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The Spectacularization of Suffering: An Analysis of the Use of Celebrities in  
'Comic Relief' UK's Charity Fundraising Campaigns

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, we engage with recent charity fundraising campaigns in the UK such as ‘Sport Relief’ and ‘Red Nose Day,’ both of which are organized by Comic Relief, an operating British charity. These campaigns are increasingly extreme spectacles of celebrity-suffering that concentrate public attention on the spectacle-image itself rather than on the charities these spectacles espouse. Drawing upon Guy Debord’s critique of spectacle and celebrity in *Society and the Spectacle*, we contend that the phenomenon of celebrity fundraising in this context is interesting not only because of its voyeuristic dimensions (as argued by a number of scholars on celebrity humanitarianism) but also because it raises issues about how the use of highly visual and visceral images of celebrities’ suffering has banalized the charitable causes to which they lend their names, often erasing them altogether. Celebrities’ suffering in this context is framed by the media both as mega-spectacles of entertainment but also as lavishly-staged journeys of heroism and suffering set apart from the material and social abundance celebrities represent. We demonstrate, using a range of empirical sources from news reports and live TV coverage that when celebrities submit to these extreme journeys of physical suffering, it raises new questions about the moral limits of the marketization of emotion and the commodification of the charitable journey itself.

**Keywords:** Spectacle, Charity, Celebrity, Hero, Guy Debord, Comic Relief.

## Introduction

In 2012, the British comedian John Bishop completed a 290-mile triathlon from Paris to London in five days for Sport Relief, calling it his ‘Week of Hell’ (Anisiobi and Dadds, 2012). In late 2011, David Walliams became seriously ill after contracting a virus from his 140-mile swim in the Thames for Sport Relief (Vidal, 2011). In 2009, Eddie Izzard completed, in 51 days, a 1,100-mile marathon (i.e. 43 marathons), also for Sport Relief, leaving him with gruesome foot injuries (Barkham, 2009). The stories of celebrity-suffering keep coming: the 2009 Kilimanjaro trek, the 2011 Big Red Nose Desert Trek in Kenya, and the 2013 Comic Relief Challenge ‘Hell and High Water,’ where comedian Dara O’Briain had to be rescued after being thrown overboard from his raft into the Zambezi River (Sheridan, 2013). The latest hellish celebrity experience in the charity game is Davina McCall’s 2014 Sport Relief challenge, appropriately called ‘Davina-Beyond Breaking Point,’ which showed her collapsing from exhaustion and hypothermia after completing a swim across Lake Windermere as part of her charity triathlon for Sport Relief (BBC, 2014)

In recent years, celebrity fundraising has scaled new heights of physical, mental and psychological torture, all culminating in victory against odds that would fell lesser mortals. Celebrities undertake journeys of danger and deprivation which end, like a fairy tale, with ultimate victory, huge smiles and a sense of achievement on the part of the celebrities themselves and their adoring public. All these emotions are neatly tied up into a bounded narrative of mutual congratulations between the ‘public’ and the heroic figure of the celebrity. In the words of Bishop, “*You’ve changed the lives of people. I haven’t.*” (The Huffington Post, 2012). The visceral, spectacular suffering associated with charity fundraising appears to be *de rigueur* – the new frontier – for celebrity elites.

The use of celebrities by charities in their marketing communications is, of course, far from new, especially in the area of international development research and in the campaigns of environmental and humanitarian causes (e.g. Bennet, 1998; Smith and Yanacopulos, 2004; Merchant et al, 2010; Mittelman and Neilson, 2011; Neilson and Mittelman, 2012). The celebrification of emotion has recently been analyzed through the lens of celebrity advocacy (e.g. Chouliaraki, 2006, 2012). Although such studies have usefully highlighted the ‘politics of pity’ and the politics of compassion in the deeply mediatized world of celebrity fundraising, however, there is still a large theoretical and empirical terrain that remains unexplored with regards to the discursive construction of ‘the celebrity’ within such literature. While Chouliaraki (2012) focuses on the celebrity’s emotions, we take it further with our analysis by analysing how the *body* of the celebrity is sacrificed for the cause, further complicating the consumption and commodification of the celebrity.

A key question is, therefore: how are images of celebrities in the context of physical philanthropy constructed and mediatized? Further, how is the commodification of celebrities played out in the mass media and what are its imagistic expressions? We address these questions by analyzing the ways in which a specific type of celebrity-charity engagement is textually and visually constructed: visceral portrayals of celebrities engaging in acts of superhuman endurance and courage.

Drawing upon recent examples of multi-million pound fundraising campaigns by UK charities such as *Comic Relief*, we study the staged situation, the crafted nature of the spectacle itself, with the celebrity-figure as ‘the main event,’ the conduit of emotions associated with charitable giving and also with entertainment: fun, fear, pity, compassion.

To address this subject from a fresh perspective, we consider the French philosopher and cultural critic Guy Debord's political economy of the commodity/celebrity nexus. For Debord (1931-1944), 'spectacle' in modern societies has arisen because men and women are detached from the unitariness of social life and all others in it. We are no longer in emotional or economic concord with our labour nor can we express our souls through its products. Instead – and moving far beyond Marxist doctrine – Debord argues that a consumerist 'media' (or, more accurately, the 'spectacle') dominates every sphere of lived experience. For him, the celebrities personify the split within capitalist societies between life and artifice, spectacle and the everyday. They embody the fragmentation and separation that underlie spectators' hunger for wholeness and non-separation (Debord, 1967).

In the rest of this paper, we employ Debord's theory to illuminate Britain's biggest charity campaign, Comic Relief. The questions we ask are: do these spectacles constitute an entertainment system that isolates, rather than liberates, men and women from the suffering of others, as Debord would argue, or do celebrities really channel public emotion, social relations and experiences that would otherwise not find expression through other means?

### **Spectacularization in Charity Marketing: The New Normal?**

Charity marketing has attracted a healthy amount of scholarly interest, covering the study of different fundraising strategies and their effectiveness (e.g. Pelozo and Hassay, 2007; Fennis et al., 2009) to the marketing communications of the charities themselves (e.g. Coulter, 1989; Radley and Kennedy, 1997; Bennet, 1998; Smith and Yanacopulos, 2004; Merchant et al, 2010; Mittelman and Neilson, 2011; Neilson and Mittelman, 2012). For example, Neilson and Mittelman (2011 and 2012) have focused on the representational issues faced by development agencies. They showed how marketers play a role in

perpetuating negative outcomes (such as reinforcing notions of cultural difference, privilege and superiority, and racism), even when the aid recipients were treated with respect in their marketing campaigns. Other scholars (mostly from development studies) have focused on celebrity advocacy in humanitarian and environmental causes and how different publics respond to them (see Meyer and Gamson, 1995; Brockington, 2014; Brockington and Henson, 2014). The nexus of celebrity advocacy and consumption/marketing has also been under scrutiny, with many criticizing the promotion of consumption as a meaningful means of tackling global problems (Ponte and Richey, 2014), while reproducing or leaving unquestioned the forces that support poverty and degradation (Brockington, 2014: 92; see also among others Boykoff and Goodman, 2009; Yrjola, 2009; Richey and Ponte, 2011; Hawkins, 2012).

Despite these criticisms, celebrities and charitable causes are now inextricably tied to each other (Brockington and Henson, 2014). As Littler (2008: 238) notes, ‘offering support for global charities has become practically part of the contemporary celebrity job description’. Brockington (2014: 94) pinpoints the 1980s as the moment when humanitarian activists “awoke to the power of the celebrity industry,” with Bob Geldof setting up Band Aid, the creation of ‘USA for Africa’ in response to the Ethiopian famine of 1984; with the Amnesty International tour, and the start of Comic Relief in the UK. Many more global campaigns and ‘mega-events’ have followed these, attracting their fair share of controversy (McDougall, 2006; Bradley, 2013; Brockington, 2014).

While celebrity do-goodism continues apace in the age of cosmopolitan globalisation (Littler, 2008), however, its increasingly spectacular imagery merits further study, especially as charities increasingly rely on social media platforms to connect with

celebrities, their fans, and the media (Featherstone, 2007). The media-savvy, continually tweeting, instagramming, selfie celebrity invites her/his fans to live out voyeuristic visions of their everyday lives, thus raising (or lowering) the banal and the ordinary to the level of spectacle.

More recently, media and communications scholars have focused on what Chouliaraki (2012:1) calls “the theatricality of humanitarianism” and the “dependence on spectacle” (ibid: 2) as a way of capturing public attention. She shows that celebrity advocacy focuses the attention of potential donors on celebrities rather than the cause or beneficiaries (see also Goodman, 2010; Brockington and Henson, 2014). She highlights a discourse of humanitarian ‘theatricality’ which privileges the emotions of the celebrity and donors’ connectivity with the celebrity. In this regard, her arguments complement Debord’s critique of spectacle as a constructed process of emotionalizing events, to the exclusion of the intended purpose of the exercise in the first place, namely, the alleviation of suffering on the part of the individuals for whom such spectacles have no meaning or worth. In capitalist societies, however, celebrities now signify public desires and aspirations and is thus *a proxy for public engagement*, even though in pretty much all cases they, the public, were not engaged initially (in Brockington and Henson, 2014: 15, our emphasis).

### **Debord on celebrity and spectacle**

In his seminal work, ‘The Society of the Spectacle’ (1967/1994), Debord analyzes the spectacular logic of everyday life and the role of celebrities as the superficially free symbols of it in the media. His critique of the spectacle as the defining feature of capitalist society “has had a major impact on a variety of contemporary theories of society and culture,”



continuing to generate huge interest “through the Internet and other academic and subcultural sites today” (Kellner, 2003: 2). ‘The Society of the Spectacle’ is made up of 221 numbered “theses,” as Debord called them, and what appears in brackets in this paper is the numbers of the theses being quoted.

Like Adorno, Horkheimer and others of the Frankfurt School, Debord was strongly critical of the commodification and fragmentation of social experience born out of the division of (alienated) labour. The fragmented nature of existence has culminated in the *image*, the cornerstone of an *entertainment system* that isolates rather than liberates men and women from the loneliness of crowds. The role of spectacle is essentially to unify the fragments into a coherent whole that then take on commodity forms we consume. As noted by Jappe (1999, cited by Trier, 2007: 89), the “fragmentation of life into more and more widely separated spheres” has to be resolved “at the level of the image.”

The image is controlled by the media and its currency is the spectacle (sustained by its opposite, lack or privation) (Debord, 1967/1994). The media thrives on the presentation of spectacle “as an ensemble of independent representations” or images (Trier, 2007: 89). At the same time, these ‘independent representations’ of life are put together by some kind of constructed logic, a narrative that implies the neatness of unities, a package that conceals its own fissures and caveats. Put another way, *wholeness is dependent on fragmentation* (or unity and division, as inseparable categories of consumption) and *abundance on struggle*. For Debord, celebrities fulfill the role of bringing to a state of completeness and plenitude what the masses experience as fragmented and inchoate. Put another way, celebrity advocacy commodifies social relations and experiences into consumable goods. The framing of this commodification is the spectacle.

Debord's 'situationism' is a warning to be vigilant in the face of such duplicity. Unless individuals and groups begin to construct new "situations" (Best and Kellner, 1999: 131) to subvert those of the spectacle, they became complicit in, rather than resistant to, the forces of social control: 'in this society, individuals consume a world fabricated by others rather than producing one of their own' (ibid: 132). Entertainment and staged events become the organizing principle of capitalist society, in a way that is both 'fun' and deeply unequal (Best and Kellner, 1999). The masses are fed spectacle after spectacle as though each one were special, incomparable to anything else:

*Each individual commodity fights for itself. It avoids acknowledging the others and strives to impose itself everywhere as if it were the only one in existence. The spectacle is the epic poem of this struggle, a struggle that no Fall of Troy can bring to an end. This spectacle does not sing of men and their arms, but of commodities and their passions (Debord, theses 32-33).*

It is not that Debord thought consumers were dupes; it is that there is no longer any space in capitalist life that is free from spectacularization. When combined with the kind of images of material plenitude that celebrities embody, spectacle can be transformed and channeled in myriad ways. Spectacularization thus offers an aura of wholeness against the perturbations and inconsistencies of social life. It does this through its capacity to symbolize both privation and aspiration, to reconcile opposites in overwhelming, immersive images of human heroism, epitomized in our time by the actions of an Angelina Jolie, for example. We now explain how the images in which they appear enable these acts of heroism to be consumed and swallowed whole.

### **Context: Comic Relief (Red Nose Day and Sport Relief)**

Comic Relief is an operating British charity that was established in 1985, raising millions of pounds through two fundraising events: 'Red Nose Day' and 'Sport Relief' (Comic Relief, 2014). Comic Relief fundraising campaigns are heavily mediatized and enjoy the support of some of the country's biggest corporate organizations such as British Telecom, Sainsbury's and British Airways. It is covered by the BBC (which donates studio space, TV crew and production facilities), thus guaranteeing an audience of millions at every broadcast.

'Red Nose Day' was launched in 1988. It is a bi-annual telethon alternating with 'Sport Relief'. Politicians, comedians, athletes and other well-known entertainment figures in Britain take part in a television special filled with comedy acts to encourage people to give to charity while having a laugh at the same time. In recent years, international events based on this format have sprung up in Africa, the Middle East and the rest of Europe (<http://www.comicrelief.com/rednoseday>).

Sport Relief is held in association with BBC Comic Relief - it combines entertainment and sport to raise money for charities both in the UK and in the world's poorest countries. Sport Relief Mile is a key part of the programme. For both 'Red Nose Day' and Sport Relief, members of the public are encouraged to hold their own events, e.g. swimming, running, cake-baking and quizzes to raise funds. Comic Relief-inspired events have spread across the globe. The events are licensed to, and by, local organisers; the BBC only deals with TV

stations, charities and other parties (<http://www.comicrelief.com/support-us/international-events>).

This year, Sport Relief raised a staggering £51,242,186.00 for charitable causes (BBC News, 2014). In 2013, Red Nose Day raised £75,107,852.00 (BBC News, 2013). The involvement of celebrities in Comic Relief has been a mainstay of the charity since the late nineties. It was, after all, founded by celebrities (the comedian Lenny Henry and actor Richard Curtis) and has since attracted a large support network of artists, politicians and the general public.

## **Method**

To address our aims for this paper, we undertook a discursive and visual analysis of narratives and images of the celebrities' journeys of suffering (with the idea of 'journey' deconstructed through Debord's (1967/94) framing of spectacle). Visuality – or the image – has become the dominant lens of consumption in our consumer culture (Schroeder, 2002) and shapes – indeed, constitutes – the 'reality' into which consumers are socialised (Borgerson and Schroeder, 2005). Images are, therefore, a kind of text, a visual narrative for comprehending reality. As Barthes (1977) notes, the close relationship between image and text exists in two categories: 1) where the verbal text extends the meaning of the image (or vice-versa), and 2) where the verbal text elaborates the meaning of the image (or vice-versa), giving an illustration or a more precise restatement. Textual analysis can, therefore, show what representations include and exclude, what they make salient, and what differences they construct between people, places and things (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2001: 7).

Our analysis is based upon our reading and interpretation of news articles and online reports published between 2009 and 2014 - related to Comic Relief's Red Nose and Sport Relief campaigns, respectively. The material reviewed included both written and visual material published by the BBC, Sport Relief and Comic Relief websites, and popular news media (e.g. the *Mirror* and the *Daily Mail*). Both authors reviewed and analyzed this material independently. This material was subjected to an inductive in-depth discursive analysis - a multi-layered process which focused on both the textual and visual dimensions of the data. We have focused in particular, for each text, on the semantic dimension (what is the narrative about? What happens? What is the most important information conveyed?) and the strategic dimension (what does the text do? How is meaning conveyed? How is the narrative structured/organized? What makes the story compelling, believable?). Answers to the questions above were coded for each text, and across texts, searching for similarities, and identifying main themes (Silverman, 1994; Butler-Kiesberg, 2010). We then discussed themes and analytical categories, contrasting our observations and findings. We agreed that the most interesting data appear from 2012 when celebrity 'extreme' physical challenges became prominent for Comic Relief's Red Nose Day and Sport Relief events. We have thus chosen to focus on the 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2014 Red Nose Day and Sport Relief challenges (see Table 1).

<b>Date</b>	<b>Event</b>	<b>Celebrity<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>Physical challenge</b>	<b>Money raised</b>	<b>Data</b>	<b>Themes</b>
2011	Red Nose Day	Dermot O’Leary, Lorraine Kelly, Kara Tointon, Ronni Ancona, Craig David, Olly Murs, Nadia Sawalha	‘Big Red Nose Desert Trek’  100 km trek across the desert in Northern Kenya	£1.4 Million	Photographs (14 videos on BBC website); BBC website (TV highlights); BT website; newspapers (Daily Mail)	physical hardship; hostile nature
(Sept. 2011 – for 2012 Sport Relief)	Sport Relief	David Walliams	‘David Walliams vs the Thames’	£2.5 Million	Photographs (6); newspaper articles (Daily Mail, Mirror);	physical hardship; survival (life threatening)

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<sup>1</sup> These celebrities are mostly television presenters, actors and comedians who all found fame either fronting or featuring in the BBC’s programmes. Among the comedians are: John Bishop, Jack Dee, Dara O’Briain and David Walliams. Olly Murs, Lorraine Kelly, Davina McCall, Dermot O’Leary, Nadia Sawalha and Peter White are television presenters (Peter White is visually impaired and a fusion guitarist). Kara Tointon and Chelsee Healey are young actresses in a popular soap drama series who also took part in the popular BBC show ‘Strictly Come Dancing’ (called ‘Dance with the Stars’ in the US) in 2012 while Ronnie Ancona is a Scottish actress and author. Sporty Spice (Mel C) was a member of the famous 80s pop group, the Spice Girls and Craig David a singer/songwriter. Greg James and Philip Idowu are track and field athletes who were Olympians during the London 2012 Games.

			Swimming 140.54 miles of the River Thames		Sport Relief website; BT website; BBC website	challenge); hostile nature
2012	Sport Relief	John Bishop	‘Week from Hell’  Cycling, rowing and running over 295 miles from Paris to London in 5 days	£4 million	Photographs (43); newspaper articles (Mirror; Daily Mail); Sport Relief website ; BBC website	physical hardship; bravery (heroism); hostile nature
2013	Red Nose Day	Sporty Spice (Mel C), Jack Dee, Chelsea Healey, Dara O’Briain, Greg James and Philip Idowu	‘Hell and High Water,’  White water rafting down the Zambezi River (111 km in 5 days)	£1.2 million	Photographs (10), newspaper articles (Daily Mail, Mirror); Comic Relief website (videos), Charity Challenge website; BBC website	physical hardship; survival (life- threatening challenge); hostile nature
2014	Sport Relief	Davina McCall	‘Davina – Beyond Breaking Point’  Running, swimming and cycling over 7 days	£2.2 million	Photographs (52); newspaper articles (Daily Mail; Mirror; the Telegraph, the Guardian, Glasgow Evening Times); Sport Relief website; BBC website	physical hardship; survival (life- threatening challenge); bravery, heroism, hostile nature

It should be noted that while linguistic elements (word repetition, metaphors, grammar, etc.) were analyzed (to help us understand the semantic and strategic use of language) we do not provide here a detailed review of the micro-structure of language, the way other studies who use news reports as data might do (see among many others van Dijk, 1992; Teo, 2000; Furniss, 2001; Bishop and Jaworski, 2003; Harding, 2006). These studies share a concern for the construction and reproduction of discriminatory social relations in media discourse, such as the stereotyping of minorities, prejudice, sexism, racism and nationalism (e.g. van Dijk, 1992; Teo, 2000; Furniss, 2001; Harding, 2006). Discourse *per se* (and its link to power, hegemony and ideology) is not the primary focus of our research. For the sake of illustrating Debord's relevance for understanding the intersection of celebrity and charity work, we present our findings organized by themes constructing the journey/transformation of celebrities as heroes for the Comic Relief campaigns.

The material was initially examined for broad categories and then coded in detail, by delineating themes from our interpretations of the written data. In our interpretation of images, we followed Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) who note that the visual component of a text is an independently organized and structured message, connected to the written component, but not necessarily dependent on it. In total, 125 pictures from the different campaigns and news reports were analyzed for their textual components, not as evidence of the *who*, *where* and *what* they referred to, but as evidence of *how* their maker(s) have chosen to represent 'reality' (van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001). That is to say, images are culturally constructed rather than objective records of visual data.

For our visual analysis, we used interpretive tools including: information which is both internal and external to the object, such as context, comparisons, denotation, and



connotation. The basic interpretive techniques are: subject matter (e.g. group, models), form (e.g. fold-out ads), medium (e.g. black and white photographs), style (e.g. harsh, realistic), genre (refers to a type or category of art, e.g. group portrait) and contextual issues (e.g. the purpose of the picture and how it is presented, encompassing concerns external to the photograph or advertisement) (Schroeder, 2002: 119).

Because we agree with Schroeder (2002) that the interpretation of images is never complete or closed (Schroeder, 2002), each author reviewed the data independently before cross-checking interpretations with the other. This process of combining two sets of analysis proved useful for creating codes and generating the following themes: 1- physical hardship; 2- danger (life threatening challenge); 3- emotion/bravery (heroism); 4- hostile nature; all these themes contribute to the creation and representation of the celebrity as hero/superhuman and the celebrity as human. We discuss these in detail in the following section.

## **Findings**

Our findings show a certain formulaic narrative undergirding the journeys of celebrities in both charity campaigns. This template may be described as the overcoming of extreme odds in a spectacular context and ‘exotic’ locales (for Red Nose Day challenges). Locally, equally spectacular feats of endurance are undertaken by celebrities (for Sport Relief). Thus, we see celebrities risking life and limb swimming the Thames, whitewater rafting in the Zambezi and running, swimming and cycling in a 7-day triathlon. Notably, these

celebrities are not professional athletes<sup>2</sup> although many of them have a track record of physical fitness and achievement. The core themes identified throughout the five campaigns studied here are: physical hardship, survival in the face of danger, bravery/heroism and battling with Nature (set up as a hostile or unfriendly ‘opponent’). The combination of sheer physicality and emotional endurance demonstrated by the celebrities is then mediatized within the template of a heroic journey. They did not start as heroes – the journey creates them as such.

### ***1-Physical Hardship***

Each challenge highlights the physical hardship that the celebrity would be experiencing. The words used to describe the challenge echo this theme: ‘*gruelling challenge*’; ‘*arduous physical challenge*’; ‘*a series of arduous back-to-back feats of endurance*’ (e.g. [http://www.yorkpress.co.uk/news/national/news/11010454.Davina\\_in\\_tears\\_as\\_challenge\\_ends/1/](http://www.yorkpress.co.uk/news/national/news/11010454.Davina_in_tears_as_challenge_ends/1/)) and several other news outlets on the well-known television presenter Davina McCall’s challenge) and ‘*brutal seven-day triathlon*’ (e.g. Watts, 2014), and in various other websites and newspapers). The length and details of the challenge are described quantitatively (i.e. 500 miles; 7 days; ‘*gruelling 500-mile quest*’); “*Davina braved brutal conditions, tackling a punishing 130-mile cycle on Day One, swimming the life-threateningly cold Lake Windermere, scaling the colossal Scafell Pike on foot in freezing snow [...]*” (Hislop, The Edinburgh Reporter, 2014). David Walliams, a highly successful comedian, “*completed the toughest challenge of his life in Walliams vs. The Thames, swimming 140 miles of the Thames in just eight days – raising over £2.5m in the process*”

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<sup>2</sup> An exception is the British World Champion triple jumper Phillips Idowu who took part to the 2013 ‘Hell and High Water’ Red Nose challenge.

(Anonymous [1], 2012). In the process, he “*endured freezing waters, a stomach bug, severe vomiting and diarrhea, which caused him to fall behind schedule*” (BBC, 2014). The physical hardship is vividly captured on film (video and still images). The news reports and the Sport Relief website provide photographs of the celebrity, dishevelled, in distress (e.g. collapsing, recovering in bed), or grimacing through medical treatment (massage and ice treatments) (see Hodgson, 2014; the *Telegraph*, 2014).

Red Nose Day has also been described in similarly impressive terms: “[about the Hell and High Water challenge] *the toughest yet Comic Relief challenge to date*” (Anon. BBC, 2013). The suffering of the celebrities becomes the focal point to attract viewers to the TV programme. For example, List, an online TV guide, uses the title ‘*TV stars suffering on Comic Relief desert trek*’ (see The List, 2011) to preface a vivid description of the suffering in question :

*“Olly Murs, Dermot O’Leary and Lorraine Kelly have all been struck down with painful injuries in Kenya. The telly trio - who are currently taking part in gruelling 100-kilometre BT Red Nose Desert Trek across the African country’s inhospitable Kaisut Desert to raise vital funds for Comic Relief - are all suffering at the hands of the scorching heat. [...] the usually chirpy Lorraine Kelly is suffering from painful mouth ulcers.”*

Since blisters are a minor ailment that all readers and viewers might have also experienced themselves, the following quote by Radio 4 presenter Peter White highlights the scale of the pain as ‘uncommon’ (i.e. beyond ‘normal’ blisters): “*The medic that looked at my feet, who happens to be an ex-soldier, said he’s seen squaddies removed from battle for having feet as bad as mine.*” (The List, 2011).

## ***2- Hostile Nature***

Mountains, rivers, lakes and other natural phenomena are constructed in these celebrity journeys as forces that have to be overcome. The difficult weather conditions (wind, snow, rain, storms, floods, scorching heat/sun) are systematically cited to highlight the difficulty of the task. For the Desert Trek, the desert landscape and the “*blistering heat*” make the challenge particularly tough for the celebrities:

*“Despite the punishing heat, the daunting distance and accumulated fatigue, the trekkers, inspired by your donations, reach their final destination [...]” “Embarking on the toughest physical challenge of their lives, nine celebrities attempted to cross one of the world’s most inhospitable deserts in Northern Kenya to raise cash for Comic Relief”* (BBC, 2011a).

For or the challengers taking on the Sport Relief activities on the UK soil, the weather is the enemy: ‘*dire conditions*’, ‘[Davina McCall had to] *battle snow and ice as she cycled and ran through the Peak district*’; ‘[...] *struggled against snow*’; ‘*battling the elements*’ (various articles on Davina-Beyond Breaking point, e.g. BBC 2014; Hodgson, 2014). McCall’s trainer is quoted as saying: “*these are the worst weather conditions we’ve seen on any challenge- it’s the worst weather ever*” (BBC News, 2014). In one shot, Davina is photographed walking alone, desolate, amidst a snowy landscape (never mind that an entourage and camera crews were clearly in attendance).

## ***3-Survival***

The ‘journey’ as a transformational voyage of physical, emotional and psychological suffering and self-discovery is, as we have seen, a key part of packaging the spectacle. Going beyond one’s limits, and surviving ordeals and dangers of every kind, are important

aspects of the extreme physical challenges the celebrities face. We noted earlier that the dangers facing the celebrity have become an important theme for the most recent campaigns (from 2012 onwards for Sport Relief, and from 2013 onwards for Red Nose Day). For example, the Zambezi is branded as ‘deadly’ and dramatic acclaim follows as soon as it is known that the celebrities have in fact ‘survived’ their challenge:

*“They made it! Our BT Red Nose Challenges: Hell and High Water team **survived** over 100km of the **deadly** Zambezi, all to raise money for Comic Relief”* (Red Nose Day, 2013; our emphasis).

The description of the TV broadcast on BBC of the ‘Hell and High Water’ documentary promises viewers a riveting programme, saturated with images of danger and the potential death of the celebrity (almost to the point of excluding the beneficiaries’ own plight):

*“Daunting, testing and genuinely dangerous, this challenge will see the celebrities face raging rapids, crocodile-infested waters, near-death experiences, emotional school visits and marauding hippos as they go through ‘Hell and High Water’. The six celebrities face some of their darkest moments and share their heart wrenching experience, all to raise funds to help educate some of the poorest children on the planet”* (BBC, 2013).

Nature and local wildlife, in particular, are also constructed as dangerous and life-threatening in the case of the Red Nose challenges taking place overseas (in Africa) for both the 2011 and 2012 events. Journalists gleefully relayed the dangers in detail for the ‘Hell and High Water’ challenge:

*“Before setting off, the celebrities were briefed about ...hippos that chomp at boats to knock them over, and crocodiles that then line the shore, attacking rafters as they swim to safety. With the threat from wildlife growing greater by the day, the challengers have to be off the river by nightfall to help avoid attack from hippos – who kill an average of 3000 people a year on the Zambezi” (Croft, 2013).*

Comedian Dara O’Briain adds: *“The brief this morning was really scary... apparently, if the hippos don’t get you, the crocodiles will chew the boat until it’s dragged down.”* (Croft, 2013). In comparison, the celebrities taking part in the Desert Trek in 2011 only (!) had to deal with *“fighting exhaustion, blisters, scorpions, stomach bugs and high temperatures (50 degrees Celsius)”* (BBC, 2011).

For the challenges undertaken on British soil (and remarkably lacking in dangerous wildlife), the danger is still emphasized. David Walliams fell very ill after swallowing the bacteria-infected Thames river water during his charity swim. He told reporters:

*I've got quite an upset stomach, so I'm really, really feeling sick. I haven't been able to eat anything. .. I've been sweating all morning but I'm hoping it will pass. I like to stay positive. We'll see what happens. This is a journey, not a race [...]. If I get seriously, seriously ill and I have to have a day out of the water, so be it. We'll get back in again the next day” (Mirror, 2011).*

In addition to tearing a disc in his back, he also showed signs of hypothermia and had to put on a wetsuit (which caused him painful rashes on the neck) (Mirror, 2011). The ‘dramatic collapse’ of Davina McCall after her swim was also widely relayed in the media. The challenge is also described in glowing terms: ‘*an outstanding achievement*’, ‘*stunning*

*effort*, ‘*a life-changing experience*’ for the celebrity; but also the physical and emotional toll it has taken on her. Davina’s face and physique are described in detail over and over again: ‘*she looked weary*’; ‘*looking far from happy*’; ‘*sobbing*’; ‘*left physically drained by the experience*’ (*The Times*, 2014); ‘*The TV star has also been battling with the pain of being in the saddle for so long...*’; ‘*Lost her appetite*’; ‘*suffers from hypothermia*’ (Leyfield, 2014). The celebrity herself also provides updates on her physical condition. Davina McCall posted on Twitter (for her 1.9 million followers) a photo of her legs covered with ice packs with the comment: ‘*very sore knees and right shin*’. She actively participates in the construction of her ‘*epic*’ journey of pain and suffering for fundraising.

#### **4- Bravery and Heroism**

Bravery and heroism are highlighted in several news reports of the Sport Relief and Red Nose challenges. Photographs that accompany the articles praise the heroic celebrity who endures extreme physical pain to raise money. The team of celebrities who took on the “*gruelling*” BT Red Nose Challenges: Hell and High, is described as “*intrepid*” (Croft, 2013). They indeed need to be fearless if they are to “*take on their next set of terrifying rapids, amid dangerous wildlife*” (Croft, 2013).

The celebrities are often portrayed as flawed (in a human way) but ultimately overcome their physical weakness and/or fear. For example, readers are made aware of Davina’s phobia of open water: “*The **brave** former BB presenter....who has a fear of open water ...had to be treated for hypothermia*” (Armstrong and Jefferies, *Mirror* 2014). The reader is told that: “*She has won over the public with her resilience over the past few days with TV viewers seeing **her sobbing and barely able to enter the water** during a 1.5 mile swim*

*across Windermere*” (*Herald Scotland*, 2014). A similar tactic is used to describe the additional challenge facing Peter White who is visually impaired:

*“The five-day adventure [Desert Trek] saw the team deal with snakes, spiders and scorpions, and endure temperatures as high as 118 degrees Fahrenheit. The route presented them with frequent rock slides and dangerously rocky paths. Hard enough for the sighted celebrities, but for visually impaired Radio 4 presenter Peter White, it was a real test of skills. “I would say that today was the most physically challenging day of my entire life so far,” he said on Day One. [...] “As a blind person, trying to combine a steep climb while dodging rock slides is really tough.””* (BT, 2011).

The transition from mere mortal with physical weaknesses and fears to a hero is visible with the triumphant arrival of the celebrity at the end of the challenge, greeted and cheered by journalists, supporters, family and friends as she/he comes home. Davina is photographed holding up the British flag upon arriving at the final destination (which reminds us of the way gold medalists take to the winner’s podium or run the victory lap at major international sporting events). She quipped: *“wearing this is like being an Olympian, but I don’t really feel like I should be allowed to wave the flag around”* (Leyfield, 2014). Evidently, someone gave her the flag for a great photo op, highlighting the heroic status of the celebrity. Athletes and Olympians are modern-day national heroes but the peculiar irony and incongruity of the situation where she is obliged to wave the British flag after the ritual of heroic/human suffering appears to have escaped her and the British public.



## **Discussion**

Our findings show in detail the spectacularized suffering of celebrities as they undertake journeys of adventure, fear and deprivation. A dominant theme running through our analysis is the physical nature of the suffering: extreme pain, blood and injury – ‘exhaustion, blisters, scorpions,’ ‘really, really ill’ and so on – accompanied by real tears and a sense that death could be round the corner. Media discourse, it has been shown, has tremendous power in contributing and reproducing social processes (see for example, Teo, 2000; Furniss, 2001; Bishop and Jaworski, 2003; Harding, 2006). The media shapes people’s perceptions and knowledge of the world and social situations, their interpersonal roles and their identities (de Cilla et al., 1999). This has important consequences for the way people ‘receive’ media discourse, and in this case, the representation of role models (i.e. the celebrities) in epic journeys of suffering and heroism.

Spectacular suffering in this context is illuminated by Debord’s theory of spectacularization and the two pillars of his critique we have identified as particularly relevant for this purpose: wholeness/fragmentation and abundance/privation. Underpinning these dualities is the concept of the spectacle as that which gives the illusion of “unreal unity” [theses 72]. Thus, the celebrification of suffering or, in other words, the mass visual consumption of what he calls ‘privation’ [44] must fit a neat narrative. Our findings show that the elements of the narrative rest not only upon a structure of the hero overcoming physical hardship (privation) but also ultimate victory (wholeness). By analyzing the visuality of suffering and the discourse of pain, survival, heroism and triumph against extreme odds while battling ‘Nature,’ we show how suffering is inscribed upon the bodies of celebrities in dramatic, even gruesome ways.

This kind of public participation by proxy (in this case by displacing suffering on the body of a celebrity) is a twist on the phenomenon of the ‘crucial communicative figure’ (Chouliaraki, 2012: 2) who can authenticate and also represent in his or her person the ‘distant suffering’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005) of starving millions in Africa and elsewhere. As noted by these authors, a crucial caveat emerges when celebrities take over the pity felt by the privileged millions for those other distant others: it is precisely because the celebrity proposes a universal altruism that the former can give without truly feeling the suffering of the orphans in Africa, or the people suffering from AIDS for example. These others become distant (forgotten, almost): they become only third parties in that spectacle, mere ‘figurants’ or accessories to the main event (accented by, rather than in spite of, the triumphant arrival of the hero at the village to cheering crowds. It is a notable irony that somebody like David Walliams makes so much of his swallowing contaminated water from the Thames when millions routinely drink water that is at least as, if not more, contaminated because they have no choice.<sup>3</sup> An even greater irony is the sight of celebrities tipping ice-cold water – water that is presumably ultra-safe to drink! – over themselves in the most recent global charity sensation, the Ice Bucket Challenge, before nominating their celebrity pals to do the same thing, thus wasting even more water. What is celebrated is the figure of the drenched celebrity, the spectacle itself, thus further severing the bond between spectators and the beneficiaries of the charity, sufferers of ALS or motor neurone disease.

As Debord would argue, even deeper layers of separation between celebrities and beneficiaries can be discerned in our analysis: while searing heat, thirst, disease, raging

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<sup>3</sup> We owe this insight to an anonymous reviewer.

rivers and the threat of death are probably endured as an ever-present lived reality for aid recipients, these same experiences are spectacularized by the media so as to make celebrities appear extraordinarily brave for taking them on.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the raging rapids, hippos, crocs and so on are framed as exotically dangerous psycho-geographies for popular consumption, thus further glamorizing the celebrity-figure and erasing the aid recipients as the focus of the campaign.

While contemporary charity fundraising is invariably presented through images of dramatized suffering, what is constructed in the media is, nevertheless, a more sanitised version of human suffering than the real ordeals faced by the starving, the homeless, the sick, and the unloved. It is noted, for instance, that in all the case studies we have explored, the celebrities made the point, repeatedly and emphatically, that what they have done is only meaningful insofar as the public supported them, re-casting the roles of ‘victim’, ‘hero’ and ‘donor’. The suffering they submit to is doubly painful to witness because it so closely mimics penitential rites endured by the sinner, the outcast, the leper.

These visual images form the basis of our framework of how spectacle works in capitalist societies. Like images of vaccines, running water, clean white hospital bed sheets and celebrities hugging the malnourished or HIV-positive child, the spectacular logic “silences anything that it finds inconvenient” (Debord, 13). It isolates all from its context, its past, its intentions and consequences. Ultimately, spectacle defies any imagery. The pornographic nature of suffering (or suffering heightened to a pitch that is scarcely believable or relatable by audiences) sets the image free from any locus of signification; the suffering is hyped-up

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<sup>4</sup> We owe this insight to another anonymous reviewer.

imagery, a floating signifier devoid of meaning (Baudrillard, 1981). Thus, spectacular suffering (paradoxically) both undercuts and energizes Debord's Marxist structuralism.

In the search to be unified with its referent, spectacle functions in our society almost purely as a commodity-form, a product that can be endlessly invented and re-invented to create emotionally satisfying scenarios and performances to stimulate mind and body. These scenarios often have very little, if anything at all, to do with the issue at hand, whether it is a war between nations, trying to eradicate disease and poverty or improving social justice or mobility. These larger questions are, in fact, trivialized and made entertaining in order to make large issues seem easy to solve. Like the hero/human, rich/poor, donor/sufferer dichotomies set up by charity events, spectacles thrive on easy oppositions: "fallacious archaic oppositions are revived" by such spectacles and "and pseudoplayful enthusiasms are aroused by an *endless succession of ludicrous competitions, from sports to elections*" (Debord, 62, our emphasis).

Our analysis shows – drawing upon Debord – that, in the case of Sport Relief, it is not only the underprivileged who disappear from our screens and our imaginations by the all-consuming spectacle of the suffering celebrity. The charities themselves are not heard or seen, except in very brief glimpses. It is the suffering itself that gives us, in an instant, all the "intangible as well as tangible things" [36] that constitute charitable giving: pity, love, altruism and satisfaction. Congealed into images of the hero, hostile Nature, danger and survival, the suffering of the celebrity is fetishized into a commodity-form that conceals both the charities as well as its dependents. And so we arrive at the final, bizarre twist upon Debord's insight that "separation is the alpha and omega of the spectacle" [25]: by spectacularizing the suffering of celebrities, Comic Relief (with the BBC) both

commodifies and splits asunder the bond that ought to have joined spectators with the charitable cause or the beneficiaries of those causes.

Without discounting the fact that millions of dollars and pounds are undoubtedly raised for charity without the use of celebrities, the likelihood remains that there are few more effective ways for charities to raise money-in-an-instant than through images such as those we have described in this paper. The spectacles compress pity, heroism and struggle into a 27-day package (not unlike instant diets or instant meditation) that exceeds what an Angelina Jolie or Sharon Stone could do (with their aspirational but remote auras of pity). In the data we have looked at here, the public are encouraged to feel that the celebrities' journeys are theirs. They are constantly and lavishly thanked by celebrities - David Walliams even kisses the air at them profusely towards the end of the latest Sport Relief programme (Anon, Comic Relief website, 2014a) (the camera shows him moving away from Gary Lineker and towards the viewer as he does this, thus literally closing the gap between him and the millions watching the programme). Whole. Perfect. Complete.

What does 'spectacularization' really do for consumers and the celebrities themselves? Are they just pawns, ultimately, in a great media game of entertainment? What agency is there for both sufferer and voyeur? The insight of Debord is that spectacles merely defer the consumer's awareness of divisions that are always already present. They present as eternal and satisfying that which is transient and changeful:

*The image of blissful social unification through consumption merely postpones the consumer's awareness of the actual divisions until his next disillusionment with some particular commodity. Each new product is ceremoniously acclaimed as a unique*

*creation offering a dramatic shortcut to the promised land of total consummation*  
[Debord, 69].

In this sense, spectacular charity events are fraudulent, both intellectually and morally. The public are invited to participate in these events through a scripted narrative in which they both commodify the celebrity but are also commodified by the very process and structure of the event: ‘What obliges the producers to participate in the construction of the world is also what excludes them from it’ [Debord, 72]. This gap is closed, as we have shown, by the clever construction of a simple (even banal) mythic narrative that appears easily accessible to most but is in fact rendered powerful because it is undergirded and infused by elements of spectacular suffering. The final piece – that of celebrities living out the narrative and suffering through it – clicks into place to seal its place in the public’s imagination because it makes whole that which was fragmented and makes privation a privilege for those lucky enough to witness and share in it.

## **Conclusion**

Giving to charity is, arguably, one of the great, unquestioned pillars of British society: “*We are a great sporting nation but also one of the most generous countries when it comes to contributing to good causes*” proudly notes David Cameron (BBC News, 2014b). It is an entrenched value in every sector of commercial and private life and hundreds of millions of pounds are raised every year for charitable causes. As Nelson et al. (2011: 815-6) note, ‘almost no one disagrees with (the) values’ associated with giving to charity.

Celebrities have a powerful role to play in promoting these values because ‘can be powerful allies in the battle for public opinion’ (ibid.) waged by policy-makers, the media, sponsors and advertisers:

*The function of these celebrities is to act out various lifestyles or socio-political viewpoints in a full, totally free manner. They embody the inaccessible results of social labour by dramatising the by-products of that labour which are magically projected above it as its ultimate goals: power and vacations – the decision making and consumption that are at the beginning and the end of a process that is never questioned...But the activities of these stars are not really free, and they offer no real choices. [Debord, 60]*

The use of celebrities as a kind of easy, golden answer to communicate and market charities’ values and missions (Helmig et al., 2004; Vazquez et al., 2002) is increasingly criticised as strategically narrow and unimpressive in its impact: already, there are signs that “the ability of celebrity advocates to reach people is limited, and dominated (in Britain) by some extremely prominent telethons [including Comic Relief] and the work of a few stars” (Brockington and Henson, 2014: 8).

At the same time, the spectacle continues to scale new heights. The public not only aspire to the material abundance of celebrities; they now aspire *to suffer like they do* for charitable causes. For instance, there is an increasingly popular trend for the public to mimic celebrities through bodily and visceral expressions of sympathy for the underprivileged, a form of *physical philanthropy* that has now penetrated corporate offices, schools and other places: “Companies all over London are encouraging their employees to take part in extreme physical challenges to raise money for their chosen causes,” notes Simon Albert,

co-founder of Charity Challenge (2010). Future research could focus on how celebrities' involvement in charity marketing and fundraising actually flattens the emotional engagement the public has with charitable causes.

Last but not least, the charitable organizations themselves, as we have pointed out, should not escape attention. The nature and scope of celebrity gift-giving and philanthropy raise new questions for marketing researchers. For instance, Mark 'Facebook' Zuckerberg's US\$1 billion to charity (Stone, 2014) recasts Debordian questions about privation, abundance, narratives of wholeness in a new light and we should ask whether or not such massive gifts end up creating new divisions between classes and groups in societies. Does lavish gifting on this scale – whether in the form of blood, injuries or dollars, art collections, monuments and mansions -- make the word 'charity' obsolete, even laughable in some instances? How much is too much? Are charities in danger of being 'too rich to fail'? What are the moral and emotional limits on charitable giving in the years to come? And how are charities and the media going to satisfy an ever-growing appetite among the public for more and more spectacular shows of privation? In future – and on a continuum of extreme marketing tactics – will celebrities start bleeding on public television to sell soap? Our paper has, hopefully, focused attention on the logic of spectacularization in this regard by applying Debord's theory as a heuristic and theoretical frame to develop a more finely-grained and innovative understanding of the operations and effects of celebrity advocacy in our time.

Let us leave the final (and brilliantly concise) word to Lucy Mangan of *The Guardian*:

*“There is some part of me that won't be satisfied without blood or dismemberment next time. Make Lionel Blair tap-dance until his feet are bloody stumps, and I will stump*



*up. Show me shark-bitten chunks of Graham Norton strewn around the Atlantic coast and I'll be sorry, sure – I love Graham Norton – but I will give you the fiver I sort of feel I no longer owe you otherwise”. (Mangan, 2014)*

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