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Conversatia News

## **Behind the Screen: Exploring Parasocial Relationships**

We all have some famous people that we look up to and admire. We see their lifestyles and can't help but imagine what it would be like to live it. Although the idea of idolizing a public figure is typically harmless, a dangerous threat arises when fans go too far: Parasocialism. In this interview-style discussion, learn about the complexities that lie behind this unhealthy relationship that can form between a fan and their idol.

### **What is Parasocialism?**

Parasocialism, formally defined by the National Register of Health Service Psychologists, is “a one-sided relationship, where one person extends emotional energy, interest and time, and the other party, the persona, is completely unaware of the other’s existence.”

### **What’s the problem with parasocialism? Why is it becoming such a prevalent problem especially when fanbases form left and right?**

The thing about parasocialism is that it fosters extremely unhealthy relationships that create an uncomfortable atmosphere for both parties involved. Parasocialism becomes consuming and can take away from other aspects of a fan's life as they place all their focus on someone who does not return that to that extent. It's classified as a major issue by many psychologists as well because of the extent to which a fan can go to keep the illusion of a “relationship” with the celebrity. Since fandoms form left and right, like-minded people can get together and build off each other's adoration for these media figures. However, in these fandoms, while some fans recognize a healthy appreciation, being in an environment where others are equally obsessed contributes more to the problem. The reason as to why the problem is only now coming to light is because of the increased media platforms that fans use to share their viewpoints on celebrities. Fans show their “obsession” through these platforms, and in doing so, they make other casual users on the platform uncomfortable

### **How do parasocial relationships differ from traditional social relationships?**

Parasocial relationships differ from traditional social relationships mainly in the nature of the interaction. Parasocial relationships are one-sided as mentioned before, while traditional social relationships are two-sided, involving mutual interaction and communication. That distinction is crucial because the lack of mutual communication in parasocial relationships is what identifies it as being a major problem regarding the overall psychology of fans and the social environment in big media and entertainment industries.

### **How does the relationship form? How do media personalities influence the development of parasocial relationships?**

Parasocial relationships form through repeated exposure to a media personality in ways that create a sense of familiarity for the fan as they begin to feel that they know the media personality due to the intimate or relatable content despite the lack of actual interaction. Media personalities influence the development of these relationships by sharing personal content and posting about their daily lives, and thoughts, to make the fans feel included in their personal lives. They interact with the fans and demonstrate authenticity that helps fans feel a stronger connection as if they truly know the actual celebrity. Essentially, celebrities and other media personalities “feed” into these parasocial relationships by projecting familiarity and intimacy with fans through online profiles. They of course do this with their own incentive in that they can help boost business and are provided an opportunity to capitalize off their interactions with the fans. We see examples of media personalities influencing the development of these parasocial relationships with Taylor Swift posting her journal pages online and creating the culture of trying to find hints for the next albums wherever whenever she was, even in personal locations or with celebrities and idols going on live when just going about their daily lives so it feels like a facetime almost

### **In what instances do fans take being a fan too far? How do we distinguish the line between casual appreciation for a media personality and obsession?**

Fans who engage in parasocial relationships cross the line from appreciation to obsession with instances like stalking and following the personality around, invading their privacy, and sharing information that isn't publicly shared, by excessively engaging in extreme behaviors like sending messages and gifts. A major thing is creating edits or writing fan fiction and taking creative liberties with the media personality's life in ways that more often than not, make them uncomfortable. Now, we can distinguish the line between casual appreciation and obsession by enjoying and consuming content produced, rather than engaging in consistent monitoring to the point where extreme emotions are felt about the celebrity's interactions with others. We have several examples of fans taking it too far. For example, BTS member, Jungkook mentioned his favorite kombucha from a tea brand TEAZEN, and increased 500% of the sales because fans went out and bought out the product within a day and the brand ran out of stock. Or, with Billie Eilish adding fans to her close friends her following rates increased creating the delusion in the fans that they were actually her “close friends.” We saw stalking as an extreme case of parasocialism with Twitch streamer Sweet\_Anita reported being “stalked relentlessly” to the point where she needed to take legal action.

### **What are the negative implications of parasocialism? How does it have a two-party impact on both the celebrity/media figure as well as the fan?**

Parasocialism itself as mentioned previously is such an unhealthy relationship to engage in and it has negative psychological and social implications on both the celebrity and the fan. For the media figure, there are things like a lack of privacy, as they are under constant scrutiny and exposed to an invasion of space. They are prompted to have more stress and anxiety as dealing with obsessive fans can be mentally taxing especially with the fanbases being prone to being emotionally volatile. Of course, there are also major security concerns with it as celebrities are exposed to potential threats from overzealous fans, again we have the extreme cases of stalking and forced interaction.

**What are some specific examples of this occurring? What are some common things that overtly obsessed fans engage in to showcase their appeal towards a certain figure in media?**

With parasocialism, celebrities are continuously placed in invasive situations where there are stalking incidents such as the infamous case of Mark David Chapman, a fan who stalked and later murdered John Lennon. There are instances of extreme fan actions like breaking into the homes of celebrities like the incident with Justin Bieber. There is online harassment which is particularly prevalent in that fans harass other people who either criticize or interact with their idol. A major example of overtly obsessed fans is the saesang culture that ties in with the KPOP industry. Many KPOP idols facilitate interactions through lives and feeds, but there are groups of fans that stalk the idols and follow them around everywhere, finding hotels, finding their family homes, etc.

**Do these fans know that they are taking the relationship too far?**

Obsessed fans honestly may not realize the extent of their actions due to the extent of the emotional investment they put into the relationship. The deep emotional connection can cloud their judgment and even create the idea that they are simply doing it all out of goodwill and “love” for the celebrity. This further ties into how they may be misguided by the perceived reciprocity in that they believe that their actions are welcomed by the celebrity. Overall, fans are commonly unaware of how they are acting because they are facilitated by so many external forces, and don’t acknowledge perceptions of boundaries.

**How can we find ways to facilitate a comfortable and sensible reaction between the fans and celebrities that shows mutual appreciation? How can content creators, celebrities, and other prominent figures in media manage their parasocial relationships with fans?**

To create a healthy dynamic between fans and celebrities the best way to do so is setting boundaries. Celebrities should clearly communicate acceptable and unacceptable behaviors with their fans. Celebrities can work with engagement management in that they can interact in controlled ways to maintain connection without personal invasion. To better manage parasocial relationships, content creators and celebrities can engage while maintaining clear boundaries, regularly reminding fans of the nature of the relationships, and implementing appropriate security to protect privacy and safety.