

Parasocial Relationships in the Age of Social Media

by

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Abstract

This paper and survey will explore the effect of social media, with its offer of direct access to celebrities and their lifestyles, as well as fan-to-fan connection, on the development of parasocial relationships. In addition to integrating previous research surrounding parasocial relationships, a survey was conducted surrounding Harry Styles fans to provide a case study on social media's impact on the development of parasocial relationships and how they can exist within fandom.

Introduction

Parasocial relationships, one-sided relationships between a media viewer and a performer, have long been used to benefit celebrity status and increase a fanbase. Early literature suggests that parasocial relationships can be created through repeated exposure to television personalities after the viewer analyzes and accepts the actor's character role. While this finding demonstrated that television is impactful on the creation of parasocial relationships, it was discovered in a time when access to the next episode wasn't instantaneous, allowing these parasocial relationships to be built slowly. In addition, the gradual release of television episodes provided a sense of privacy and control to celebrities. More recent literature expands the idea that parasocial relationships can occur in the digital age; however, none explicitly explores the impact of social media on the development of parasocial relationships and how they exist within fandom. Now more than ever, social media allows users behind the scenes access to celebrity lifestyles in real-time that television media did not. Unlimited exposure to celebrity social media accounts and content results in viewers having a more immediate and intense sense of familiarity and belief in "knowing" celebrities. The rise of social media has increased the development of parasocial relationships with said celebrities and strengthened online fandoms.

Literature Review

The term parasocial relationship was first coined in 1956 by Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl in their paper, *Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance*. Horton and Wohl introduced parasocial relationships in reference to new mass media, i.e., radio, television, and movies, as "the seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer" (Horton and Wohl 215). Today a parasocial relationship can be

defined as “a kind of psychological relationship experienced by members of an audience in their mediated encounters with certain performers in the mass media” (Oxford Reference). There are a lot of studies out there regarding parasocial relationships and the psychology behind them.

However, many of these studies detail the relationships built between audiences and television or film characters. One of those aforementioned papers is *Development of Parasocial Interaction Relationships* by Rebecca B. Rubin and Michael P. McHugh. According to Rubin and McHugh, “a bond of intimacy is developed with media personalities through shared experiences existing only through the viewing of the personality or persona over time” (Rubin and McHugh 280). Repeated viewings and exposure to television episodes gave audiences a sense of familiarity with characters through observation, leading them to believe they know the characters.

With the rise of social media, parasocial relationships have gone beyond their original definition and can now include every celebrity. As stated in the article, *Parasocial Relationships with Musicians*, “the changing nature of celebrity, and the affordances of interactive social media, permit audiences unprecedented access to their favorite stars and the roles they play. Clear contrasts between public personae and private life are muddied.” (Kurtin et al. 31). Social media allows fans to see into the lives of celebrities and feel connected to them more than ever before. In the paper, *Parasocial Interaction in the Digital Age: An Examination of Relationship Building and the Effectiveness of YouTube Celebrities* by Leslie Rasmussen, it was discovered that after watching multiple YouTube videos by the same creator, “respondents expressed feelings of knowing the speaker and feeling as though the speaker was their friend.” (Rasmussen 289). Through these repeated interactions with celebrities and content, viewers become more attached. Unlike having to wait for something to air on television back in the 1950s when Horton and Wohl first used the term parasocial relationship, social media allows users instant access to

the accounts of their favorite actors, musicians, and athletes. There is no limit to how much time one can spend consuming social media content. Unlimited access to social media has expedited the development of modern parasocial relationships and allowed them to evolve to what they are today.

Fans play a considerable role in parasocial relationships. As mentioned in the journal *Sense of Community on Twitter and Instagram: Exploring the Roles of Motives and Parasocial Relationships*, social media platforms are perfect spaces for fans to gather because they “offer users access to both their favorite media figures and other users who are interested in these media figures” (Blight et al. 314). The ability to forge relationships between fellow followers offered through social media is a major difference from prior media formats and empowers fans/users. The direct access and insight that social media allows fans to have on celebrities and their lifestyles have greatly accelerated what a parasocial relationship is and allows for the mobilization of fans in real-time in both positive and negative ways. For example, fans in parasocial relationships can positively mobilize for celebrities, such as voting for an award or streaming a song. On the other hand, some fans in parasocial relationships feel like they can come to the defense of and have the right to attack others on behalf of their celebrity. In these cases, the fandom then reflects poorly on the celebrity, especially when they never gave a call to action.

Fandom

Social media is the norm now. It is expected for people to have accounts across different platforms and can be considered a red flag among younger crowds if they do not. While social media is for the everyday person, a very specific group of people has risen and claimed it as their

own: fandoms. Fandom can be described as a group of people who are fans of the same person, issue, or subject. Social media is the go-to for online fandoms. Whether it is Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, TikTok, or Facebook, you are bound to find fan accounts, update accounts, and groups. In the case of this paper, the common interest is a celebrity/media figure. There is an even more specific name for these types of superfans which is “stan”. The term stan was first created by the rap artist Eminem and is defined as “an extremely or excessively enthusiastic and devoted fan” (Merriam-Webster).

Fans have normalized this term and created a subsection on Twitter known as Stan Twitter, a place for like-minded fans to connect and talk about their favorite celebrities. There are stan accounts for pretty much any celebrity that exists and all of the fans can come together and bond over their shared interest. According to Blight et al, “These group-specific forms of expression often emerge from interaction centered around a celebrity or media figure (i.e., discussing a celebrity). Community members observe and learn communal practices from those who desire to engage with or about that person (e.g., how and what to tweet)” (pg 314). People who exist in fandoms take cues from each other on what to post, how to act, and more. This also leads to the creation of certain slang words, trends, tone, and interactions. Social media has allowed millions of individuals to come together all in support of a specific celebrity. When mobilized, fandoms can be powerful. Fandoms have the power to make a song number one on the charts, win publicly voted awards, and sell-out concerts. On the other hand, fandoms also have the power to attack people online. Animosity can exist between multiple fandoms as each fan thinks that their celebrity is the best. If someone posts something negative about their favorite singer, actor, or athlete, fandoms can take their attacks too far due to mob mentality and

anonymity. This is a result of a parasocial relationship. Fans feel that they are so close to their celebrity that they will personally fight back against any negative comments on their behalf.

Survey

For my survey I decided to take a closer look at one fandom in particular, Harries, the fandom surrounding the musician and actor, Harry Styles. While doing my research it was important that the specific fandom fulfilled the requirements of having most, if not all of the following qualities: one-sided interactions, used as a means of promotion, and regularly interact with each other in reference to their artist. Harry Styles was perfect because of his huge fanbase, lack of non-promotional social media content posted on his social media accounts, and little to no reciprocation of fan interactions. Styles has a total of 82 million followers across his Instagram and Twitter accounts, this does not include the HSHQ accounts run by his management which have 8 million combined followers or his brand Pleasing which has 1.7 million followers. Not to mention the tens of millions of people that still follow his former band, One Direction's accounts. While Styles has his personal accounts @harrystyles on Instagram and @harry_styles on Twitter along with his

headquarters/management accounts known as @HSHQ, it is very clear that the same team is posting across all accounts.

There is a huge difference in the frequency and types of posts from the early years of his career in One Direction to now. Figure 1 is Styles' most recent Instagram post from May 5, 2022, a graphic announcing tour dates with the



Figure 1

caption “Love On Tour 2022. North America” (Instagram). This image is clearly a promotional post to make fans aware of the tour.



Figure 2

Figure 2 on the left is an Instagram post shared by Styles when he was still in One Direction. It is a picture of a scrabble board and the caption states, “First recorded attempt at ‘Vibey’ in scrabble” (Instagram). It was posted on May 25, 2015. The picture shared in 2015 is a lot more personal than the one posted this month. It gives a look into Styles’ personal life and has nothing to do with his career. Back in 2015 Styles

wasn’t promoting something in every single post and used Instagram in the same way a casual user would. Now in 2022, his supposedly “personal” accounts are utilized as a promotional tool and he never interacts with fans online. While this can be sad news for fans, it is good news for my study because a defining factor of a parasocial relationship is that they are formed through one-sided interactions.

Another reason I chose to focus on Harry Styles fans was because they have a strong sense of community and a massive presence on social media. Harries wouldn’t exist without Harry Styles and vice versa, however just by looking at social media it is clear that Harries publicly spend a lot more time surrounding Styles with little to no reciprocation. Oftentimes when there is interaction, Styles or his team is looking for fans to purchase or promote things. Recently to promote the upcoming album *Harry’s House*, Styles and his team put together the website HSIQ.co where fans can collect items in their “house” based on their favorite Styles songs that they stream on Spotify. While there is no true reward besides collecting virtual

objects, Styles' streaming numbers have skyrocketed and he is now the 5th most listened to artist in the world on Spotify. Harries interact with each other on social media to host streaming parties to get songs and albums to number 1, share presale codes and help others get tickets, giveaway merchandise, plan fan projects, and more. All without interaction from Styles. It is super interesting to see that while Harries have essentially no interaction with Styles himself, they are able to build bonds with each other with Styles as the common link. Since Harries are able to talk to each other about Styles on social media, their thoughts and ideas of him are reinforced time and time again, allowing them to believe they know him when in fact they truly don't.

Methodology

For my research, I surveyed 104 Harry Styles fans through social media. I posted my survey on two different social media platforms. The first was on Twitter, in the newly created Communities section. A Harry Styles update account created a community titled "Harries House" for Styles fans to come together and post about the album. The community has about 6,000 members. The second platform that I posted my survey on was Discord. Styles and his team actually created their own Discord server to promote his upcoming album release. The server has 195,000 members. I chose to post my survey within these platforms and communities because they were created specifically for Harry Styles fans to interact with each other while promoting his new album. The survey consists of a total of 16 questions. Of those 14, 9 were required. The survey has a mix of multiple-choice, long-form, and short-form questions. The survey is completely anonymous and demographics were not collected. It is in fact, understood that each person who responded to the survey found it through Twitter or Discord, is a part of the Harry Styles fandom, and uses social media. The questions asked on the survey include:

Are you a fan of Harry Styles? How long have you been a fan of Harry? Do you have a social media account dedicated to Harry Styles? Do you interact with other Harry Styles fans on social media? If yes, please explain how? How many hours in a day do you spend on social media looking at and or posting content related to Harry Styles? Have you ever spent money on Harry Styles in any of these categories?: Music, Concert Tickets, Merchandise, Pleasing, Movie Tickets. If you are comfortable sharing, around how much money have you spent? Have you ever met/interacted with Harry? If yes, how? What makes you a fan of Harry, why are you drawn to him? Do you feel like you know Harry? If yes, please elaborate. Are you satisfied with Harry's social media use?: Yes, No, Other.

The goal of the survey and questions is to prove if my hypothesis that social media rapidly develops parasocial relationships with celebrities and strengthens fandoms is correct or not.

Results

By asking the first question, "are you a fan of Harry Styles?", I was able to determine that all 104 of the people who filled out the survey were in fact fans and all had a higher chance of developing a parasocial relationship with him and being part of his online fandom. Out of the 16 questions that were asked on the survey, the ones that I deemed most important are as follows:

Q1: How long have you been a fan of Harry?

Determining how long the fans who filled out the survey have been fans of Styles is super important. It is argued that repeated exposure to media figures is what builds the parasocial relationship. Therefore, people who have been fans of Styles for longer would have a stronger

bond and relationship with him. Participants of the survey were given 5 options to choose from: a few months, 1-3 years, 4-6 years, 6-8 years, and 10+ years.

How long have you been a fan of Harry?

104 responses

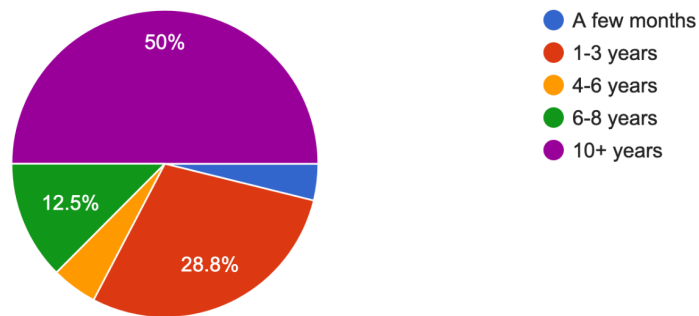


Figure 3

As seen through the results of Figure 3, exactly half of the Harry Styles fans that were surveyed have been fans of his for 10+ years. By dating this survey, it is discovered that half of the participants have been fans of Styles since around the beginning of One Direction's career. Alternatively, 3.8% of participants have become fans in the past few months. It is interesting to note that the biggest chunk of participants after 10+ years have actually been fans for 1-3 years. This means that they have become fans of Styles due to or after the release of his sophomore album, *Fine Line*, in December 2019.

Q2: Do you interact with other Harry Styles fans on social media?

Question 2 is important because it identifies the aspect of fandom on social media. In addition to participants being fans of Styles, it is also necessary for them to use social media as a

way to interact with other fans about him. By establishing that social media is used by fans as a way to discuss things related to Harry Styles with like-minded people, it becomes clear that fandom also plays a role in the formation of parasocial relationships.

Do you interact with other Harry Styles fans on Social Media?

104 responses

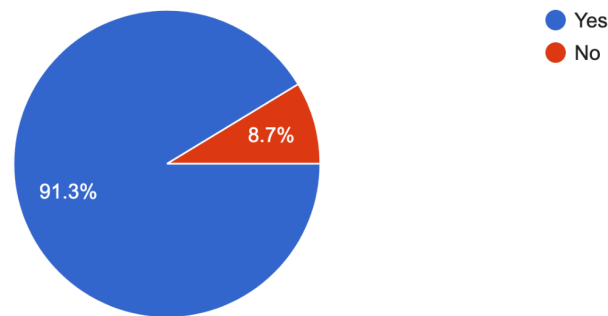


Figure 4

With a resounding 91.3% to 8.7%, it is very clear that participants who have all self-identified as Harry Styles fans, do interact with other fans of his across Social Media. When asked how they interact with other fans, recurring answers included, using Twitter to post and discuss whenever Styles does something, talking in group chats about Styles, having streaming parties, making internet friends, and more.

Q3: How many hours a day do you spend on social media looking at and or posting content related to Harry Styles?

In addition to establishing the presence of an interactive fandom on social media, it is also important to determine just how much time the participants and other fans actually spend on

social media interacting with content related to Harry Styles. For Q3 the participants were prompted with the following choices: less than 1 hr, 1 hr, 2 hrs, 3 hrs, 4+ hrs. The results can be found below in Figure 5.

How many hours a day do you spend on social media looking at and or posting content related to Harry Styles?

104 responses

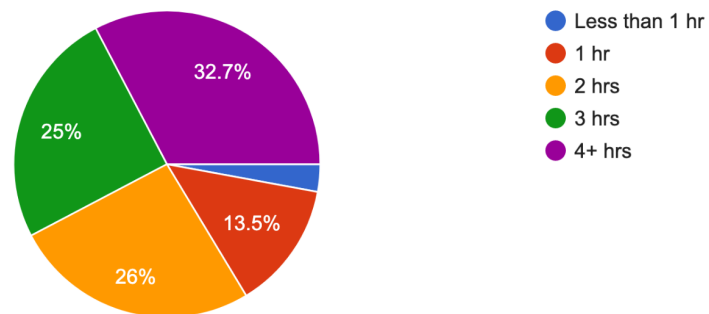


Figure 5

The majority of fans, 32.7%, spend four hours or more per day on social media looking at, interacting with, or posting Harry Styles related content. The next most popular answers were two hours with 26% of participants and three hours with 25% of participants. Due to current technology, these fans have unlimited access to social media and this content at the tips of their fingers. Anytime they want they can look at or post about Harry Styles. The ability to do this allows them to have so much exposure to Harry Styles and their ideas of who he is which really quickens and strengthens the bonds of their parasocial relationships with him.

Q4: Have you ever met/interacted with Harry?

Now that it has been established through the survey that the participants are indeed fans of Harry Styles, have been fans for many years, and interact with other fans on social media, it is time to determine if they have ever met or interacted with him. This question is super important because one of the markers for a parasocial relationship is that it is a one-sided relationship built through media exposure.

Have you ever met/interacted with Harry?

104 responses

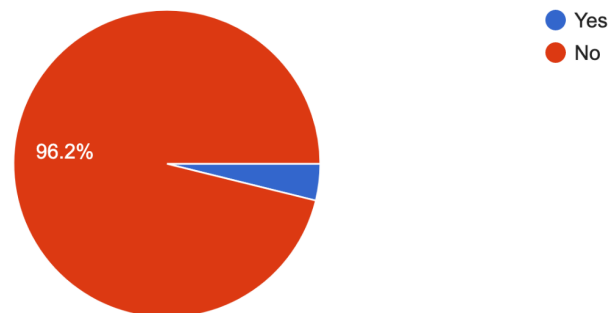


Figure 6

Based on the answers from 104 participants the majority have not met or interacted with Styles in any way. When breaking down the numbers only 3.8% or 4 participants said yes. When asked to elaborate, one participant met him while working at a music arena, another met him in Seattle, and one in London. The final participant interacted with him at a concert. All of these interactions were by chance. None of them were set up by Styles' team or directly initiated by Styles.

Q5: Do you feel like you know Harry? If yes, please elaborate.

This final question is the most important in determining if any of the participants have developed parasocial relationships with Harry Styles. People in these relationships have reported feeling like they know the celebrity or media figure they have been constantly exposed to and viewed over time, in this case over the course of many years.

Do you feel like you know Harry?

104 responses

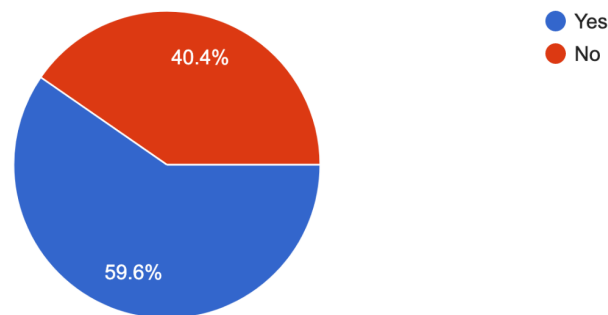


Figure 7

More than half of the survey participants responded to the survey as feeling like they know Styles. 59.6% (62 participants) said yes and 40.4% (42 participants) said no. When asked to elaborate on their answers, many share the same sentiment, that they have grown up with him and think of him as a friend, they know who he is through his music, interviews, and stage presence. Many of the participants still said yes to feeling like they know Styles while also stating that they do not know him on a personal level. It is interesting to see how they can still be aware of that and at the same time think of him as a friend. Some more in-depth answers from participants regarding feeling like they know Styles are:

- “Obviously he keeps a lot of his personal life a secret, but his music is very vulnerable and we can tell a lot about him from that. Plus just watching interviews all the time and seeing so much of his life, it’s hard not to feel like you know him. I mean, we’re spending hours upon hours listening to him talk and sing and live his life, it feels the same as spending time with a person in real life, and if you spend that many hours with someone in real life, you’d feel like you know them personally too.”
- “I feel like he’s a best friend to me. Sure, I know a lot about him because of interviews, social media stuff, and all that. Whenever I get connected to a person like this, I always feel the need to know a lot about them because I want to understand them.”
- “I feel like I know Harry, in the sense of a long term friend. I’ve been watching him grow up for 10 years as I have grown up, so of course I have an attachment to him and his personality. I feel like I know what he would say to certain remarks, what he would wear when shopping around, or if he would like a song or not. Just like an old friend, you know their preferences, likes, and dislikes. With Harry it just came over time, as if we built our own relationship.”
- “Despite having never actually met him, he shows his heart through music and his concert performances in a way that reveals who he truly is to his fans.”

Multiple participants referred to Styles as their friend unprompted. Once again, only four participants out of the 104 who answered the survey, have personally met or interacted with Styles. The rest of the participants' thoughts and ideas about Styles have been crafted by what

they know about him through his music, interviews, concerts, and what is shared by him and people who know him via social media.

Conclusion

Through the survey questions and especially the results of Q5, it is very obvious that participants have formed parasocial relationships with Harry Styles through social media. Participants' parasocial relationships with Styles have formed through Styles' music and media appearances, years of being fans, interaction with related content on social media, and interaction with other fans online. The majority of participants have been fans for over 10 years, interact with other self-proclaimed Styles fans, spend 4 hours a day on social media dedicated to Styles, and have not met Styles but feel like they know him. This all makes sense, of course after being fans for years and spending hours a day exposed to content, participants are going to feel like they have some sort of connection with Styles.

What makes this interesting is the lack of personal reciprocation on Styles' side. What makes this work for him without upsetting or losing fans, is his fandom. The other fans fill the hole in the relationship that is otherwise shouted into the void. Social media plays a huge part in this. Fans are able to connect with each other in an instant from all over the globe. They can talk about their favorite songs, meet up at concerts, build friendships, and more with the common denominator of Harry Styles. Fans are able to build up these thoughts and ideas about Styles without having ever met him because they are all created and reinforced by other fans. This aspect of fandom helps them validate their feelings and beliefs about Styles that might not actually be true.

Recommendations

If I had more time and resources to expand this study I think it would be interesting to see if it is possible to track the development of a parasocial relationship pre-social media and compare those findings with the results of my social media survey. It is assumed that social media and current technology fast-track the creation of these relationships, but just how long did it take in the late 1950s when parasocial relationships were discovered or at least given a name. It would also be interesting to survey participants using the more professional and accurate Parasocial Interaction Scale (PSI) or the Experience of Parasocial Interaction Scale (EPSI). I believe that the results would be more definite when determining if parasocial relationships exist within certain groups of people as they were used in earlier studies.

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