist framing, aesthetic policing, quote distortion, camera-as-weapon, surveillance as routine, affective refusal, care practice, and counter-narration. Through second-cycle pattern coding, we consolidated these scene-level codes into three recurring discourses: journalism as narrative control, journalism as moral authority and discipline, and journalism as spectacle-driven surveillance. In addition, we tracked a cross-cutting analytic tension between attachment and detachment that operates across scenes rather than as a discrete pattern; this tension illuminates how the film alternately invites and refuses care. Table 1 provides context for that systematic process, including associated scenes, codes, and a sample memo note.

Because interpretive CDA prioritizes dialogue over numerical reliability scores, we established agreement through a documented series of conversations. After independently coding the same twenty-minute segment—from the opening bus montage through the press-party sequence—we met to harmonize the codebook, collapse overlaps, and agree on decision rules. For scenes where surveillance and discipline co-occur, we coded to the dominant journalistic function while noting the secondary one. A second meeting

Table 1. CDA process.

Scene (time)	Evidence from film	First-cycle codes	Pattern discourse	One-line memo
Newsroom tirade	McMaxford: "I put them up there, I can bring them down."	Editorial omnipotence; spectacle staging	Narrative control	Editor self-authorizes power to script fame; newsroom mise-en-scène performs sovereignty.
Spinning front pages	"Scaredy Spice Girls' Terror of Concert" montage	Ridicule headlines; reliability attack; economic stakes	Moral authority	Headlines punish alleged deviance and tie it to national and monetary harm.
Pope quip scandal	Ginger's "Is the Pope a Catholic?" reframed as an offense	Quote distortion; decontextualization	Narrative control	Casual quip reauthored into a scandal to manufacture news value.
Manor intrusion	Damien emerges from the toilet, hides under the bed with the camera	Camera as weapon; physical intrusion; horror grammar	Spectacle-driven surveillance	Paparazzi gaze is literalized as predation; visibility overrides consent.
Boot camp drill	Regimented training; Posh in stilettos	Aesthetic policing; feminized refusal	Moral authority	Visual allegory of correction; femininity marked as a problem to fix.
Press-party exchange	Ginger defends Girl Power to a scoffing man	Trivialization of feminist speech	Moral authority	Substantive claims are reduced to entertainment, undermining credibility.
Photo shoot remix	Historical personas; swapping "Spice" identities	Brand refusal; counter-narration	Cross-cutting tension (Detachment/Attachment)	Playful re-authoring resists reductive labels and reclaims agency.
Nicola's labor	Group prioritizes friend's birth over image demands	Care practice; affective refusal	Cross-cutting tension (Detachment/Attachment)	Centers relational ethics over spectacle and schedule.

addressed edge cases, such as how to treat the courtroom fantasy that parodies symbolic punishment. A third meeting confirmed that each pattern code was supported by multiple, non-contiguous scenes, rather than a single set piece. We maintained an audit trail of memos and codebook iterations to ensure transparency in the movement from scene to code to discourse.

Throughout this process, we read the film intertextually in relation to the cultural history outlined in the literature review. The point was not to "fact-check" a fictional text, but to recognize how its exaggerations rely on an already mature repertoire: paparazzi economies that convert access into image commodities; headline grammars that moralize deviance and reward repetition; nationalist framings that police who counts as properly British; and gendered storylines that render women hypervisible yet professionally unserious. Framing *Spice World* within that genealogy allowed us to treat its camp excess as an analytic advantage. The film's humor and spectacle do not obscure journalistic practice; they amplify it to a scale where its ethical stakes are easier to see. We also want to acknowledge two reflexive conditions that shape interpretation. The film is co-created with the celebrity subjects it portrays, complicating simple accounts of victimhood or control. We therefore privilege institutional discourse (i.e., the press's language, routines, and claims to authority) over authorial intent, while still noting moments of self-performance. We also take camp seriously as a rhetorical strategy. Exaggeration, pastiche, and visual humor are not noise around the analysis; they are the means by which the film exposes the tabloid logic of detachment and models an alternative grounded in attachment and care. What follows presents scene-level evidence with these codes in view. The discussion then steps back to place those discourses within journalism's longer history and to consider how the attachment-detachment tension reframes ethical practice.

What Spice World Says About '90s Tabloid Culture

This section presents the findings of our Critical Discourse Analysis of *Spice World*, focusing on how the film exposes and critiques the institutional power of 1990s tabloid journalism. Following Reynolds's model, we applied first-cycle descriptive coding to language, character behavior, and visual motifs related to journalistic figures and media institutions. These codes, such as "editorial omnipotence," "ridicule headlines," and "camera as weapon," were then grouped into second-cycle pattern codes, revealing three dominant ideological discourses: journalism as narrative control, journalism as moral authority, and journalism as spectacle-driven surveillance. Alongside these three discourses, we trace a cross-cutting attachment-detachment tension that shapes how scenes solicit or refuse care, without constituting a separate pattern in the code architecture. Each discourse reflects how *Spice World* positions tabloid journalism as a historical force that constructs celebrity, regulates behavior, and commodifies public life.

Journalism as Narrative Control: The Press as Creator and Destroyer of Celebrity

One of the most persistent discourses in *Spice World* is the construction of journalism as a narrative institution, one that does not simply reflect celebrity status but actively

constructs, directs, and dismantles it. This is dramatized through the character of Kevin McMaxford, editor of *The National Event*, whose over-the-top monologue, "I put them up there, I can bring them down," positions the tabloid press as the true author of fame. The newsroom setting, complete with indoor thunder, dim lighting, and a villain's lair-style staging, externalizes his self-perceived omnipotence. Read historically, this is not an anomaly but a condensed performance of tabloid authorship that stretches from penny-press sensationalism and yellow-press "story building" to late-century newsroom showmanship; *The National Event*, the tabloid newspaper within the film, inherits a repertoire in which editors don't just cover celebrity—they serialize it. The scene reads as a direct mirror of the 1990s tabloid editorial culture, where the line between reporting and authorship was thin and an editor could plausibly claim control over a celebrity's narrative arc.

This narrative logic plays out through the film's visual motifs and front-page headlines. In one scene, *The National Event* runs the headline "Scaredy Spice Girls' Terror of Concert," stoking public anxiety about the group's reliability. Such headlines are not neutral observations; they function as discursive interventions, detaching the Spice Girls from professionalism and attaching them to constructed narratives of chaos and failure. The framing echoes real-world tabloid practices in the 1990s, particularly their coverage of Princess Diana, Britney Spears, and rising female pop stars whose careers were alternately bolstered and sabotaged through press attention. Media institutions such as *The Sun*, *News of the World*, and *The Daily Mail* gained notoriety for their aggressive surveillance and myth-making. These outlets frequently targeted women like Diana, Spears, and even Fergie (Sarah Ferguson, Duchess of York), whose bodies and behaviors were relentlessly scrutinized and reframed as scandal.[61]

In *Spice World*, these headline-driven crises serve to maintain the press's relevance by manufacturing a story, then reacting to it. The film is mirroring a familiar 1990s maneuver: convert a routine uncertainty into a rolling crisis, thinning the boundary between entertainment and news so spectacle can stand in for public interest.[62] The film also dramatizes how tabloids weaponize quotes through selective editing. A telling example occurs when Geri Halliwell (Ginger Spice) jokes, "C'mon, is the Pope a Catholic?" during casual banter. McMaxford seizes on the comment, twisting it into a front-page scandal questioning the Pope's legitimacy. The incident exemplifies the discursive strategy of distortion, a process of extracting and repackaging celebrity speech to fit sensationalized narratives, regardless of the speaker's original intent. This moment, played for satire, mirrors journalistic routines that treat celebrity utterances as raw material for narrative fabrication. Through headlines, misquotes, and artificial crises, the tabloid crafts a vision of the Spice Girls that is emotionally volatile, morally suspect, and professionally unstable, all while claiming to be objective. The implication is that journalism, especially in its tabloid forms, has often functioned more like serialized fiction than as documentation. The press's investment in revealing the *real person* behind the celebrity façade is a legitimizing tool that reifies gender norms and undermines female autonomy.[63]

Narrative control in *Spice World* is also distinctly gendered. The Spice Girls are rarely shown engaging with the media on their terms; instead, they are surveilled, speculated upon, and reinterpreted through male-dominated editorial voices. McMaxford's assertion of power is not an isolated act of ego but a reflection of institutional gendered logic, in which female fame is contingent and fragile, subject to journalistic authorship. At one point, Posh Spice laments, "I'm really fed up with people thinking all I do is talk about clothes all

the time." This comment, though lighthearted, reveals the cumulative effect of press framing that reduces women to surface traits, flattening complexity in favor of easier consumption.[64] This captures how media exposure constructs not just visibility but symbolic legibility, turning the women into characters first and people second. In this model, the press acts not as a mirror but as a screenwriter, deciding which traits, images, and moments are elevated into public discourse. In the late twentieth century tabloid era, institutions did not merely observe celebrity; they serialized it: staging rises, crises, and falls as commercially legible arcs. This is the ideological work of journalism, as Reynolds identifies it, the power to structure reality by selecting what counts as news, who is considered credible, and when a story "ends."[65]

By collapsing the boundary between journalism and storytelling, *Spice World* invited viewers to see the press not as a passive documenter of fame but as its chief author, and, at times, its antagonist. McMaxford's editorial philosophy encapsulates journalism's ideological storytelling function: the power to determine not just what is known, but how it is known, and who controls the knowing. Kevin McMaxford's now-infamous line: "I put them up there, I can bring them down," is not merely villainous bravado, but a crystallization of what Reynolds identifies as journalism's ability to structure reality. The film mocks the illusion of journalistic neutrality by exaggerating editorial omnipotence.[66] Spears' mental health crisis and Diana's fatal car crash were both mediated by an industry more interested in narrative coherence than ethical care. In dramatizing a villainous tabloid editor who claims authorship over celebrity, *Spice World* mirrors the dynamics of the era, but with satirical self-awareness.[67] Through satire, the film exposes the institutional routines that lend journalism its cultural authority, while also questioning the ethical implications of that authority when wielded without care.

Journalism as Moral Authority: The Tabloid Press as Enforcer of Social Norms

Beyond its role in shaping narrative arcs, *Spice World* also depicts tabloid journalism as a powerful agent of moral regulation. The fictional tabloid *The National Event* acts not only as a storyteller but as an enforcer of cultural codes, issuing judgment through ridicule and implication. What the film satirizes is a press habit of the decade that policed the line between "serious" and "feminine," monetizing women's visibility while casting it as trivial or unruly. That gatekeeping is not incidental; it is how legitimacy is rationed. The coverage signals to audiences what counts as culture and what counts as gossip, even as both are sold through the same channels.[68] Journalism has historically maintained institutional authority not simply by informing the public but by affirming shared values and disciplining those who appear to violate them.[69] In *Spice World*, this moralizing function is particularly tied to gender norms, aesthetic expression, and nationalist expectations, all of which are used to frame the Spice Girls as deviant. In the United States, the framing of Monica Lewinsky, the relentless paparazzi campaigns against Britney Spears, and the vilification of Mariah Carey following her 2001 breakdown reflect a broader pattern of journalistic detachment from care at the turn of the twenty-first century, especially when covering women.[70]

One key mode of moral regulation in the film is esthetic policing. The Spice Girls' distinct styles—Posh's fashion obsession, Scary's boldness, Baby's innocence—are reduced by the press into stereotypes that delegitimize their personhood. During a high-fashion photo shoot, the women express frustration with being flattened into caricatures. They

reject the imposed visuals and instead reimagine themselves as historical and fictional figures, poking fun at the reductive branding they've internalized. By the end of the scene, they try on one another's "Spice" identities, blurring the lines between media-assigned roles and their multidimensional selves. The bit is camp, but the critique is historical: 1990s tabloids routinely turned women into salable archetypes, and the scene makes visible how branding displaces personhood. By swapping roles, the film demonstrates that labels are portable and thus constructed. While humorous, this moment highlights the press's complicity in reducing female identity to digestible, mockable fragments. The maneuver also reveals the commercial function of typecasting: it streamlines coverage by turning complexity into inventory. The Spice Girls' refusal to stay in character becomes a subtle act of protest, one that the press treats as unprofessional.

Another scene that underscores moral discipline through gender expectations occurs during the military boot camp sequence. Forced into regimented training by a male authority figure, the group is dressed in camouflage and made to perform exaggerated drills. Yet Posh Spice (Victoria Beckham) shows up in stilettos and a camouflage mini-dress, breaking the visual conformity expected of the exercise. Her refusal to abandon femininity in a hyper-masculine space visualizes one of the film's central tensions: that the media treat femininity itself as a problem to be corrected. The absurdity of the scene highlights how the press, and the institutions it represents, respond to female expressiveness not with celebration but with containment.[71]

This disciplinary logic also intersects with nationalist anxieties about fame and global reach. *The National Event* often frames the Spice Girls' popularity as a kind of cultural dilution, suggesting that their global success comes at the expense of traditional British values. Headlines like "Spice Girls set to conquer the globe" imply not admiration but warning. The tabloid portrays the group's cosmopolitanism as incompatible with national identity, linking their deviation from norms to a broader fear of cultural erosion. The Spice Girls are presented as too international, too visible, and too autonomous, traits that threaten the press's imagined British ideal. In doing so, the tabloid aligns itself with nationalist sentiment and implicitly argues that female celebrities must remain legible within domestic boundaries to be respected.[72] In another understated but potent moment, Ginger Spice (Geri Halliwell) confronts a man at a press party who mocks feminism as an attack on masculinity. Dressed in a sparkly red bodysuit, she delivers a calm rebuttal, insisting that Girl Power is not about man-hating but equality. Her defense of feminism is sincere, but the mise-en-scène ensures that the moment is filtered through distraction and performance. The scene draws attention to how female political speech is often trivialized or drowned out by esthetic spectacle, a dynamic the press amplifies.[73] Rather than engaging with the substance of her statement, the media frames such declarations as entertaining, rather than serious, reinforcing journalism's tendency to delegitimize emotion, beauty, and activism when they coexist.[74] In 1992, *The Mirror* infamously published topless photos of Fergie on vacation, causing a media firestorm that blended prurience with moral outrage. Similarly, tabloids manufactured outrage around Geri Halliwell's departure from the Spice Girls, spinning it into a betrayal of national values and feminine loyalty. Stories were often designed to escalate drama—manufacturing moral crises, stoking nationalistic outrage, and scripting the downfall of celebrities.[75]

By rendering femininity excessive, cosmopolitanism suspect, and emotional expression unserious, *The National Event* reaffirms British values of stoicism, punctuality, and

decorum. These are not neutral ideals; they are loaded with gendered and nationalist meaning. The film's satire thus captures the double move of the period: tabloids crossed boundaries for profit while legacy outlets performed boundary-keeping to distance themselves from the same pleasures. That performance stabilized professional identity without dislodging the underlying economy of spectacle. The repair work, in other words, protected the category "journalism" while leaving its historical market incentives intact.

Even those aligned with the Spice Girls, such as their manager, Clifford, feel the weight of this moralizing pressure. Visibly anxious about the headlines, Clifford becomes a proxy for how media discipline impacts not just public perception but internal team dynamics. Above him, the character of Chief (Roger Moore) operates as an almost mythic symbol of media detachment and elite control, issuing cryptic mandates from his high-rise office. Together, these male authority figures reinforce the idea that institutional journalism governs not through force, but through implication—by setting the terms of what is acceptable and what must be corrected. By dramatizing these forms of moral surveillance, *Spice World* critiques journalism's complicity in upholding gendered and nationalist norms under the guise of reporting.[76] Whether through ridicule, esthetic correction, or nationalist framing, *The National Event* exercises power not by telling lies but by deciding which truths deserve public scrutiny. Its role is not simply to narrate celebrity life but to police the borders of what counts as appropriate, respectable, or honest. In resisting these constraints, the Spice Girls reveal the press's disciplinary mechanisms for what they are: tools for reinforcing the status quo while disguising institutional bias as cultural concern. Beyond scripting celebrity, *Spice World* frames late twentieth century tabloid journalism as a cultural gatekeeper, deploying ridicule and repetition to reinforce dominant social values.

Journalism as Spectacle-Driven Surveillance: Detachment from Care

If *Spice World* frames *The National Event* as both narrator and disciplinarian, it also indicts the tabloid press as a voyeuristic machine: one driven by spectacle, surveillance, and detachment from care. This third discourse centers not on what the press says, but how it watches. The character of Damien, *The National Event*'s in-house paparazzo, embodies this ideology of visual intrusion. His exaggerated physicality, vampire-like movements, and grotesque enthusiasm for capturing the "perfect shot" transform the press into something monstrous. Damien's exaggeration works because it is close to the truth: the 1990s media environment normalized an economy that treated the privacy-visibility line as negotiable so long as the image sold. The camera is not merely a tool but a credential for access, and the photo becomes evidence by virtue of circulation. The analysis points to a market logic that redefines intrusion as craft, thereby eroding consent as a news value. Journalism here is not a truth-seeking practice but a predatory spectacle industry.[77]

Damien is introduced through scenes that literalize his lack of boundaries. Most memorably, he emerges from a toilet in the middle of the night at a manor house where the Spice Girls are sleeping. Dressed entirely in black and bathed in horror-style lighting, he crawls through the shadows, camera in hand, eavesdropping from beneath their bed. The sequence draws on horror esthetics (e.g., tight framing, suspenseful music, disorienting camera angles) to evoke the terror of surveillance. By leaning on horror form, the film makes plain the market logic of the time: boundary violations could be reclassified as craft rather than an ethical breach. Genre does historical work here, translating fear into a critique of

routine. The sequence reframes the paparazzo as the visible face of an institutional appetite for proximity at any cost. In this moment, the journalist is not a reporter but a predator, and the female celebrity is not a subject but prey. Here, the routine of paparazzi photography is exposed for what it has often been: uninvited, dehumanizing, and strategically disembodied from the increasingly recognized virtue of journalistic care.[78]

Other scenes reinforce this institutional detachment. His editor, McMaxford, never questions Damien's invasions. On the contrary, his stunts are celebrated, regardless of how humiliating, private, or out of context the resulting images may be. In this sense, Damien is not just an individual; he is the personification of *The National Event's* logic of extraction. His camera functions as a weapon, capturing not the truth, but scandal as a commodity. Headlines are formed not through verification but through the mere existence of a compromising image. This maps directly onto tabloid-era press strategies in the 1990s, where photos of Britney Spears shaving her head or Lindsay Lohan exiting a car became not just stories but currency.[79] The ethics of how those images were obtained, if they were staged, coerced, or harmful, were irrelevant to their market value. *Spice World's* editorial spectacle thus echoes a media moment when journalists engaged in paradigm repair by positioning tabloids as unprofessional, while still benefiting from the same emotional spectacle.[80]

In contrast to Damien's cold pursuit of visibility, the Spice Girls repeatedly assert an ethic of relational care. Their interactions with one another are emotionally open and physically affectionate. They joke, bicker, dream, and support one another across the film, with moments of sisterhood providing a counterweight to the surveillance they endure. The relationship with their pregnant friend Nicola exemplifies this ethos. The film's climax, when the girls hijack their tour bus to get Nicola to the hospital, functions as a symbolic rejection of tabloid priorities. Human connection outweighs brand maintenance, and friendship trumps fame. That *The National Event* does not cover this moment underscores the limits of spectacle journalism: care is presumed not to sell. Damien's arc concludes with a rare gesture of redemption. After witnessing the Spice Girls' solidarity and emotional honesty, he concedes that his career has made him miserable. This moment may appear sentimental, but it serves a critical function: it frames care as an antidote to surveillance. Rather than enacting vengeance or issuing condemnation, the Spice Girls offer Damien empathy. This move aligns with broader tropes of "soft power" in feminine-coded narratives but also presents an alternative media ethic. In this ethic, relationship supersedes reach, and witnessing requires responsibility, advocacy, and reflexivity among members of the press.[81]

Even as the film resolves in comedy and camp, it does not let *The National Event* off the hook. McMaxford never apologizes. The publication continues unabated. The ideology of spectacle-driven journalism is not dismantled; it is exposed. The viewer is left not with a solution, but with a sharpened lens: an invitation to see the press differently. Through Damien's grotesque methods, McMaxford's unchecked editorial power, and the Spice Girls' embodied resistance, *Spice World* articulates a trenchant critique of media surveillance as a normalized, profitable, and deeply unethical form of public storytelling.

When the Spice Girls are expressive, confident, or playful, the press doesn't just report it; it punishes it, deploying moralizing language that aligns the women with deviance. The boot camp sequence, in which the group is forced into militaristic conformity, becomes an allegory for the disciplinary intent of media institutions.

Likewise, the rebranding photo shoot scene, where the girls portray various historical figures and one another, critiques how the press reduces women to archetypes, only to chastise them for inhabiting those very roles. The courtroom trial scene, in which a fictional judge sentences the group to "a lifetime of appearances on cheesy chat shows in Taiwan," further emphasizes this parody of symbolic justice. In the film's logic, media exposure becomes a site of punishment rather than celebration. This regulation of identity aligns with observations about the historical marketing and objectification of women's bodies in media.[82]

Public femininity, in this framework, must be controlled, categorized, and judged, especially when it is joyful or assertive. *The National Event's* coverage reproduces a tabloid-era panic about unruly women, similar to the real-world treatment of figures like Lindsay Lohan and Whitney Houston, whose stories were framed not as complex but as scandals requiring punishment. The press at this time also framed Winona Ryder's 2001 shoplifting incident as evidence of moral collapse rather than contextually exploring the mental health pressures of celebrity. The tabloid lens often disciplines through esthetic critique, reducing women to bodies, then blaming them for how they are seen.[83] What *Spice World* ultimately critiques is journalism's self-appointed role as arbiter of *good* public behavior. This moral authority is not static; it is weaponized in gendered and racialized ways to regulate who belongs in the public sphere and on what terms. *Spice World* caricatures this dynamic, but its satire reveals the mechanisms by which media narratives enforce compliance through shame. Journalism becomes not a mirror of public values, but a producer of those values, disciplining subjects into legibility or casting them out.

Perhaps most sharply, *Spice World* indicts the journalistic institution for its detachment from care; its transformation of visibility into voyeurism. Damien, the paparazzo, serves as the grotesque embodiment of a press culture that turns intrusion into spectacle. He is not simply a rogue character, but a visual synecdoche for the systemic violation of celebrity boundaries. His cartoonish behavior—emerging from toilets, eavesdropping on women's sleep, photographing them without consent—parodies real paparazzi tactics while exposing their dehumanizing effects. This portrayal highlights that journalism's routine practices often encode exploitative assumptions. In tabloid journalism, those assumptions are esthetic-icized as entertainment, but they rest on the foundational belief that public visibility justifies total access. *Spice World* challenges this by proposing a counter-ethic as an affective model of mutual recognition. The Spice Girls' relationships with each other, their care for their friend Nicola, and even their willingness to forgive Damien articulate an alternative to the institutional logic of extraction. This concern with care echoes a call to consider the ethical consequences of dehumanizing coverage, particularly when it targets women's bodies and private lives.[84] It also echoes a challenge by some to reconsider the ways journalism has historically wronged those who are minoritized and marginalized.[85] As some, like Britney Spears' experience during this time, demonstrates, this kind of detached reporting can manifest not only in career damage but also in mental and legal repercussions. The film's stylized visuals, such as Damien's lurking shadows and the haunted manor sequence, draw on horror tropes to depict surveillance as a violent act of possession. This cinematic framing intensifies the ethical argument: that journalism's gaze can be parasitic when unmoored from responsibility.

In foregrounding care, the film presents a quiet yet radical proposition: that journalism might recognize its subjects as individuals rather than mere content. This is not a nostalgic

plea for better coverage, but a political assertion that media institutions must be accountable not just to the public, but to the lives they report on.[86] *Spice World* becomes a case study in ethical rupture, where attachment is coded as soft, feminine, and unserious, and detachment as hard, professional, and profitable. The film reverses that hierarchy. Through satire, it insists that emotional connection, relational power, and care are not liabilities to journalism, but rather its potential for an ethical future. The detachment/attachment is at play in the film mirrors longstanding debates in journalism ethics about objectivity versus responsibility.[87] Detachment, in this context, refers to a professional ideology that values emotional distance, neutrality, and control over the journalistic subject. It legitimizes surveillance, misrepresentation, and even harm by appealing to institutional norms of objectivity and audience demand. Attachment, by contrast, embodies a mode of practice rooted in empathy, proximity, and ethical reciprocity. It recognizes that media subjects have interior lives, vulnerabilities, and agency that ought to be respected. In *Spice World*, attachment is enacted not only through the Spice Girls' care for one another and their friend Nicola, but also through their resistance to reductive media labels and their insistence on being seen as full people.

Spice World reveals that journalism's historical role in constructing and disciplining celebrity is inseparable from the institutional logics that govern its practices. The film is not just a parody of media excess, but a cultural intervention that surfaces public skepticism about the press's moral and narrative authority. It is a text that invites viewers, not just scholars, to interrogate journalism's historical claims to legitimacy and to imagine how public storytelling might look different if rooted not in detachment, but in responsibility. Rather than rejecting journalism wholesale, however, the film critiques a specific mode of tabloid journalism: one characterized by self-interest, detachment, and ideological influence. In doing so, it contributes to the history of journalism by documenting how cultural products challenged press legitimacy, not through op-eds or institutional reform, but through satire, self-performance, and popular resistance. As such, *Spice World* offers a historically grounded case study of how journalism's late twentieth century power was not only enacted in editorial rooms but also contested on screen and in public imagination.

Conclusion: Spice World in the Historic Context of Journalism

Spice World offers a surprisingly incisive portrayal of late twentieth century tabloid journalism's ideological function in the construction and discipline of celebrity. Through exaggerated characters, narrative disruption, and direct commentary on press behavior, the film reflects the institutional logic of tabloid journalism in the late 1990s, an era marked by the fusion of entertainment and news, spectacle and authority. This study identified three central discourses within the film: journalism as narrative control, the creator and destroyer of celebrity; journalism as moral authority, an enforcer of social norms; and journalism as a spectacle-driven surveillance industry detached from care. Each discourse points to a larger institutional critique of journalism's role in maintaining power by historically shaping how fame is understood, consumed, and controlled.

While often overlooked as frivolous, *Spice World* provides a valuable case study in how journalism has been imagined and resisted in public culture. It dramatizes journalism not as a neutral or passive force, but as an actor that intervenes in the lives and narratives of public figures. It also reflects how celebrity subjects, even within fictional texts, have resisted the

reductive logics of tabloid storytelling. In doing so, the film participates in a broader metajournalistic discourse, one that questions journalism's ethical boundaries and its legitimacy as a truth-telling institution. Situating this analysis within journalism history reveals how popular culture can function as a form of critique, both documenting and shaping how journalism is remembered, understood, and challenged. The institutional dynamics at play in *Spice World* remain relevant today, even as the media landscape has shifted from tabloid print to digital virality. What the film captures is the enduring tension between journalism's power and narrative agency, between institutional detachment and the human subjects caught within its gaze.

This invites journalism historians and media scholars to take popular culture more seriously as a metajournalistic and discursive site where journalism's authority has been shaped, negotiated, and at times, rejected. If we are to reckon with the ethical and ideological legacies of the late twentieth century tabloid era, we must look beyond archives and newsrooms to the cultural texts that mirrored, mocked, and made meaning from journalism's excesses. *Spice World*, in all its glittering absurdity, reminds us that even the most playful texts can carry the weight of institutional critique, calling us to imagine more caring and accountable futures for the stories we tell.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations emerge from focusing on the film itself. First, we did not include reviews of the movie at the time of its release because the goal was to examine *Spice World* as a stand-alone text. Further study is needed to analyze both contemporary and current coverage of the film. Such a study could reveal how journalists engaged in paradigm repair in their critique of *Spice World*, as well as how attitudes toward female celebrity have changed over time, compared with retrospective pieces from 10, 15, or 20 years ago. The film itself is a cultural product of the Hollywood industry. *Spice World* not only addresses tabloids within its narratives but also the film industry itself. In this way, the film serves as a camp-metacommentary on the culture industry in which the Spice Girls existed.[88] Our focus was on the film's critique of tabloid journlalism; however, a deeper analysis could reveal how the filmmakers navigated their positionality within the 1990s pop culture industry while creating a critique of its functions.

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