

# The participatory politics and play of canceling an idol: Exploring how fans negotiate their fandom of a canceled ‘fave’

Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies  
2023, Vol. 0(0) 1–15  
© The Author(s) 2023



Article reuse guidelines:  
[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)  
DOI: 10.1177/13548565231199983  
[journals.sagepub.com/home/con](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/con)



**Simone Driessen** 

Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands

## Abstract

What happens if your favorite artist gets canceled? Can you remain a fan after such a controversy? This study explores how fans – those with a strong affective bond toward their fan object – negotiate their fannish position and practices after the cancellation of their idol. Fans are asked to re-evaluate their fandom, and potentially their participation in it: a political turning point in their fannish career. To better understand this phenomenon, this study examines the fandom of the canceled Dutch singer and The Voice coach Marco Borsato. Doing so, it highlights how fans negotiate, give meaning to and understand the cancellation of their ‘problematic fave’ by drawing on an interview study with twelve Dutch fans of Marco Borsato complemented with an analysis of online fan comments. A thematic analysis of this data shows the complexity of being a fan of a canceled artist. Further, it reveals how fans navigate the everyday political and cultural consequences of being a(n ex-)fan in this situation. Findings illustrate how some fans steadfastly commit to their fandom and dismiss the allegations, while others are more careful in publicly expressing their affection and wish to first learn more about the situation. They feel conflicted about the situation and turn their fandom into something more /private. Based on these findings, this article unfolds what motivates some to step away from this cancel case and Borsato, while others defend him at all costs. Through this lens, we can argue that this might resonate with and help us better understand for example polarized views in society at large. So, seemingly innocent fannish play offers a first look and step toward an understanding of how such processes play out on a macro-level.

## Keywords

Fandom, cancel culture, fan politics, music fandom, cancel practice, cultural industry, #MeToo, music industry, fan play

---

## Corresponding author:

Simone Driessen, Department of Arts & Culture Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Burg. Oudlaan 50, Rotterdam 3000 DR, The Netherlands.

Email: [Driessen@eshcc.eur.nl](mailto:Driessen@eshcc.eur.nl)

What happens if your favorite artist gets canceled? Can you remain a fan after such a controversy? Does it make you complicit in case the artist is guilty of something? Or does this mean the end of your relationship with your ‘fave’? This study explores how fans – those with a strong affective bond toward their fan object – negotiate their fannish position and practices after the cancellation of their idol. Fans are asked to re-evaluate their fandom, and potentially their participation in it: a political turning point in their fannish career. To better understand this development, this article examines the fandom of the canceled Dutch singer and *The Voice* coach Marco Borsato. Doing so, it highlights how fans negotiate, give meaning to, and understand the cancellation of their ‘problematic fave’.

Marco Borsato can be considered one of the Netherlands’s most popular and beloved singers (see [Reijnders et al., 2014](#)). Typically, Borsato is presented in Dutch media as a caring husband, loving father, and talented coach and judge helping singers in reality TV show *The Voice of Holland* and its ‘Kids-edition’. In December 2021, rumors started that he was accused of grooming and sexual assault of a (back then) 15-year-old female. Now, at age 22, the woman decided to officially accuse Borsato of indecent behavior. This news was soon confirmed by and in Dutch media. Borsato denied the allegations via a public message shared by his team of lawyers yet didn’t appear publicly to deny these claims. Later, more accusations followed – yet in 2023, the Public Prosecutor’s Office announced that some of these will not be prosecuted. Still, his music was banned by Dutch radio stations, his wax figure at the Madame Tussauds-museum in Amsterdam was removed, and he had to stop his ambassador role for NGO War Child. Borsato was undeniably canceled – by Dutch media, the media industry, and ‘the public’.

This article explores a particular group within that ‘public’, namely, the group who emotionally feels close to the singer and is very invested in his persona and career: his fans. Academically, we still know little about ‘fans whose fandom has come to an end due to illegal, immoral, or abhorrent acts by the object of fandom’ ([Jones, 2018](#): 44). Previous research into fandoms does discuss topics like fans long-term fandom or enduring fandom (cf. [Driessen, 2015](#); [Harrington and Bielby, 2010](#)), or looks at what happens when fans’ favorite TV-series ends (cf. [Williams, 2011](#)), or scrutinizes fans’ feelings after their idol died (cf. [Phillips, 2015](#); [Sanderson and Hope Cheong, 2010](#)). Yet, there is still ground to explore when it comes to cases in which fans decide to or consider to *actively* end their fandom due to a controversy surrounding their favorite object (or subject) of fandom. The cancellation of a celebrity might be such an instance in which fans are asked to reconsider their fandom or shape it differently. More so, fans might feel inclined to ‘reiterate’ or ‘renegotiate’ ([Williams, 2015](#)) their fannish feelings or simply struggle with them after a controversy.

Drawing on an interview study with twelve Dutch fans of Marco Borsato, supplemented with a content analysis of 546 comments on two popular, publicly accessible Borsato-fan pages (also see [Driessen, n.d.](#)) this study unpacks different fan discourses of how fandom happens and is experienced after the cancellation of their ‘fave’. An analysis of the data shows the complexity of being a fan of a canceled artist. Furthermore, it reveals how some of these fans navigate the everyday political and cultural consequences of being a(n ex-)fan in this situation, while others dismiss the claims against Borsato. Findings illustrate how some fans steadfastly commit to their fandom under the guide of innocent-until-proven-guilty, while others are more careful in publicly expressing their fandom after the allegations. Additionally, most fans indicate they find it difficult to navigate through the situation because of ‘cancel culture’; a seemingly ‘playful’ yet ambiguous and ambivalent phenomenon with severe consequences. Before discussing the different findings of this study, first Marco Borsato and his role in the Dutch entertainment industry are introduced. This is followed by a theoretical background to position this work in relation to the cancel culture and how this can be understood as a fannish, political, participatory practice. The study wraps up with a

conclusion and suggestions for future research dealing with cancel cases in the creative industries and society at large.

## Introducing Marco Borsato

Borsato has been active in the Dutch entertainment industry since the 1990s, and many of his fans have followed him ever since. Before rising to fame, Borsato, who has an Italian father and a Dutch mother, sang in Italian, and worked as a chef. His break-through happened through participation in a popular televised playback show called the *Soundmixshow* – a predecessor to formats like talent show *Idols*, where contestants were required to sing live to their favorite song. After winning the show and therewith a record deal, Borsato released a few albums in Italian. In 1994, his partner in songwriting encouraged him to sing in Dutch, which launched the singer into a new wave of national fame. Ever since, he has been one of the most successful and highest grossing artists in the Dutch music industry (Reijnders et al., 2014). He has won multiple awards for his albums, songs, as an artist and several awards for his repertoire.<sup>1</sup> He scored fifteen number-one songs in the Netherlands (for comparison: the Beatles scored sixteen in the Netherlands<sup>2</sup>), and many of his albums were the ‘bestselling record’ of the year in the Netherlands and Belgium. Furthermore, according to a renowned ticket selling platform in the Netherlands, he sold out numerous series of concerts in the biggest stadia and concert venues in the Netherlands and Belgium.<sup>3</sup> However, in 2021, after accusations of a family friend who claimed Borsato had sexually assaulted and groomed her, radio-shows stopped playing his music. The controversial news about the allegations wasn’t the first public blow to his star image. In 2019, it was revealed that Borsato had an extramarital affair with a significantly younger female musician, resulting in his over 20-year marriage to end. And, after the first rumors of affairs and sexual harassment, some more followed. Particularly after Dutch journalist and activist Tim Hofmann elaborately reported, in his online show *BOOS*, on several claims and instances of sexual harassment and misconduct following accounts of multiple participants in talent show *The Voice*, where Borsato also served as one of the judges and mentors. The revelations in *BOOS* laid bare how the #MeToo-phenomenon is present in the Dutch media industry, with *The Voice* judges and other staff members playing a prominent role in it.

At the time of writing (mid-2023), the investigation into Borsato is still ongoing. So far, Borsato has not talked much about the case publicly. Only a few statements were given via his lawyer, emphasizing ‘Marco denies the allegations and actually had requested an investigation himself concerning insinuations toward his reputation and public image’. Moreover, the singer has seemingly disappeared from the public eye. He is no longer visible in Dutch media, his concerts have been canceled, his website nor socials have been updated since 2021 (except for a Tweet promoting his son’s song). Despite not offering updates to his fandom publicly, his fans do remain active and seem to struggle with how to make sense of the case.

## Cancel culture: playful and/or political act by audiences to silence celebrities?

When reading through the controversy surrounding Borsato, particularly its consequences, it can be argued his case can be described as an example fitting the so-called phenomenon of cancel culture. Following Eve Ng’s (2020) definition of the phenomenon, cancel culture is what happens when an audience publicly withdraws their support for someone, or boycotts them, building on an (alleged) accusation or controversial situation. After the news got out that Borsato was accused by a woman for sexual assault and grooming, which resulted in allegedly more accusations, several radio stations decided

to not play his music anymore until a verdict happened. Following the release of the *BOOS*-episode on *The Voice*, the singing-contest was literally canceled (Ng, 2022) and no longer broadcasted on national, commercial television. Another consequence for Borsato was that his public ambassador role for NGO War Child was over. These consequences help to understand the mechanisms of what happens when an artist or public figure becomes ‘canceled’. Eve Ng (2022), in her book *Cancel Culture*, defines cancel culture as a phenomenon composed of both cancel practices, to be considered as the actual actions (cancel practices) against or aimed at a cancel target – a brand, person, or company, and cancel discourses, which can be understood as the commentaries about canceling.

To elaborate, a celebrity in Ng’s conceptualization (2022) is defined as a cancel target: an individual subject to canceling. Furthermore, ‘canceling’ as a practice can be done via social media posts, withdrawing public support, unfollowing this person, or no longer spending money on their career or products. Often this happens in the online realm, as Velasco argues ‘on social media, any user can be the judge, jury and executioner of any individual’ (p. 2). Additionally, as Driessen (2020), drawing on a body of literature from surveillance studies, points out: fans easily can denounce, publicly campaign, or shame their idol on social media, leading to potentially a withdrawal from their work or discredit their status. Although audiences might do this in a playful manner (Nybro Petersen (2022), these practices can have severe consequences. As Nybro Petersen (2022: 1) argues, ‘fan practices [...] have become a mode of digital participation that has far broader implications in mainstream Western culture’, think of scenarios like the January 6 insurrection (a seemingly playful yet disconcerting event) at the US Capitol following former president Trump’s electoral defeat. Following Janssens and Spreuwenberg (2022), who argue canceling someone is a form of redistribution of attention: canceling means removing or denying access of a privileged person to the public sphere. Moreover, for a canceled person this literally might mean they are being silenced and consequently damage their careers or even lives (Janssens and Spreuwenberg, 2022).

Therewith, these practices have the potential to be considered as everyday political activities and actions (see Flinder and Wood, 2018). So, through the lens of fandom we can potentially learn about the social implications and political impact of cancel culture for the public sphere, in which fans’ actions are becoming more and more visible (Mueller, 2022). Juarez Miro (2021) even suggests we can use a Fan Studies framework to make sense of populist supporters: their modes of community-building and mobilization are like how fans would approach these activities. Fans’ seemingly innocent forms of participation and ‘play’ (cf. Nybro Petersen, 2022) can hold severe consequences and even potential real-world impact.

While we might think of canceling as actions beholden to a celebrity’s fans or a more general, critical audience, institutions can also cancel someone or something. Think of networks canceling a show or series (Anderson-Lopez et al., 2021), or a star who is never invited back for new projects or excluded (or even fired) from one (like happened to Kevin Spacey in *House of Cards*, or Johnny Depp in the *Fantastic Beasts*-franchise, see Driessen, 2020). Following Ng’s argumentation, cancel culture thus should be understood as an analytical concept ‘rather than one signaling a particular political standpoint’ (Ng, 2022: 6). This is also how I will employ the concept to Borsato’s case, which shows many (of the different) elements resonating with and ascribed to cancel culture. Nevertheless, previous work on cancel culture often is or has a political undertone or stresses the political force of cancel culture (see the pioneering work of Meredith D. Clark, 2020 which positions the roots of cancel culture in the Black Twitter community; or Pippa Norris, 2021, linking cancel culture to the silencing of progressive groups by conservative ones in political communication). Although these studies highlight cases in ‘Political culture’ rather than ‘popular culture’, which this study focuses upon, we should not underestimate the exemplary role of the latter.

## Being a fan of a canceled idol?

Previous studies that mapped specific cases of cancel culture mainly dealt with political public figures, events, or TV-series (to name a few: cf. [Anderson-Lopez et al., 2021](#); [Bouvier, 2020](#); [Norris, 2021](#)). Nevertheless, fans are a peculiar group to study in this light: their practices resonate and are reminiscent of a micro-participatory culture, or even a micro-society (as [Fiske, 1992](#) once claimed: a shadow-economy in how they operate). It can be argued that over the past few years, fandoms have become more politicized (see [Dean, 2017](#); [Hinck, 2019](#); [Sandvoss, 2013](#)). A turn that also leads ‘fans’ affective investments [to] become more ‘outwardly’ oriented in the sense of being constituted by a desire to change wider society’ ([Dean, 2017](#)). Yet their affection and investment might at the very least become contested or conflicted when an idol is canceled by media sources and outlets, or ‘society’ at large.

How fans should deal with a canceled idol is a topic of study gaining territory in Fan Studies in particular. For example, [Jones \(2018\)](#) in her work examining fans’ responses to the conviction of Welsh band’s Lostprophets lead singer Ian Watkins revealed how fans found it challenging to respond to this controversy. [Jones \(2018\)](#) indicates many fans felt a sense of grief when news about the conviction was made public, a feeling mapped previously in relation to how fans would feel if their favorite celebrity died. However, unique about Watkins’ situations was the fact that he was being charged and sent to prison over criminal misdemeanors: so, still alive yet locked away and no longer a public figure. These charges and the criminal conviction prevented fans from mourning publicly, despite the fans feeling ‘devastated, heartbroken, or numb’ ([Jones, 2018](#): 48). Jones’ work offers an impression of fans dealing with a convicted idol: someone who is actively charged with wrongdoing. Doing so, she argues that it is about ‘the tensions that occur between fannish attachment and instances of abhorrent behavior by the object of fandom that leads to the end of fannish attachment’ ([Jones, 2018](#): 44). But what happens to fans’ participation and affective investment if all they know so far is the controversy?

To understand how fans give meaning to their ‘problematic fave’, it might be helpful to first conceptualize what this status means for a celebrity. [Bucher and Chipperfield \(2021\)](#), in their communication on their admiration for controversial author David Wallace, point to referring to the author as ‘problematic’. The authors consider this ‘a person of prominence [...] whose behavior, past or present, is unethical, harmful or outside the bounds of what we consider appropriate or acceptable’ ([Bucher and Chipperfield, 2021](#): 74). Even more so, ‘when it comes to art “problematic fave” denotes the cognitive dissonance between enjoying an artist’s work but disliking them as a person on the grounds of their politics or behavior’ (*ibid.*, p. 74). While this helps us to discuss and grasp the idea of the individual problematic fave more strongly, it doesn’t reveal how fans respond to this behavior. The work of [Salter \(2020\)](#), exploring the toxic and problematic relationship between comics-duo Harley Quinn and Joker, does illustrate how this would work on a collective level: ‘Fandom’s discourse of “problematic faves” is important as it provides space for fans to love a text even while admitting its representational problems’. Here, Salter argues how fans, because of their affection for a text, potentially know about an object of fandom’s challenges and acknowledge this. This takes the argument of Bucher and Chipperfield beyond the notion of fans ‘suffering’ from cognitive dissonance.

Nevertheless, cognitive dissonance – being presented with new information which is conflicting with what one already knows or is familiar with – is what fans often must deal with first when their fave is caught up in or accused due to a scandal. [Matt Hills \(2018\)](#) defined the process of fans trying to place new information or changes about an object of fandom as fans being challenged on their doxas. When this happens, and fans disagree with these new items or changes, this can also lead to

toxicity in a fandom. This suggests that the fandom of a canceled artist that some fans will find it challenging to make sense of the controversy, while others may condemn it, or are able to 'reiterate' (Williams, 2015) their fandom following the scandal.

## **Methodology: how was this study conducted?**

To understand how fans give meaning to a canceled idol and negotiate these different meanings in their fandom, this study builds on an interview study with twelve Dutch fans of the singer and fans' online comments ( $N = 546$ , gathered from publicly accessible social media fan pages, cf. Gerrard, 2020). This article focuses mainly on the interview-data.

The interviews were conducted in early 2022 and lasted between 35 min to just over an hour. Topics discussed during the interviews were for example the participants' fandom over time, what they enjoyed about being a Marco fan, and of course the cancellation of Borsato and how media outlets in the Netherlands have discussed the event. Interviewees included self-identified fans of Marco Borsato: many of them indicating having been a fan since early childhood and currently also feeling somewhat conflicted to declare themselves Borsato fans. Their ages range between 23 and 45. Most of the participants identified as female, with three people identifying as male. Some of the participants were pursuing a Bachelor or Master-degree, others worked (in professions ranging from janitor to sales consultant or HR professional) and some indicated to not have a full-time job but were, for example, a stay-at-home mother. The interviewees all filled in a consent form before participating in the interview, and consent was also recorded as the interviews were recorded and transcribed afterward. This process was done by one of the author's Master students, who also used this dataset for their own graduate thesis research. The online comments were gathered as addition to this data. Although they do not explicate gender or age information of their authors, we presume the 'commenters' to be a fan due to their visit to these online pages and participating in the discussions. The comments gathered were responses to news messages (posted between late 2021 and early 2022) addressing Borsato's cancellation.

After performing a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) on the interview transcripts and online comments, several patterns of how fans negotiate their fandom of a canceled artist could be identified. I argue that these patterns represent the main discourses illustrating how fans give meaning to their fandom of Borsato after his cancellation. First, the interviewed fans discuss how Borsato has been a constant in their lives and how they consider him a 'father figure' not capable of being involved in the crimes he is accused of. They mainly discuss his persona and their fannish love for the singer, and how his demeanor must connect to him being misinterpreted in the case. Yet, some of the interviewees also disclose they have their doubts about the situation. They consider Borsato 'innocent-until-proven-guilty', which resonates with what the online comments reveal. This discourse of doubt is the second pattern identified: many of the interviewed fans and those online discuss how they feel conflicted about the situation. They wish to believe Borsato but want to learn more about the allegations. Online a discourse of 'no smoke without fire' was prevalent. Striking here is that the fans refer to how (gossip) media, particularly entertainment TV-shows and (a) juice channel(s) report about the case and how this shapes their doubt or their support. Last, this also leads to some fans being more careful about publicly displaying their fandom and adjusting their fan practices to, for example, their homes instead of expressing it publicly.

## Findings: Renegotiating Fandom after Borsato's Cancellation

This section discusses the three patterns and discourses identified after a thematic analysis of the data. First, it presents a general sense of what it 'means' to be a fan of Borsato, helping to contextualize why some fans (first discourse) consider him a constant in their lives and a 'father figure'. The next pattern identified helps unpack fans' discourses of doubt of being a fan of a canceled artist. The third pattern highlights how fans now express their fandom of a canceled artist.

### *Borsato: loving father and amicable Italian*

The typical narrative of 'who' is a Borsato fan seems to be found in Christel's (38, cleaner) story. Christel has been a fan since she was 6 years old, upon hearing Borsato's 'warm voice', and immediately considered him a great artist. At that time, Borsato sung in Italian, so she bought a course to learn Italian during her teens and started to attend concerts as soon as she could afford them. Christel amassed a large collection of albums and memorabilia from concerts, regularly sent Marco letters and postcards to declare her admiration for him but didn't become a fanclub member until just before the pandemic hit in 2020. Via the fanclub she found like-minded women with a shared interest and a sense of belonging and friendship. Another typical story of how one became a Marco fan, is that of Ellen (25, practice nurse). She indicates being a fan since she was a baby. In other words, her parents were avid Borsato-listeners, his music functioned as a soundtrack to their family life, and her parents took her along to concerts since she was little. She reflects, 'going to a concert was really a family outing, we always went with the four of us: my father, my mother, my sister and I'. This aspect of getting to know Borsato and his music through one's parents came up in quite a few interviews, a signal that the artist and his music (and lyrics too) held a general image of being family friendly. Furthermore, according to Sascha (31, working in the head office of a clothing-brand) – introduced to Borsato through her mother – his music 'appeals to many, because his music sometimes is emotional but can also be very upbeat'.

This 'family-friendly' image of Borsato is why many interviewees, but also the fans who comment online, like him. Online, fans consider Borsato's demeanor as 'warm', 'friendly', 'family man', and they call him 'a good father', or refer to the fact that he 'has children himself'. Interviewee Ellen mentions that she considered Borsato to be 'a bit of an uncle, father-like figure. Although it's not my dad, he's that type of person. And he's always honest and amicable, but also a bit euhh clumsy. But very approachable'. Additionally, Tim (32, working in HR) even attributes Borsato a status of national hero:

If you don't take into consideration all that happened recently, then I could really see him as an example. A father-like figure, but also someone who really is able to bring people together through his music. Like a national hero, or a folk hero. I think he would've gone into the history books as a great man who contributed a lot to Dutch national history.

Tim's statement, like Ellen's, shows Borsato as approachable and important, someone who appeals to many people. However, according to some fans, these character-traits are also what might be difficult for others to grasp and precisely be at the root of the accusations against him. Alina (36, stay-at-home mother), who met Borsato several times during FanClub Days or at concerts, mentions, 'Well, his physicality... I can imagine that that is understood differently by some...'. She then goes on to explain that 'he grabs everyone, but I never considered that he intended that to be more than just a hug. He [...] likes to cuddle and touch people, but I never had the idea that this was



sexually charged...'. These stories of Borsato being 'physical', particularly with people he knows well and displaying such behavior at the barbecues and parties he organized at his home for the (junior) contestants of reality TV show *The Voice*, were picked up by mainstream media after his cancellation. Media portrayed this amicable image as handsy, and the barbecue appears in the allegations as a setting to where this behavior was publicly visible. Tim reflects on those stories:

I would indeed describe him as an Italian uncle or grandpa, you know, someone who's very amicable, very touchy, cuddly, and who kisses his kids. I can imagine that if such a person organizes a barbecue or whatever, that he's also like that with children he invites, but there is a limit.

So, precisely the 'Italian' image that contributed to Borsato's success in the first place seemingly works against him in his cancellation. Yet, for Aline, this is also just part of who he is: having visited about seventy of his concerts, and twenty FanClub Days, she feels that she knows Borsato well enough to potentially consider the allegations as a misinterpretation of this affectionate persona. Christel also has this idea, 'I just cannot believe that he would touch children in such a way'. She is convinced Borsato is innocent and thinks that as a 'true fan you should support him'. Online, several fan comments display similar sentiments, with remarks like 'he's a family man [...] he would never do this to his family' or referring to this amicable character 'perhaps his amicability is interpreted wrongly'. So, these fans dismiss the allegations or claims against him and see what he is accused of as part of Borsato's persona. Nevertheless, for some interviewees this amicable character was already debatable, as they point to a previous ripple in Borsato's loveable personality: in 2009 he cheated on his then-wife after his company went bankrupt. Ellen clarifies, 'when it came out that he had cheated [...] That didn't fit my image of him as a person'. His demeanor evoked a sense of doubt as to believing who Borsato is, Ellen explains:

It breaks the image of him being picture perfect. Also these new allegations against him. What I just said about him cheating, I was like 'huh, he would never do that'. But now this makes me wonder, 'huh if did that, then what else is he capable of?'

Ellen's feeling of disbelief or doubt, was also present in many other fans' accounts of how they felt about Borsato's cancellation. Moreover, this gives the impression that some fans were dealing with feelings of cognitive dissonance when Borsato got canceled: they found it difficult to match with his public demeanor. These fannish feelings of doubt and conflict arising from and after Borsato's cancellation are discussed in-depth in the next section.

### *Discourse of doubt: no smoke without fire?*

Some interviewees, like Alina, Ester (45, works at a daycare), Naomi (36, janitor), and Christel, strongly declare their support for Borsato. Naomi even started a petition (with another fan) to get him back on the radio and created a Facebook group for other 'supportive fans' (those considering Borsato innocent). Christel explains 'we know his character [...] he's a father of three children himself [...] this is all about money'. Moreover, she is very adamant in steadfastly believing in Borsato's innocence, 'if you're a true fan, you just support him'. The online comments also reveal how some fans steadfastly support him, 'we should support him during these times', and 'he would never do this as a family man'. Yet, among the Borsato fans some do admit to doubting the case slightly. Alina does not want to judge the situation until there is an actual verdict, '... because I have met Marco so many times and know him so well, eeah, I think he should get the benefit of the



doubt'. Likewise, Ester shares this feeling, 'Unless I'm very wrong about who he is, but in a way, you also don't really know'. Despite mainstream media and radio stations boycotting Borsato – a practice to be expected as cancel practice (Ng, 2022) – this group of fans seems to support Borsato until an official verdict has been reached. This implies that for his loyal supporters his 'true cancellation' will not happen until a more acknowledged party than 'the media' or the public has given a verdict, which makes canceling Borsato a delicate process for this group.

However, for many interviewees (eight out of twelve) an immediate feeling of doubt popped up when they heard of the allegations against Borsato. Some of them attribute this to feelings like 'you never really know the person' (Mare, 23 student) or first 'not that I don't believe him, but I also want to believe the alleged victims in this case' (Tim) or indicate a feeling of wanting to 'wait until it's proven [that he's guilty]' (Sasha). Striking is that particularly the male fans interviewed expressed their doubts about his persona: Bart (26, student) remembers after the rumors of Borsato cheating appeared in mainstream media that he 'saw him give these really unsubtle winks to the camera at a concert, which changed my image of him somewhat'. So, his performing behavior which previously might be thought of as flirty or passionate, is in Bart's eyes now something that is somewhat sexually charged or dirty. Joost (26, works at the HQ of a car dealer) comments how he considered Borsato to 'always be a bit arrogant'. Among the fans commenting online, this conflict shows in remarks like 'something must be true about the situation', or '[...] even if he didn't do it, there will always be doubt [about the situation]'. These remarks indicate that this group of fans feels conflicted about the situation, but also that they also renegotiate the discourse of Borsato's 'family-friendly, amicable' personality. Williams (2015) illustrated in her work on post-object fandom that if a fandom is over fans must reconsider their position as fans. Although these fans can continue their fandom of Borsato, they do seem to take the first step in this process to either reiterate their fannish feelings. Yet, as Salter's (2020) work indicates: they are aware of the problematic aspects of their faves and looking for ways to make sense of this.

For some of the interviewees this entails reconsidering their affection and investment in Borsato, but also reflecting on cancel culture as phenomenon. Alina offers an interesting illustration of how this negotiation presented itself in her life:

I have the feeling that I need to acknowledge why I still listen to him. [...] Recently, my eldest daughter had a party, and I was taking the girls somewhere in my car. Well, I put Marco's music on, and one of those girls said, 'I'm not allowed to listen to Marco'. Well, obviously that led me to ask her, 'why? Has he been convicted already; did I miss something?'. The girl responded that her mother didn't want her to listen to the music. Then I told her, 'Fine, but you're sitting in my car right now'.

Alina explains that she doesn't allow her daughter to listen to other canceled artists, so she did understand what the girl aimed at. However, Alina's fannish feelings were stronger than the rationale to see how others might consider Borsato as canceled and silenced (Janssens and Spreeuwenberg, 2022).

Another group among the interviewed fans presents a different discourse to how they negotiate if and how they can still be a fan of Marco Borsato. For this group, narratives like those of Ellen, Sascha or Tim are exemplary: they are the ones who seem to be in doubt about what is true or false about the case. Like one fan online writes 'there is no smoke without fire'. Fans let themselves be informed by media reports, the fanclub, or fan pages, but also often refer to *BOOS* which reported Borsato as one of those guilty of sexual misconduct in TV-program *The Voice of Holland*. Watching the *BOOS*-episode ignited Ellen's feelings of doubt:

I was watching that episode with my dad, and we were like ‘could it be true?’. And you try to justify it, or reason about it, which is actually quite a bad thing to do. But the allegations against Marco seemed less strong than towards the others. I mean, he’s not accused of rape, only of sexual assault, but even that is also really bad. It’s just difficult.

Reflecting on the allegations and what they mean for her fandom, she mentions that she does not want to defend the singer, but due to cancel culture ‘everything is immediately right or wrong’. For Ellen, this means she now tries to make it more explicit when talking about her fandom, ‘I try to say, I’m a fan, but I don’t support this or that [...] or I explain I’m a fan of his music but not sure how I feel about him’. Making this distinction between his music and ‘him’ offers her a feeling of being able to acknowledge that she knows he might be in the wrong (cf. [Bucher and Grace Chipperfield, 2021](#); [Salter, 2020](#)), but that she can still appreciate his music. So, what these discourses of doubt emphasize is how there needs to be an acknowledgment that something is wrong, but perhaps also a slower pace to figure out what precisely is wrong. Similarly, Sascha admits to being disappointed when the news about the allegations came out, ‘You know from that moment onward that for example enjoying his concerts with friends... you know that’s not going to happen anymore’. To Sascha, it’s a challenging situation, in which she does not precisely know what to do, but ‘it’s such a difficult topic. [...] the allegations themselves are already so serious that I’m not sure if I can still listen with pleasure to the music, or think positively of the artist [...]’. An online comment addresses this more generally by stating about the allegations and considering Borsato as a sex offender or innocent man, ‘[...] that’s also what they said about that friendly neighbor’. Tim’s further reflects on the situation: ‘I don’t know, if there ever will be another concert. Or if I would ever visit that. But I do feel we need to think of him like *unguilty* [*sic*] until proven guilty’. Ellen also emphasizes several times that she does not want to judge the situation until all facts are on the table or until there is a public verdict, ‘innocent until proven guilty’, or immediately cancel him, ‘I also don’t want to say “you’re canceled, it’s over. Then I’m also not honest”’. However, Ellen keeps referring to the conflict she feels, ‘how will people respond if you admit to being a fan?’, and ‘I feel pressured to express what I think of the situation’. So, Ellen and the other interviewees experience a sense of public or peer pressure to acknowledge there might be wrongdoings and to take a stand in the case ([Salter, 2020](#)) while they really wish to have more clarity about the situation. This sheds a new perspective on canceling a ‘fave’ due to this discourse of doubt surrounding the case: fans wish they had more information and feel pressure(d) to consider the artist as separate from his music.

While canceling a person might seem like a straightforward practice, these fan discourses unfold canceling as a delicate process, and complicated practice of participation or play. A lot of the interviewees and online comments refer to previous cancel cases like Michael Jackson or J.K. Rowling. These references often address that one can potentially support the art of the person, yet this participation comes with certain reservations and acknowledgments. For example, Sascha reflects:

I don’t think you should per se link the product of an artist to the artist themselves [...]. If I look at for example J.K. Rowling and the Harry Potter series, then I can vehemently disagree with what she says, does, or finds, but I cannot imagine not reading the books anymore. [...] I already made my decision in that case, because I decided no longer to spend money on it or share her legacy publicly because it might be very painful for some people.

What we can learn from these cases, is that many people, particularly on social media, also want to play the role of judge in Borsato’s case. However, this type of play has severe consequences (cf. [Nybro](#)

Petersen, 2022). Velasco (2020) and Clark (2020) addressed it is this feeling (or mode of play) of as an individual being able to contribute to silencing someone collectively what counts for many people when they cancel a person.

Remarkably, some fans also blame ‘the media’ – referring to juice channels (particularly the highly popular Dutch channel LifeOfYvonne), gossip magazines, and entertainment TV-shows – to be responsible for Borsato’s cancelation. Christel mentions how a popular Dutch entertainment show ‘first decides to support him, next they criticize him’. For Bart *BOOS* did a respectable job bringing the news about the #MeToo cases in the Dutch cultural industries, but gossip magazines immediately turned to convicting Borsato, leading to what he describes as a ‘trial-by-media’. Online, one fan writes how ‘The media is responsible [...]’ and states they should ‘show us evidence and facts before you put something online’. So, the fan discourses presented here reveal how canceling is more delicate than ‘just’ boycotting someone publicly, and how this type of play (if we consider it as such) presents a complicated situation.

### *How to be a fan of a problematic fave*

As the fragments above suggest, being a fan of a problematic artist is challenging and invites for a reflection on one’s participation in the fandom. While we know about how and why artists are being canceled by fans, it is seldomly discussed how fans decide to (not) express their fandom after a controversy. As mentioned before, some of the interviewees say that it doesn’t feel like anything has changed: they dismiss the allegations and claims against Borsato. Christel still writes her letters to Borsato, she even thinks people begrudge her being a fan of him. When people ask her about why she is still a fan, she ‘don’t really listen [...] it’s the media who want to break him’. This resonates with some of the online commenters, who write ‘why do media always have to break down someone so quickly?’. For this group, the fandom continues as it was, and they tend to defend Borsato when media report about him negatively. For some of the interviewees, like Bart ‘the door has closed’, meaning this group actively ended their fandom. Yet, most of the interviewees express how they struggle with giving their fandom meaning now. Their negotiations provide an insight into understanding how one can reshape or give meaning to one’s fandom of a canceled artist. For example, the acknowledging of Borsato’s wrong doings is something fans feel pressured into, yet also offers a means to uphold their fandom. Alina, while defending Borsato in the comfort and privateness of her own car, publicly struggles much more with the situation:

I was at the hairdresser, and then they talked about Marco. Oh, I could attack them. People are so, they judge so quickly. Without really knowing what’s going on. And that’s what I find challenging. So, yeah, that was a painful moment.

Alina bit her tongue in this situation, commenting on people in general being too quick to play judge (cf. Velasco, 2020). Ellen agrees with this, ‘Particularly on social media, people are very fast in having a response. I wonder if people remain critical to what they actually think of the situation’. Online, fans comment on this with discourses like ‘Let the Department of Justice first do their research and work’. So, fans seem to want an official verdict or discourse from the artist. That might support or help decide to end their fandom and deal with the public pressure of being a fan, over the condemnation and sense of ‘play’ (Nybro Petersen, 2022) by ‘the general public’ over Borsato’s case.

A more practical implication of being a fan of a canceled artist is if one continues playing his music. Tim sketches an interesting scenario here:

...When the news broke [about the case], it felt a bit wrong to listen to his music. [...] We were with a group of friends and one of his songs came on and we were like ‘nice’, but actually it’s not done to play his music now. [...] If you listen to his music, he benefits financially. So, that’s enabling him again, like buying Russian oil.

Although his comparison of buying Russian oil is somewhat extravagant, Tim considers streaming Borsato’s music as not really boycotting him because he makes a profit from these streams. Yet, for Tim this also included that he did not do this anymore, ‘I don’t think people publicly distance themselves from the music, but [...] I would not per se sit down anymore to consciously listen to the music’. Contrary, Sascha indicates she does sporadically listen to Borsato’s music at home or within her close group of friends who share her affection for the singer, yet she wouldn’t accept it at a party anymore. She explains, ‘Recently, we were at a festival with a cover band who were taking song suggestions from the audience. Someone yelled “Marco Borsato”, and all of us turned around and were like “eeh no, we don’t do that anymore”’. So, Sascha and her ‘Borsato-friends’ do enunciate their fandom privately, but not publicly. Furthermore, she emphasizes ‘I think it’s a good thing if radio-stations don’t play his songs anymore. That’s also offering a signal as a community, as the Netherlands, that we don’t accept this type of behavior [sexual misconduct]’. Interestingly, it does not seem to be a feeling of shame or grief (Jones, 2018) that Tim or Sascha portray, but they look for navigating and negotiating their fannish feelings in a new direction. Sascha clarifies:

In my friend group this also raises a lot of discussion: what if he is uncanceled? They all mention they will listen to his music again, and indoors I will definitely participate, because well, his music just evokes a happy feeling for me, albeit it’s a bit less now.

Like Sasha illustrates, being a fan of a canceled artist is challenging. The interviewees’ solution seems to be separating the art from the artist (acknowledging his wrong doings, discussing the case in a neutral manner), or by finding ways to continue their fandom albeit not publicly (privately playing his music or among fan friends). Yet within limits of the current situation and considering there might be somewhat of an aftermath to still deal with.

## **Conclusion**

This article explored how participation and play in the fandom of canceled idol Marco Borsato is experienced by his fans. It illustrated how the interviewed fans and those commenting on fan pages discuss and give meaning to their fandom while navigating through the challenging circumstances of being a fan of a – suddenly – controversial artist. Their discourses illustrate conflicted feelings and doubt, yet also a sense of determination. Looking at previous literature on cancel cases and culture, one might expect that such a cancellation is followed and committed to by ‘everyone’ in a certain community (cf. Bouvier, 2020; Clark, 2020; Ng, 2022). Yet, what this study reveals, is how within a community, like a fandom, there can be conflicting views. One group of interviewees and online commenters was very determined and convinced of Marco Borsato’s innocence. They ascribe the allegations of sexual misconduct against him as a misinterpretation of his amicable, ‘Italian’ character. Although these fan actions are somewhat visible (e.g., through starting a public Facebook-page in his support or a petition to get him back on the radio), their practices of play are potential signals of clearing Borsato’s name or at the very least remind people that no official verdict has taken place yet (cf. Nybro Petersen, 2022; Mueller, 2022).

However, this group of determined fans is – in this study – outnumbered by those who show their doubts: these interviewees and online commenters feel more conflicted about the situation. They want to learn more about the situation (officially, from the artist). This insecurity about whether he is innocent or guilty leads them to reconsider their fandom (cf. Williams, 2015). Some find it, as the last theme also illustrates, still okay to continue their fandom in the private sphere but no longer publicly express it. Or, if they are asked about it, acknowledge they know about the controversy and discuss their standpoint or feelings about it (with some even blaming ‘the media’ for playing a part in the controversy). These fans admit their idol is caught up in something (Salter, 2020), but also – despite that they feel a pressure to take a stand – discuss why they would or could think differently about the situation if this were the case. For many fans, this leads to making their fandom more private (cf. Jones, 2018), to display their awareness and give a signal to the victims involved: by not taking a determined stance or dismiss the situation, they also showcase a willingness to believe the victims.

Although this case addresses a portrayal of personal politics on a small scale and in a specific community, we can see the potential of the ‘playful’ modes of participations (cf. Nybro Petersen, 2022) and lessons learned through this study. Yet, for a follow-up to this study, it is necessary to examine how these fannish feelings develop over time: particularly when the trial starts or when a verdict is reached. More so, this also invites for a deep-dive into the cultural industries and how to potentially change power relations or inequalities: a topic that already started with the advent of the #MeToo-movement. With the small number of male fans interviewed in this study and relatively young interviewees (all under 45), it might be interesting to differentiate the gender- and age dimensions in future work: in this study, those identifying as males and those being under 35 did think differently of the case, and it would be interesting to learn more about these perspectives in cancel cases. Additionally, it might be helpful to learn from, for example, concert programmers or radio stations to learn how they take decisions after the cancellation of an artist.<sup>4</sup>

To wrap up, this article uncovered what motivates some fans to step away from this ‘political situation’ (the cancellation of Borsato) while others perhaps feel a need to care even more about the person involved and defend him at all costs. Through this lens, we can argue that this might resonate with the development or process of polarized views in society at large. This seemingly innocent play might then offer a first look and therefore help toward an understanding of how these processes play out on a macro-level.

### **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **ORCID iD**

Simone Driessen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8195-0072>

### **Notes**

1. See an overview of these awards won on Borsato’s website <https://borsato.nl/awards/>.

2. See this weekly Dutch Top 40 charts 'dossier': <https://www.top40hitdossier.nl/overig-nieuws-top-3-meeste-nummer-1-hits>.
3. See the website of Ticketmaster: <https://www.ticketmaster.nl/artist/marco-borsato-tickets/640593>.
4. A Dutch newspaper reporting on the case with the response from Borsato's lawyer: <https://www.metronieuws.nl/entertainment/2021/12/advocaat-marco-borsato-ontkent-aantijgingen/>.

## References

- Anderson-Lopez J, Lambert RJ, and Budaj A (2021) Tug of war: social Media, cancel culture, and diversity for girls and the 100. *KOME* 9(1): 64–84. DOI: [10.17646/kome.75672.59](https://doi.org/10.17646/kome.75672.59).
- Bouvier G (2020) Racist call-outs and cancel culture on Twitter: the limitations of the platform's ability to define issues of social justice. *Discourse, Context and Media* 38: 100431. DOI: [10.1016/j.dcm.2020.100431](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2020.100431).
- Braun V and Clarke V (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2): 77–101. DOI: [10.1191/1478088706qp063oa](https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa).
- Bucher M and Chipperfield G (2021) How to be a fan in the age of problematic faves. *Life Writing* 18(1): 67–78. DOI: [10.1080/14484528.2021.1864090](https://doi.org/10.1080/14484528.2021.1864090).
- Clark MD (2020) Drag THEM: a brief etymology of so-called “cancel culture. *Communication and the Public* 5(3–4): 88–92. DOI: [10.1177/2057047320961562](https://doi.org/10.1177/2057047320961562).
- Dean J (2017) Politicising fandom. *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations* 19(2): 408–424. DOI: [10.1177/1369148117701754](https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148117701754).
- Driessen S (2015) Larger than life: exploring the transcultural fan practices of the dutch backstreet boys fandom. *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 12(5): 180–196.
- Driessen S (2020) For the greater good? Vigilantism in online pop culture fandoms. In: D Trottier, R Gabdulhakov, and Q Huang (eds) *Introducing Vigilant Audiences*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 25–48.
- Driessen S (forthcoming) Bad dreams are only dreams, or aren't they? Examining how Dutch fans of Marco Borsato negotiate their fandom after his cancellation. In: G Ouvrein, A Jorge, and H van den Bulck (eds). *Celebrities and their Audiences*. Lexington Books, In preparation.
- Fiske J (1992) The cultural economy of fandom. In: L Lewis (ed). *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*. Routledge, 30–49.
- Flinders M and Wood M (2018) Nexus politics: conceptualizing everyday political engagement. *Democratic Theory* 5(2): 56–81. DOI: [10.3167/dt.2018.050205](https://doi.org/10.3167/dt.2018.050205).
- Gerrard Y (2020) What's in a (pseudo)name? Ethical conundrums for the principles of anonymisation in social media research. *Qualitative Research* 21(5): 686–702. DOI: [10.1177/1468794120922070](https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794120922070).
- Harrington CL and Bielby DD (2010) A life course perspective on fandom. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 13(5): 429–450. DOI: [10.1177/1367877910372702](https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877910372702).
- Hills M (2018) An extended Foreword: from fan doxa to toxic fan practices? *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 15(1): 105–126.
- Hinck A (2019) *Politics for the Love of Fandom: Fan-Based Citizenship in a Digital World*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press.
- Janssens J and Spreeuwenberg L (2022) The moral implications of cancel culture. *Ethical Perspectives* 29(1): 89–114. DOI: [10.2143/EP.29.1.3290737](https://doi.org/10.2143/EP.29.1.3290737).
- Jones B (2018) My music was on shuffle, one of their songs came on and I had to hit next...”: navigating grief and disgust in Lostprophets fandom. In: R Williams (ed). *Everybody Hurts. Transitions, Endings, and Resurrections in Fan Cultures*. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 43–58.

- Juarez Miro C (2021) Who are the people? Using fandom research to study populist supporters. *Annals of the International Communication Association* 45: 1–16. DOI: [10.1080/23808985.2021.1910062](https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2021.1910062)
- Mueller H (2022) *The Politics of Fandom: Conflicts that Divide Communities*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc.
- Ng E (2020) No grand pronouncements here ... : reflections on cancel culture and digital media participation. *Television and New Media* 21(6): 621–627. DOI: [10.1177/1527476420918828](https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476420918828)
- Ng E (2022) *Cancel Culture. A Critical Analysis*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Norris P (2021) Cancel culture: myth or reality? *Political Studies* 0(0). DOI: [10.1177/003232172111037023](https://doi.org/10.1177/003232172111037023).
- Nybro Petersen L (2022) *Mediatized Fan Play: Moods, Modes and Dark Play in Networked Communities*. Milton Park: Routledge.
- Phillips T (2015) Wrestling with grief: fan negotiation of professional/private personas in responses to the Chris Benoit double murder–suicide. *Celebrity Studies* 6(1): 69–84. DOI: [10.1080/19392397.2015.995470](https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2015.995470).
- Reijnders S, Spijkers M, Roeland J, et al. (2014) Close encounters: ritualizing proximity in the age of celebrity. An ethnographic analysis of meet-and-greets with Dutch singer Marco Borsato. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 17(2): 149–169. DOI: [10.1177/1367549413508098](https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549413508098).
- Salter A (2020) #RelationshipGoals? Suicide squad and fandom’s love of “problematic” men. *Television and New Media* 21(2): 135–150. DOI: [10.1177/1527476419879916](https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476419879916).
- Sanderson J and Hope Cheong P (2010) Tweeting prayers and communicating grief over Michael Jackson online. Bulletin of science. *Technology in Society* 30(5): 226–229. DOI: [10.1177/0270467610380010](https://doi.org/10.1177/0270467610380010).
- Sandvoss C (2013) Toward an understanding of political enthusiasm as media fandom: Blogging, fan productivity and affect in American politics. *Participations: journal of audience and reception studies* 10(1): 252–296.
- Velasco JC (2020) You are cancelled: virtual collective consciousness and the emergence of cancel culture as ideological purging. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities Special Conference Issue* 12(5): 1–7. DOI: [10.21659/rupkatha.v12n5.rioc1s21n2](https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v12n5.rioc1s21n2).
- Williams R (2011) This is the night TV died”: television post-object fandom and the demise of the west wing. *Popular Communication* 9(4): 266–279. DOI: [10.1080/15405702.2011.605311](https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2011.605311).
- Williams R (2015) *Post-Object Fandom: Television, Identity and Self-Narrative*. London: Bloomsbury.