

Paula Deen, the N-Word & Media: Reactions from Senior Citizens

Edward Evans Smallwood

Department of Communication, Regent University, Virginia Beach, VA, USA

Email: Dr.EdSmallwood@gmail.com

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Abstract

In 2013 Celebrity Chef Paula Deen admitted to using the N-word; this study focused on the ensuing scandal and the reactions to it and her. To help interpret Deen's situation and the reaction to it with context, multiple theories (parasocial interaction and expectancy violation theory) were utilized along with mixed methods research design. Further, Comedian Chris Rock was used as a comparative example of a celebrity who also used the N-word. A 36-item online questionnaire was administered (N = 1346) in 2013 at the height of the Deen scandal. In addition to the questionnaire, the study engaged participants over the age of 60 with three focus group interviews and six follow-up personal interviews to provide interpretive perspectives. Key findings include: 1) Seniors liked Paula Deen and considered her a positive, grandmotherly figure; 2) Seniors thought that the controversy was blown far out of proportion and that the punishment Deen experienced was excessive; 3) Seniors thought that Deen should be forgiven.

Keywords

Paula Deen, N-Word, Media, Parasocial Interaction, Expectancy Violation

1. Introduction

Celebrity Chef Paula Deen was a Food Network diva, cookbook author, and restaurateur. She hosted several cooking shows and was the high-profile owner of a burgeoning business empire. Deen resides in Savannah, Georgia, where she owns and operates The Lady & Sons restaurant with her sons, Jamie and Bobby Deen. Sometimes referred to as the "queen of Southern cuisine", she has also published fourteen cookbooks.

In early 2013, Deen and her brother were sued by a former white, female worker claiming discrimination. As a result of that lawsuit, in June of that same

year, Deen stumbled into her own personal media calamity when court transcripts from that case revealed that she had admitted to using the “N-Word” in the past. This information went “viral” and a firestorm of negative publicity erupted for the celebrity cook. The fallout was swift and harsh. The Food Network canceled her shows. She lost multiple endorsement deals (with companies such as Wal-mart, Target, Sears, Caesars Entertainment, Smithfield Foods, QVC & Home Depot) and her multi-million-dollar business began to crumble. She was lambasted as a symbol of old southern racism. The story and her downfall garnered national attention and became a staple of cable news networks for months. While some, including Deen, claim the story was grossly exaggerated and unfair, it evidently struck a nerve in the public consciousness. The original lawsuit that led to the disclosure of Deen’s admission was eventually dismissed, but questions about the N-word and our society’s powerful reaction to it remain. The Paula Deen scandal represents an opportunity to explore the impact of language, in this case, a single word (the N-word) in a real-world, high profile situation.

Few words in modern American culture strike such a chord and evoke such passion. “The word nigger has special status as a slur, and its usage has a socially volatile history (Henderson, 2003: p. 65).” It has been claimed that “there is arguably no more vile racial slur in the English language than nigger and no word more likely to incite violence” (Holt, 2008: p. 12). Indeed, the word is so provocative that it is generally not considered acceptable for common usage. Rahman (2011) observed that “norms of social propriety currently preclude use of the full form nigger in public discourse. Instead, the general public euphemistically uses the term the N word” (p. 165). The euphemism is not limited to the general public; scholars use the “N-word” as well (Low, 2007; Duncan, 2008; Rahman, 2012).

Concerns about race and race relations in the United States remain major public issues; from the 1964 race riots (and long before) to Rodney King in Los Angeles until current times, including Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri and George Floyd, racial topics and related concerns of inequality have been at the forefront of much of American social science research and political policy initiatives. The language and communication that we use as members of our society have a significant impact on our ability to live, work, and exist together. It’s almost impossible to overstate the significance of the “N-word”. This single word could be considered a symbolic representation of racism in the United States.

1.1. Multi-Theory Approach

Many scholars have called for, and used, multiple theoretic perspectives to help explain communication phenomena (Babrow, 1993; Fraser & Brown, 2002; Jurczak, 2005; Cohen, 2010; Fraser, Brown, Wright, & Kiruswa, 2012). Indeed, several theories offer potential for studying the reaction to Paula Deen’s situation. This paper focuses on two theories: Parasocial interaction and expectancy violation theory. Parasocial interaction might be relevant owing to Deen’s celebrity status. In what ways might opinions and perceptions of Deen’s predicament vary based on one’s perceived relationship with her? Further possible approaches

come from the realm of interpersonal communication (as they relate to the “relationships” participants feel that they have with Paula Deen). For example, theories such as symbolic interactionism, which deals with “meaning, language and thinking” evolved from relationships (Griffin, 2012: p. 55) could be applicable. In addition, semiotics or linguistic theories, dealing with words and the power of symbols, signs, and their meanings (with reference to the N-word) might offer explanatory value in this investigation. Expectancy violation is yet another theory that could bring useful interpretive power to this study. Of course, race and cultural studies might also be of value in helping to understand this topic. Finally, opinions and interpretations of racially charged language are nearly always explained through the lens of the groups on the receiving end of the denigrations. Standpoint theory suggests an alternative or unexpected lens from which to view and understand situations.

A combination of theoretic approaches appears to offer interpretative value to the Paula Deen N-word affair: parasocial interaction and expectancy violation theory. These two theories are briefly introduced here as lenses to help make sense of the situation.

1.2. Parasocial Interaction

Horton & Wohl (1956) observed “one of the striking characteristics of the new mass media, radio, television, and the movies, is that they give the illusion of face-to-face relationship with the performer” (p. 215). Since then, numerous scholars have investigated and affirmed the interpersonal relationship aspect of parasocial interaction between celebrities, such as television personalities, and non-celebrities, such as TV viewers (Rubin & Rubin, 1985; Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Rubin & Rubin, 2001; Giles, 2002; Fraser & Brown, 2002; Cohen, 2010; Tian & Hoffner, 2010; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). Research by these authors and others supports the contention that mediated relationships exhibit many of the same attributes and characteristics that face-to-face relationships exhibit and, further, that these mediated interpersonal relationships can be studied similarly to face-to-face interpersonal relationships.

Tian & Hoffner (2010) postulated that serial television programming, in particular, which continues week to week can pull audiences into “social worlds” that allow them to create interactions with people that they only know from watching television (p. 251). Prior to her fall from grace, Paula Deen had several popular cooking shows on the Food Network that aired weekly and in heavy re-run rotation. Further, Rubin & Rubin (1985) observed that interpersonal and mass mediated channels are used as “coequal alternatives” to fulfill relational aspects of both psychological and social needs. Thus, parasocial interaction could be considered an integration of multiple theoretic approaches, including mass communication and interpersonal communication. It could be enlightening to investigate how perceived relationships with Paula Deen affect interpretations of her situation.

1.3. Expectancy Violation Theory

Expectancy violation theory (EVT) is another perspective that offers potential to integrate similar theoretic approaches (*Expectancy Violations in Mass Media*, 2012: p. 2). Although originally rooted in nonverbal communication, the application of expectancy violation theory (EVT) to wider areas of communication has grown significantly since Burgoon first published the concept. Specifically relevant in the case of Paula Deen, *Cohen (2010)* showed that expectancy violations can occur with mass media figures vis a vis parasocial relationships; she surmised that “individuals may have different reactions to the same expectancy violation committed by different types of media figures because they have unique expectations for the roles that different celebrities should perform” (p. 101). *West & Turner (2010)* delineate three primary factors that influence expectations: individual communicator factors, such as gender, personality, age and reputation; relationship factors, such as history, liking, and nature of relationship; and contextual factors, such as cultural and environmental expectations. Any or all of these factors might come into play with regard to the Paula Deen scandal.

In addition, *Averbeck (2010)* supported Burgoon’s EVT “extension” of language expectancy theory by arguing that a violation of language, including word choice, has implications: “using language that negatively violates the expectation, being aggressive where deemed inappropriate for instance, results in a negative appraisal of the message and/or the source (p. 259).”

2. Research Methods

This study utilized a mixed methods research approach to develop an understanding of what seniors think of Paula Deen, her N-word controversy and the reactions to it, as well as their opinions on forgiveness for Deen’s “indiscretion”. Qualitatively, hermeneutics, and phenomenology were applied to understand and interpret the reactions of the participants regarding the Paula Deen N-word controversy. Hermeneutics focuses on interpretation of human acts or products, questioning them, and being aware that the understanding of them occurs within the context of the individual researcher’s perspectives (*Patton, 1999*). Meanwhile, *Van Manen (1990)* observed that “phenomenology is the systematic attempt to uncover and describe” meaning of lived experiences (p. 10). So this study attempts to help understand and interpret the lived experiences of the participants in regard to the reactions to Paula Deen (by themselves and others) in the summer of 2013. Quantitatively, survey research was also conducted to bring a large sample of measurable data to compare and contrast with the more detailed, in-depth perspectives generated from the focus group and personal interviews. Altogether, three different research techniques were used to triangulate information for this study: 1) Survey; 2) Focus groups; 3) Personal interviews.

2.1. Survey

A 36-item questionnaire was administered online via Survey Monkey. Respondents were invited to complete the short questionnaire from Google search ads

(AdWorks), Facebook, and Twitter posts during July of 2013, at the height of the Deen N-word scandal. The largest group of respondents was over the age of 60 years. More than half of the 1346 respondents fell into the 60-plus category, the high end of the age ranges on the instrument. Seventy-six percent of the respondents identified as Caucasian; 14 percent identified as African-American; 10 percent identified as multi-racial, and eight percent identified as other.

2.2. Interview Participants

This study focuses on purposively selected seniors (60+) as interview participants for more in-depth exploration in an attempt to understand the perspective of those using the language (like Deen) from the justification of Standpoint Theory. In particular, this study looks at the Deen affair from the standpoint of senior citizens.

More specifically, in an attempt to get inside the head of Paula Deen, the decision was made to focus the study using people like her. For example, because Deen was 60+ (67 at the time), it was felt that participants of a similar age might offer a unique perspective on her situation. In addition, older Americans are an important, and growing, demographic. According to U.S. News & World Report, “There are now more Americans age 65 and older than at any other time in U.S. history (Brandon, 2012: para. 1).” More than 40 million Americans are 60 or older and the percentage of U.S. adults 60+ has tripled in the last century, from 4.1% in 1900 to 13.3% in 2011 (A Profile of Older Americans, 2012: p. 2). As the baby boom generation continues to age, the population of older Americans will continue to grow, increasing their impact on, and relevance to, society. Often overlooked, it is clearly of value to study senior citizens and include their perceptions.

Further, because Deen is based in the south (born and raised in Georgia), participants were also chosen based on their location of residence (the southeastern United States). Three representative (southern) sources for the focus groups were identified: 1) A senior group at a church; 2) Another group from a community senior center; 3) A home-based group. All participants signed informed consent agreements.

As Deen is female, and had a largely female audience, women were also oversampled to provide a clearer, more appropriate, and more directly applicable perspective on her situation. Each focus group also contained at least one male to include another point of view as part of the discussions. The educational achievement of the participants was broad; while all of the participants had completed high school, half held at least bachelor’s degrees, and four also held graduate degrees. Income distribution was broad as well, ranging from less than \$20,000 per year to more than \$150,000 per year. Note that annual income for seniors can be misleading because many are retired and don’t earn annual income in the way that such figures might usually suggest. Politically, 67% considered themselves independent, while only 5% were Democrats, and 29% self-

reported as Republican. All of the interview participants were white.

The participants were not selected by the study author; rather, they were invited by “group contacts” who were chosen from one large city and one medium-sized city in North Carolina. These contacts were suggested as opinion leaders by a local pastor (who works with senior citizens) and approached by the author. The contacts were asked to invite up to ten additional participants to participate in the focus group interviews. Invited guests were told only that they would be asked to discuss their opinions about celebrities such as Paula Deen. The only requirement was that the participants be 60 years of age or older.

2.3. Focus Group Interviews

Focus groups provide feedback that is “more specific, meaningful, and animated than what can be obtained from individually filled out consumer questionnaires and surveys” (Patton, 1999: p. 388). Three focus group interviews (N = 7, 8 & 6) were conducted with an average time of 57 minutes each. The groups will be referred to in this study as Group A, Group B, and Group C. All group interviews were moderated by the study author. Focus groups combined with the survey data by offering rich, thick descriptions of feelings and perceptions related to the Deen controversy. All sessions were recorded on video during June of 2014.

2.4. Personal Interviews

Although formal, structured observations based on a social scientific approach offer enormous value, the simple fact of the matter is that we cannot observe everything. For example, feelings, opinions, thoughts and how people assign meaning to their experiences are not very observable. Therefore, we must ask questions, or interview people, “to allow us to enter into the other person’s perspective” (Patton, 1999: p. 341). In addition to the focus groups, six seniors, who had expressed a willingness to discuss the topic further, were invited to participate in follow-up, in-depth, personal interviews which were all conducted by the author using the interview guide approach. As with the focus groups, the participants in the personal interviews were majority female (five of six), but also included one male.

Table 1 contains a list of the interview participants along with each participant’s age, sex, education level and annual income.

All sessions were recorded electronically (audio and video) during June and July of 2014. The personal interviews averaged approximately 45 minutes each.

3. Topics of Inquiry

Focus group and personal interview questions explored perceived “liking” of Deen and aspects of “punishment” & “forgiveness” of Deen vis a vis opinions about her use of the N-word in addition to participant opinions of the scandal and the N-word itself. Further, personal interviewees were asked to respond to some of the survey results. The study integrated perceptions and feelings about

Table 1. Paula deen interview participants.

	Name	Age	Sex	Education	Income (\$000)
1.	Sandy*	female	70 - 79	BA	35 - 50
2.	Jennifer*	female	70 - 79	HS	35 - 50
3.	Frank*	male	70 - 79	AS	20 - 35
4.	Holly	female	70 - 79	HS	50 - 75
5.	Amanda	female	60 - 69	HS	N/A
6.	Sue*	female	70 - 79	MS	35 - 50
7.	Linda*	female	70 - 79	PHD	50 - 75
8.	Elizabeth	female	70 - 79	HS	N/A
9.	Clarice	female	60 - 69	AS	150+
10.	Melody	female	60 - 69	BS	150+
11.	Wanda	female	70 - 79	HS	35 - 50
12.	Anne	female	70 - 79	HS	35 - 50
13.	Trudy	female	60 - 69	MS	100 - 150
14.	Patty	female	60 - 69	BS	<20
15.	Rick	male	70 - 79	BS	50 - 75
16.	Deborah	female	70 - 79	MS	20 - 35
17.	Brenda	female	70 - 79	HS	150+
18.	Kathleen	female	70 - 79	BS	20 - 35
19.	Diane*	female	80 - 89	BS	N/A
20.	Janet	female	80 - 89	HS	N/A
21.	John	male	70 - 79	AS	50 - 75

*Participated in both focus group interview and personal interview. Note: To maintain confidentiality, the actual names of participants were substituted with aliases for reporting purposes.

the media figure (Deen) and her use of the N-word from focus groups and personal interviews along with quantitative measures from the survey data (education, gender, and ethnicity) for triple-sourced triangulation. Qualitative research calls for inquiries that are focused but not overly specific or restrictive, thus allowing the participants the opportunity to express and explain their opinions in their own context. From the foregoing, research questions were developed to help describe and explain a particular point of view on the Deen affair.

Research Questions

1) Research Question 1

How do adults aged 60+ perceive their relationships with Paula Deen?

2) Research Question 2

What do adults aged 60+ think of the Paula Deen “N-word” controversy?

3) Research Question 3

How do adults aged 60+ perceive the Paula Deen “N-word” controversy in terms of punishment and forgiveness?

4. Findings and Discussion

Findings are discussed below in the context of 1) The participants reported relationships with Deen; 2) The N-word controversy and reactions to it; 3) Punishment and forgiveness. Within the controversy discussion, sub-themes of sponsors, historical use of the term (N-word), and conspiracy theories are considered. Additional themes of comparison to other celebrities and expectations are also explored

4.1. Relationship with Deen

More than half (57.7%) of survey respondents either strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that they felt like they knew Paula Deen. However, seniors (60+) reported a stronger feeling of relationship with Deen (69.0%). Many of the participants from both the focus group and personal interviews commented that they felt that they knew Deen. Observations such as this one from Group A were typical: “I think everybody thought she was like your sister; your grandma or somebody that smiled all the time.”

The participants generally thought well of Deen. Overall, 78% of the survey respondents either strongly or somewhat agreed that they liked Paula Deen. Again, seniors were even more likely to report liking her (88%). Most considered her a southern grandmotherly type. She was described as “a good person”, “a next door neighbor”, and “someone who had a great personality”. One participant from Group C commented of Deen, “She was always bubbly. She and I would’ve got along real well. She enjoyed life.” Deen was referred to as a southern belle in multiple instances, in a fond manner. Rick observed that Deen “was someone you could really rely on; she’d give you the shirt off her back.”

However, there was a small minority that questioned Deen’s generally positive appeal. One participant from Group C was unimpressed with Deen, offering, “I think of the stereotype [southern belle] and I didn’t like it.”

In general, most participants felt that they had a positive relationship with Paula Deen and several suggested they would enjoy talking with her and spending time with her.

4.2. N-Word Controversy

Survey results showed a strong majority of the participants thought Deen was treated unfairly in regard to this controversy. While 71% of all survey respondents thought Deen was treated too harshly, 81% of seniors thought the same.

Linda commented on Deen’s situation “She was unfairly persecuted”. Typical of other observations, a participant from Group C echoed that sentiment, observing “They crucified her”. Trudy was representative of the participants when

she offered “I think the whole reaction to it was a case of political correctness gone awry.” Most agreed that they would not use the N-word today but they still felt the reaction to Deen’s admission from the past far exceeded the bounds of prudence. “Yes, it’s a horrible word and nobody should use it. But there are other horrible words that people use and they’re not stoned. It was really an over-reaction; I was kind of taken aback.” observed Jennifer.

However, a recurring thread in all of the focus groups was the apparent inequity highlighted by the fact that African-Americans are evidently allowed to use the N-word with impunity while caucasians who use the term are strongly criticized or worse.

4.3. Sponsors

Sandy reflected “I think the people who sold her products were scared to death. That really bothered all of us [seniors].” Sue represented what many participants expressed in the interviews, that using the N-word was bad but that the sponsors unfairly dealt Deen the commercial equivalent of a death blow: “She obviously made a mistake but it’s not the end of the world. But the companies are all trying to be perfect. They [sponsors] over-reacted.” Frank commented on what he saw as a gap between public opinion and Deen’s sponsors: “The Paula Deen circumstance is a perfect example of perception being behind reality. The perception of those sponsors is that they’re afraid they’re gonna lose customers, so they drop her. The reality is that the public is more forgiving than they are.”

Jennifer could have continued Frank’s thought when she observed “it was almost a knee-jerk reaction on the part of the companies to distance themselves so quickly and so abruptly and so finally”. From another group, Rick added that he thought “the overwhelming majority of the United States supported her”.

4.4. The N-Word “Back Then”

Another important aspect of the N-word is the evolution and chronological context of the term. Words and their usage change over time and “society is ‘where language change happens’” (Coupland, 2014: p. 279). “The racist form nigger is one of two contemporary forms that developed from the early use of nigger, which was at one time relatively neutral as a referential term employed by whites (Rahman, 2012: p. 138).” Several participants commented on the changing nature of the N-word and what they considered to be its history. The sentiment universally expressed by the participants was that virtually everyone, including them, may have used the N-word in the past (as Deen did) but that none would consider it appropriate today. Many observed that the acceptability and meaning of the N-word is far different today than when they grew up. Diane shared that, while the word was used when she was a child in South Carolina, she didn’t think it was used “maliciously”. Many concurred and suggested that it was used more as a descriptive term (neither negatively or positively). Diane

added a southern accent or pronunciation perspective on the term “it was not that you were being insulted because it was just a different way of pronouncing negro”. Multiple interviews agreed that the pronunciation factor was relevant, because with a southern accent, “negro” could easily become “nigruh” and eventually “niggah” or “nigger”. Frank noted that when he was a child, people used the N-word, as well as other derogatory terms, such as Wop, Deigo, Spic, and others. But, he continued, “as we grew older and more mature, and more aware of the offensiveness of those expressions, we stopped using them.”

Another consistent theme was the desire to be respectful but the lack of knowledge or lack of comfort with appropriate terms to describe people. Several participants expressed almost a bewilderment at the proper, acceptable term(s) for African-Americans. Several times the progression of terms applied to black people was listed. Diane summed it up this way. “We went through black; we went through colored, we went through nigger, I’ll just say it, and negro, and African American. Today, I hesitate to use any word that denotes black. I don’t want to hurt someone’s feelings.”

4.5. Conspiracy Theories

Some sort of conspiracy theory was suggested in every focus group and reiterated in virtually every personal interview. The participants expressed concern that there had to be something else going on. Typical comments included, “Maybe someone wanted to get even with her” and “I’m wondering whether she wasn’t set up by someone.” The word vendetta was used more than once. Generally, the participants thought that the response to Deen’s transgression was “overkill”. Jennifer’s expression of this concept seemed to reflect the sentiment that emanated from the majority of the interviews, “With all that’s going on in the world, I could not validate why [the reaction to Deen was so intense], something is not ringing true about the whole deal.”

Although activist Al Sharpton was suggested as a possible culprit, the most common scapegoat suggested was “the media”. Participants felt that the news media simply made a mountain out of a mole hill in this situation with the driving force of their own economic benefit. Frank observed to nodding heads “The press, to me, looks for headlines that are going to sell whatever they sell.” Brenda seemed to sum up the feeling shared most often in regard to the media’s role in the Deen scandal: “The media likes to fan the flames. It’s a shame because the media can be very good.”

4.6. Punishment and Forgiveness

Fellow Georgian and former President Jimmy Carter appeared on CNN to urge forgiveness for Deen: “She was maybe excessively honest in saying that she had in the past, 30 years ago, used this terrible word. I think she has been punished, perhaps overly severely, for her honesty in admitting it (Sterling, 2013: para. 2).”

Age was also a factor in perceptions and opinions about Deen’s situation.

Among survey respondents under the age of 60, 8.5% reported that Deen should not be forgiven while among those 60 or older, only 3.9% reported that opinion. A similar disparity was shown in regard to the opinions on whether Deen should lose her job as a result of the scandal. Of those under the age of 60, only 67% responded strongly disagree while those 60 or older were far more likely to strongly disagree that Deen should lose her job (85.5%).

Correlating with the feelings that the impact on Paula Deen was excessive, the feelings on the topic of forgiveness were similarly generous. Most felt strongly that Deen should be forgiven and that her punishment, if any, should have been minimal. For example, Jennifer commented “In my opinion, there should’ve been no impact. If we were held accountable for everything that we said 20 or 30 years ago, we’d be in a world of trouble and pain. It’s like let’s just crucify her; it’s just a word.” There was a common theme of “but for the grace of God, there go I.” Linda’s comments represented the group opinion when she said, “I think, in general, if you’ve lived more than 10 years, you have said or done things that you regret. We all have.”

Virtually all of the participants expressed concern that our society (especially the media) is not quick to forgive in many cases. Frank observed “I’m not sure we’re a truly forgiving society. We preach it in our churches, but I’m not sure that we practice it.” He added that forgiveness should be “automatic”. Many of the participants took a longer perspective, seemingly born of their wisdom and experience here on earth. Holly crystalized this viewpoint “I think we’ve [seniors] grown and realized that life is getting short. Don’t hang onto these grudges; don’t be judgmental. Give somebody a second chance.”

4.7. Additional Themes

Above and beyond the primary areas of inquiry, two themes, in particular, cropped up again and again. First was the theme of comparison to other celebrity scandals and second was the theme of unexpected behavior.

4.7.1. Comparison to Other Celebrities

The theme of “comparison” occurred almost universally and is worth addressing here. Paula Deen’s situation and her punishment were repeatedly compared to the transgressions of other celebrities and their own fallout (or lack thereof). Chris Rock was highlighted as an example of a black comedian who used the N-word voluminously with little to no negative impact.

Charlie Sheen, Alec Baldwin, and Tiger Woods were all suggested as celebrities who had made public mistakes (of varying degrees) but who had returned to their careers with apparently little negative impact. There was a feeling expressed by some that Deen was unfairly targeted. Several commented that her gender had an impact on how she was treated. Diane commented that “southern people, particularly southern women, have to fight a little bit harder to get ahead.” Sue, from another group, added “females have always been mistreated, from the Bible on up. It’s obvious.”

4.7.2. Expectations

Another theme that surfaced repeatedly was that of the “unexpectedness” of Deen’s admission. As a “southern belle” or a grandmotherly figure who bakes cakes, many were shocked that Deen would be using such an offensive term. Jennifer observed “With her, from the south, people could say that she still has that plantation mentality. The expectation was there that she’s a southern lady...and she shouldn’t be saying this [the N-word].” Sandy drew the contrast clearly when she compared Paula Deen’s use of the N-word with Chris Rock’s use of it. She said that Chris Rock works where they sell liquor all the time but Paula Deen makes buttercream cookies. The implication is that Chris Rock or any other comedian in a comedy-club type of environment is probably going to use foul language and no one will be surprised. However, Paula Deen is a different story. Foul language is not expected from her. Linda put it plainly: “because she was from the south and because she was this lovely, grandmotherly, lovable woman, and they thought she would never do anything like that, and then all of a sudden, they see a different side of the public persona.”

4.8. Theoretic Interpretations

These findings can be interpreted through several theoretic lenses. Indeed, the combination of several perspectives appears to help generate a richer understanding of the Paula Deen situation. First and foremost, expectancy violation theory (EVT) seems to offer significant explanatory power in the case of the Paula Deen N-word scandal. All three sources of data (focus group interviews, personal interviews, and survey data) confirm that Deen was widely liked and the general consensus was that she was railroaded. As participant Frank asked, “why is Paula Deen being ostracized when there are a lot worse things being said?” Especially in light of the fact that other celebrities have said and done arguably much worse, EVT provides a possible answer. The shock or violation of expectation for Paula Deen might have led to the strong reaction she experienced. For example, factors such as Deen’s reputation (southern belle, “sweet”, “funny”, “nice lady”) present a stark contrast with one who might generally be expected to use the N-word. Importantly, this study begins to help address a need Cohen (2010) expressed for EVT studies to focus more directly on the relational characteristics of media figure attachments.

In addition, the integration of parasocial relationships offers another interpretive view in Paula Deen’s situation. As both the survey data and the interview responses support, liking and feelings of relationship with the mediated figure Paula Deen were clearly a factor for the study participants. What type of impact did the parasocial relationships with Deen on perceptions and reactions to her case? Using the concept of parasocial interaction as an umbrella provides a framework in which to apply and integrate interpersonal theories to mediated figures such as Deen. Further, Tian & Hoffner (2010) called for more research into celebrities that are not liked. Deen presents a unique situation as a celebrity who was initially liked but was later disliked by many. Some evidence was presented in this study that indicates

those who have a feeling of relationship with Deen were likely to view her more favorably and more likely to forgive her transgression. Majorities of participants from both the surveys and the focus groups felt they had some sort of relationship with Deen and majorities from both groups felt she should be forgiven and that her punishment was too harsh. Within the context of expectancy violation, perceived parasocial relationships appear to emphasize the violation of expectations.

In general, this study attempts to add to the body of multi-theoretical work pioneered by many scholars. Specifically, it is a response to [Giles \(2002\)](#) who called for greater development and integration of Parasocial Interaction (PSI) and [Cohen \(2010\)](#) who has pioneered integration of PSI and Expectancy Violation.

5. Further Research

The most obvious area of further research on this topic would be to replicate the study with different populations, including African-Americans and also younger participants. Further, as [Cohen \(2010\)](#) suggests, there is ample opportunity to compare different types of parasocial relationships with regard to their impact on interpretations and opinions. Another area of future investigation that could be of interest might be to examine the parasocial interaction aspect of this inquiry in further detail using formal scales such as experience of parasocial interaction (EPSI) suggested by [Hartmann & Goldhoorn \(2011\)](#). In addition, future research could attempt to ascertain the relative importance of EVT factors, such as individual communicator factors (gender, personality, age and reputation); relationship factors (history, liking, and nature of relationship); and contextual factors (cultural and environmental expectations). Additional studies could also delve more deeply into the “comparison” theme by studying multiple celebrity scandals in reference to each other. Another possible path to consider might involve concepts of apologia as applied to media figures and how EVT might integrate into expectations and level of acceptance/forgiveness for apologies. There are potentially interesting perspectives on linguistic evolution that might be studied as well. Beyond these suggestions, future research might address use of the N-word or other emotionally charged terms by different groups and their impact on different audiences. Finally, this researcher recommends that future research should consider involving mature adults more often instead of the usual default of easily-available undergraduate students. As our celebrity culture explodes with an ever-growing number of media outlets and devices, this is surely an area that will be examined to a greater degree.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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