

“ONE OF THE MOST PROLIFIC SMUT WRITERS ON TUMBLR”: CONTESTED FAN PRACTICES AND THE CONTINUUM OF FAN PERSONAS

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ABSTRACT

Most fanfiction writers never imagine the worlds they create could become television content. However, many were confronted with this possibility in the third episode of HBO's Euphoria (2019). Kat Hernandez, a social outcast, became a well-known writer on Tumblr for her fanfiction about Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson from One Direction. Her story, "The First Night," was brought to life through an explicit one-minute technicolour animation. This article examines the reactions to both the animation and the specific fan practice of Real Person Fanfiction (RPF) highlighted by the episode. By analysing the reactions of three groups—One Direction fans, subscribers to the "Larry Stylinson" narrative, and non-One Direction fanfiction writers—this article demonstrates how fans perform contested fan practices and (attempt to) mediate which aspects are visible to the mainstream and other fans through specific fan personas. Drawing on scholars like Christopher Moore, Mark Stewart, CarrieLynn D. Reinhard, Celia Lam and Jackie Raphael, this article investigates how idealized fan performances, often weaponized against fandom by mainstream culture, are also used internally to regulate behaviour.

KEY WORDS

Fannish Behaviour and Practice; Contested Fandoms; Conflicting Fandoms; Celebrity Fandom; Real Person Fanfiction

INTRODUCTION

When fanfiction writers sit down to craft stories ranging from small 200-word vignettes to multi-part odysseys, most never imagine these stories existing outside their fandom. And yet, many fanfiction writers and readers worldwide were left dealing with this very possibility when the third episode (“Made You Look”) of the acclaimed HBO show *Euphoria* aired. This episode focuses on Kat Hernandez (Barbie Ferreira), a character who described herself as having spent her life afraid of being judged for her weight and trying to take up less space (“‘03 Bonnie and Clyde” 00:17:59-18:11). As Rue Bennett (Zendaya) narrates Kat’s early life, she explains that Kat’s social life deteriorated in elementary school after she gained weight and was ostracized as a result. Rue explains that because she was shunned at school, Kat found refuge online and started writing fanfiction. However, it was not just any fanfiction; Kat had “become one of the most prolific smut writers on Tumblr” and was known for her NC-17¹ real person fanfiction

(RPF) that focused on the romantic pairing of Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson from the band One Direction (“Made You Look” 00:05:16-23). The episode then transitions to a technicolour sixty-two-second animation that depicts a sex scene between the two men, a snippet of Kat’s Tumblr-famous fic, “The First Night.”

Kat may be a fictional RPF writer, but she represents the historical conceptualization of fans as “losers with pathetic real lives sublimated into being a fan, somewhere between laughably inept and dangerously pathological” (Stanfill 2019, p. 52). The character and the animated sequence became a catalyst for discussion of RPF writing and adjacent fictional narrativizing of celebrity lives. Many fans of *Euphoria*, One Direction, and fan fiction writers took to social media to share their reactions to the animation. In these responses, fans not only interrogated the depiction’s veracity but also reflect on its consequences for how the broader public perceives Directioners and how Directioners perceive each other. Backlash to this episode and the external and internal tensions it amplified within the One Direction fandom is the focus of this paper². These conflicts often stem from divergent ideas of what it means “to be a good enough fan” (Busse 2017, p. 177). The contention surrounding practices like writing RPF demonstrates that fans enact their fan identities in diverse ways that may or may not align with fellow fans.

Celebrities like the members of One Direction reached the height of their success during a time when social media afforded public figures a level of hypervisibility that traditional media could not. Social media became a system where “celebrity self-presentation seem[ed] to originate from the celebrity figure themselves, rather than through the filter of a representational system” (Lam & Raphael 2022, p. 9). This system not only places today’s celebrities under an intense spotlight but also gives fans multiple avenues for access (or the presumption of such). The longevity of a celebrity is largely determined by how well they and their team adapt to this new model, understanding that the public now “desire[s]...truth within the celebrity image in which the performance is discarded and the seemingly authentic can be found” (Lam & Raphael 2022, p. 8). Thus, social media posts, public appearances, and seemingly goofy, off-the-cuff interview responses are all attempts to present a personable, authentic, yet carefully curated public persona. As Celia Lam and Jackie Raphael (2022, p. 10) explain, the meaning we attach to a celebrity “multiplies depending on the source of curation”, creating a persona congruous with “self-presentation or fan interpretation” but that also may “conflict with other variants”. Within the broader One Direction fandom, there is a collective interpretation of the band that aligns with the image the boy band has constructed. However, within this shared fandom, known collectively as ‘Directioners’, there are sub-fandoms, such as the one *Euphoria* pantomimes, which reimagines the band’s persona in ways that disrupt their carefully managed image. The specific form of persona bricolage and reinterpretation employed by RPF writers complicates One Direction’s public narrative and sparks discord within the fandom about the “correct” way to be a Directioner.

These conflicting intra-fandom self-definitions undergird many of the tensions I analyse in this article. I build on the work of Christopher Moore, Kim Barbour, and Katja Lee, who have outlined “Five Dimensions of Online Persona”—public, mediatised, performative, collective, and intentional value. I have adapted this framework to specifically understand how personas emerge and operate for fans who engage in contested fan practices, and how they negotiate their contested identities within a collective that shares a broader fan identity. Barbour’s concept of persona registers is similarly relevant, especially when considering how fans express and manage their identities in various contexts. I have adapted both models to examine how One Direction fans negotiate personas while navigating both external and internal perceptions of their fan participation.

I propose four distinct yet overlapping registers of fan persona—public, communal, selective, and private. Each exists simultaneously yet in tension within any given fan space, with the necessity to perform each depending on the context. These personas are shaped by broader cultural hierarchies and notions of acceptable cultural consumption, which are replicated within fan communities. Similar language and shaming outside of fandom, which characterizes practices like fanfiction writing, celebrity stanning, and shipping as overly emotional or obsessive, are often used within fandom to relegate certain fan activities such as RPF writing to a deviant or lesser status. This stigmatization pushes fans who engage in these practices to negotiate their personas differently and navigate these levels of fan identity to maintain belonging and avoid judgment.

Using the Directioner fandom as a case study, I argue that fan policing and conflicts over participation reinforce cultural hierarchies, compelling fans to operate within the boundaries of “good fandom”. Specifically, I examine tensions surrounding RPF and how this policing reflects gendered expectations, mainstream ideas of cultural legitimacy, and the stigmatization of feminine fan practices. These tensions are further shaped by heightened cultural visibility—of both the band and the fandom—and the intense focus on real or imagined relationships between One Direction members. These relational narratives inspire both creativity and conflict, shaping how fans navigate their identities within the fandom. As a result, fans negotiate their fan identity across various registers—public, communal, selective, private—to balance the pressures to be a “good fan” through a culturally approved version of fandom engagement, with their desire for an authentic and enjoyable fan experience.

METHODOLOGY

For this study, I collected responses from four social media platforms (between 2021-2024) where fandom activity is prominent: TikTok, Tumblr, YouTube, and Twitter (now X). These platforms were chosen for their significance as participatory spaces where pop culture is discussed, reshaped, and contested by fans in real time. The *Euphoria* episode dramatizing Larry Stylinson (a portmanteau of Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson) fanfiction sparked widespread reactions and discussions central to this study. Its depiction of RPF provoked responses that extended beyond critiques of accuracy and exposed deeper anxieties about how fandom practices—particularly those associated with young women—are judged through a lens of gendered stereotypes. *Euphoria* explicitly trades in these stereotypes, portraying Kat in a manner consistent with historical portrayals of female fans who are “socially deviant loners or members of a dangerously hysterical crowd” (Reinhard 2018, p. 5). Audience reactions to the Larry Stylinson fanfiction scene ranged widely, from those who viewed it as an accurate portrayal of fan culture to those who were deeply offended. However, they all shared a common anxiety about how this fictional portrayal reflected on real fans.

A keyword search using terms like “Euphoria Larry Stylinson,” “Euphoria One Direction episode,” and “Euphoria RPF” was conducted on each platform to identify relevant discussions with screenshots taken to preserve ephemeral content. The data consists of sixty tweets (original posts, retweets, replies, and the response from Louis Tomlinson that has 5,100 responses), ten TikTok videos (with a total of 1,048 comments), thirty Tumblr posts, and the most viewed YouTube video of the animation (with over one million views and 4,606 comments). Additionally, comments from a now-removed Change.org petition, which as of May 2024 had 19,681 signatures, were also included to capture the breadth of responses.

Three distinct groups were identified within this data set. First are One Direction fans who do not ship Larry Stylinson (Directioners). Directioners represent the broader, more

“mainstream” fan identity that prioritizes the band’s image as the band has curated it while distancing themselves from practices they perceive as deviant, such as RPF. Next are those who ship Larry Stylinson (Larries), whose engagement with RPF is a longstanding point of contention within the fandom, tensions that the episode further exacerbated. Finally, there are those who are fanfiction writers but do not identify as Directioners or Larries. This group provides a perspective on RPF that is detached from the internal dynamics of the One Direction fandom while also reflecting broader fanfiction community views on the practice.

The three groups were categorised based on language used in responses, such as “I’m a Larry but...”, comments from fans explicitly rejecting Larries such as “real fans don’t...”, and remarks from general fanfiction writers discussing the scene without identifying as Directioners or Larries. If we return to the four registers of fan persona I outlined earlier—private, selective, communal, and public—these three groups provide a unique case study to explore the tensions between these personas. This fan persona framework is useful for understanding how Larries navigate their identities under the scrutiny brought by the *Euphoria* episode, as well as Directioners who disavow Larries’ fan practices and seek to control how the fandom is publicly perceived.

Responses included in the dataset were both immediate reactions from 2019 when the episode first aired, and comments posted in subsequent years; the latter demonstrates that these were not merely knee-jerk responses and instead reflected preexisting tensions that continue to persist. Ethical considerations were taken into account by focusing on publicly accessible data and anonymizing usernames (themselves often pseudonyms), as the identity of individual posters is not relevant to this study. Instead, the focus is on the trends and patterns that emerge when responses are analysed collectively. I used a thematic approach to examine how fan comments reflect the ways fans navigate their identities in response to internal and external pressures. These identities are then situated within the framework of fan personas—public, communal, selective, and private—to examine how fans navigate the hierarchies and pressures they face both within and beyond the fandom.

REAL PERSON FANFICTION: HOW FAR IS TOO FAR?

Kat is depicted as an RPF writer. “It is one of the more popular subgenres in fanfiction, as fans have long been eager to fictionalize and dramatize the lives of celebrities and public figures. RPF is a highly contested genre both within and outside fandom, evidenced by Fanfiction.net’s twenty-year ban on “stories with non-historical and non-fictional characters: actors, musicians, and etc” (2008). Cast under a “powerful taboo” within fandom, RPF is a morally grey area for many fanfiction participants, even among those who do not normally have such limitations on what they write and consume about fictional characters (Tiffany 2022, p. 57). This is of note because, as Bronwen Thomas (2014, p. 173) explains, fanfiction often strongly ties fictional characters with the real people that portray them on screen, arguing “for many Pemberleans, Colin Firth is Mr. Darcy” yet RPF, for many, crosses a boundary that something like “fan casting”³ does not. Instead, the line is drawn at stories that “impinge on ‘the real lives’ of actors or personalities in the media, particularly where this involves casting aspersions on their sexuality, making reference to their families, or broaching taboo subjects such as incest or underage sex” (Thomas 2014, p. 173). This boundary is ironic given that the “real lives” fanfiction writers play with are often celebrity personas—mediated constructs that are themselves a form of fiction. This narrativizing creates, in Hannah Ewens’ (2020, p. 101) words, a “second existence” for the celebrity that the fans know and have come to love. Several scholars like Richard Dyer (2004), Mark Duffett (2013), and Katharine McCain (2021) argue that celebrity is constructed. The public image of One Direction is not simply a natural reflection of

who they are and is instead, as McCain (2021, p. 30) notes, “merely the perfect version that they have crafted for a job”. By engaging with celebrities in this way, RPF writers highlight the “performance and fictionality” of celebrity personas carefully curated for public consumption (Pope 2019, p. 139). This becomes idealized and unassailable for some and a creative opportunity for others.

It is the conflicting ways that different segments of the audience interpret and consume these “commoditize[d] expressions of selfhood”, combined with the multilayered nature of this manufactured selfhood, that give rise to complex intra-fandom dynamics (Lam et al. 2022, p. 1). On one level, there is the persona carefully curated by the celebrity through publicists, interviews, “personable” social media posts, and scheduled public appearances. The broader fandom interprets this persona and constructs a second layer of the celebrity-text based on their collective understanding and idealization of the celebrity, “flesh[ing] out the dynamics of combined celebrity persona that are often hinted at in interviews and press depictions” (Lam & Raphael 2022, p. 17). Simultaneously, fans like RPF writers further complicate this process through their “active read[ing]” of the celebrity persona in niche ways that may diverge from what the broader fandom considers appropriate (Lam & Raphael 2022, p. 17). They imagine celebrities in scenarios or relationships the celebrities have denied or that contradict their public personas. As a result, they are deemed mis-readers of the celebrity and a threat to the public persona that the fandom of said celebrity curates for itself. The incongruity between fans who seek to preserve the celebrity’s curated image and those who “take full advantage of the license for play and creativity” that a mediated persona provides results in clashes of fan identities (Thomas 2014, p. 176). The *Euphoria* episode and the many responses to its depiction of RPF is a prime example of this.

Public Persona

When *Euphoria* first aired, a rumour circulated that a Tumblr account had posed as a One Direction fan to gather information for the Kat character. This claim was substantiated by the episode’s use of a Tumblr handle linked to an active account that fans recalled interacting with in the months leading up to the show. Rumour or not, the belief that there was a “mole” within the fandom sparked anxieties among fans, particularly regarding how the fandom was perceived when it was not “on”—that is, behaving intentionally to mediate how the collective is viewed. Or in other words, its public persona.

The public persona is how fans present themselves to external audiences, including non-fans, media, and celebrities. It is influenced by societal expectations and cultural hierarchies that often stigmatize certain fan behaviours. Fans consciously perform their fan identities in socially acceptable ways to protect their collective reputation, influencing how they are perceived individually and collectively. By combining Moore et al.’s public dimension of the online persona with Barbour’s concept of the professional persona, the result is a highly visible and curated persona crafted in response to this hypervisibility. Public personas are shaped by the need to engage with a wider audience and involve negotiating between private identity and public performance (Moore et al. 2017). In this sense, the public fan persona is the face of the fandom when interacting with outsiders, including the mainstream media. When describing the professional register, Barbour (2015, p. 62) explains that this register stems from a desire to balance the need for public visibility with self-protection, ensuring that professional performance remains consistent and controlled. Similarly, the public fan persona also involves “a consistent theme of self-protection” (Barbour 2015, p. 62). This is evident in how both individuals and the collective fandom may adjust their public presentations to conform to (or avoid subverting) dominant cultural expectations. This often creates intra-fandom conflict as

certain aspects are highlighted while others are downplayed or shamed into silence to present a more “acceptable” image to the outside world.

Kat is written as not only a fandom celebrity who started the “conspiracy...that Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson of One Direction were secretly fucking” but also as someone whose fandom participation reflected a broader tendency to sexualize everything around her, including eventually, herself (“Made You Look” 00:05:41). This replicates pre-existing stereotypes about fanfiction writers and their work, and is particularly harmful because, despite Sam Levinson’s claims that he is “not interested in realism,” *Euphoria* is received as “a realistic depiction of the struggles of young adults” (Seitz 2019; Primus 2022). Kat embodies many negative stereotypes about fanfiction writers—overweight, outcast, low self-esteem, and sexually inexperienced. The use of Kat’s body to signal a transformation out of the “abnormal” fan life is not particularly unique to *Euphoria*. As Busse (2017, pp. 192-93) points out, the bodies of “the pimply, unwashed, out-of-shape fanboy and the overweight fangirl...metonymically...signify their fan obsession”, appealing to the stereotype that fans are “undesirable and repulsive bodies”. Fans play their part in policing the image of fandom, but how they are represented in mainstream media like movies and TV shows, along with how they are reported on in news articles and documentaries, plays a key role in defining the image of fan culture and particularly how girls and women function within these spaces. This mediation of fandoms, and the fear that fan practices may be misunderstood, drives fans to carefully curate their public persona.

Mark Stewart (2023, p. 173) asserts that in television and movies, the portrayal of fans becomes a strategic narrative tool for reinforcing specific norms of fandom performance, promoting behaviours considered rational and normal while disavowing the fans who deviate from this standard. Instead, as Stewart explains, those who do not conform to what is deemed “appropriate fandom” are “positioned as bad, deviant, wrong—i.e., ‘inappropriate’” (p. 173). This dichotomous framing of the fan subject shapes broader public narratives around what it means to be a good fan. By reinforcing stereotypes about fictional fans like Kat—who may serve as an introduction to fandom generally or the only representation they encounter—the *Euphoria* writers contribute to a negative cultural perception of the public persona of the One Direction fandom.

There has been a considerable shift in subcultures and their relationships to the dominant culture. Thanks to things like social media and popular events like Comic-Con, it has become easier to find your “tribe,” and being a nerd, a geek, a stan, etc., is increasingly mainstream. However, despite the apparent destigmatization of these labels, some identities gain more power and privilege compared to others within geeks and nerd culture: “It is often less explicitly fannish (or, one might argue, the less explicitly female fannish) elements that have been accepted by mainstream” (Busse 2017, p. 180). Practices like fanfiction and “shipping” are read as decidedly feminine. Although mainstream media cultures have appropriated many fandom terms—with “shipping” being one of the most popular—these forms of fan expression still have a contentious relationship within mainstream culture, holding a status in society that is “normalized while remaining pathologized” (Scott 2019, p. 93). The *Euphoria* episode by its very existence suggests that the public views One Direction fans, whom Kat is meant to represent, through a lens of abnormality, despite Directioners’ efforts to cultivate a more favourable public persona. Kat is meant to be a target for mockery and metonymy for the “irrational and immature media consumer” (Tang 2023, p. 294). Fanfiction writers noticed this and publicly disapproved, arguing the episode “promoted stereotypes” and is a “violation of fan culture”:

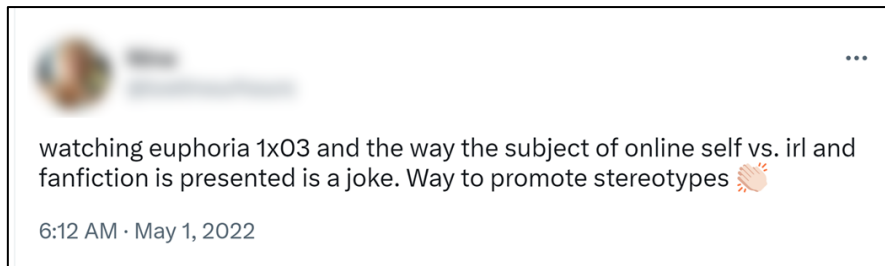


Figure 1: "Watching Euphoria 1x03." Twitter May 1, 2022.

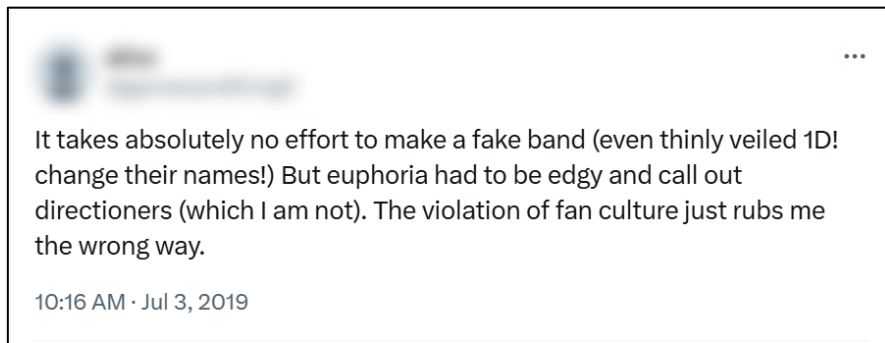


Figure 2: "It takes absolutely no effort." Twitter. July 3, 2019.

As fan culture becomes more mainstream, negative portrayals of fandom become more frequent as outsiders enter these spaces where they are "more often than not looking for something of shock value or to quickly compile a list of memes, selected fan art, or fanfiction to feature elsewhere" without taking the time to understand that these are performances within a specific fannish context (Dym & Fiesler 2020, p. 155:18). When outsiders, driven by curiosity sparked by phenomena like *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011), *After* (2014), or *Euphoria* (2019) peek behind the curtain into fanfiction communities, they often lack the context to fully understand these spaces.

Fans like the Directioners are understandably concerned with how their fandom is perceived by outsiders, given decades of demeaning and humiliating media messages directed at fans just like them: those who may have had posters of John Lennon, Bret Michaels, Michael Jackson or JC Chasez on their walls instead, but were shamed all the same. To exert control over this image, they may defensively target those they see as a threat to the fandom's reputation, such as Larry Stylinson fanfiction writers. Fandom norms like pseudonymity and cultural ethos such as "don't talk about fandom" are designed to protect individuals and the community from external judgment (Dym & Fiesler 2020, p. 155:7-8). Many fans see how fan objects are treated when they leave fan spaces and have strong opinions about what they think the outside world should see, lest it be used against them. Instead of confronting negative portrayals of fanfiction as "disgusting" or "poorly written", they redirect this invective toward other fans whom they perceive as threats to the fandom's public reputation (Barner 2017, p. 99). The finger is often pointed at fans deemed weirder, suspicious, or abnormal, as the negotiation of appropriate fan behaviour remains in flux by fans constantly recalibrating what is acceptable both within their communities and in interactions with others. What is acceptable from fans versus what opens them up to criticism and disdain? The harshness with which the Directioners responded to Larries who write fanfiction suggests that their seemingly improper fan performance did just that and brought shame to other fans in the fandom.

Communal Persona

Some fans consider RPF harmless if it does not reach the hands of celebrities, while others see it as a tricky ethical area or even a major violation of privacy. These differing opinions highlight the complex dynamics within fan communities, where fan practices like RPF are constantly negotiated. Public criticism of Larry Stylinson fanfiction writers by other One Direction fans (such as those discussed below) reflects an effort to avoid being associated with stereotypes portrayed in media like *Euphoria*. This internal policing works to uphold a more “acceptable” public persona for the collective fandom. However, the pressure to conform to standards set by the broader fandom extends beyond the public persona.

Fandoms may establish norms to curate a specific public image that shapes individual and collective behaviour within these spaces. This process also complicates the experience for those whose fannishness does not meet these standards and leads to the policing and shaming of these online personas into silence. As Jack Lipei Tang (2023, p. 303) observes, in fan communities “norms are being strategically violated, amended, and reappropriated”, highlighting the shifting nature of what is considered acceptable fan behaviour. This ongoing negotiation of norms influences how fans craft their online personas, often complicating the process and resulting in, as Barbour (2015, p. 58) describes, overlapping and sometimes contradictory “types of performances that share the performance space”. These dynamics shape the ‘communal persona’ that reflects shared fandom values.

Unlike in more intimate fan alcoves where a fan can participate in more polarizing forms of fandom expression, broader fan spaces often require fans to moderate their behaviour and align with widely accepted fan practices to avoid marginalization. This involves denying, hiding, or qualifying certain controversial practices to reinforce their status as proper fans. Moore et al. (2017, p. 6) explain that collective dimension of an online persona ensures it is not an isolated identity but is shaped by interactions across multiple online networks, creating overlapping publics with the user’s persona at the centre. In the context of fandom, this translates to fans feeling pressured to conform to shared standards of acceptable behaviour.

Practices like RPF writing, while accepted in more niche spaces, often become a point of contention in broader communal fan spaces. While fanfiction more generally is stigmatized, “RPF is seen as crossing a hazy line of appropriateness, even within the fanfic community” (Pope 2019, p. 143). It occupies a contradictory position within fandom where it is derided, but simultaneously one of the most visible aspects of fan culture. As a result, RPF writers often find themselves marginalized in fan spaces and the communal persona becomes a way to balance their fan preferences with the collective values of the fan community. The Directioners’ responses below highlight this divide, as they actively distance themselves from Larries, portraying Larries as deviant or improper fans who have violated the collective fandom’s values.

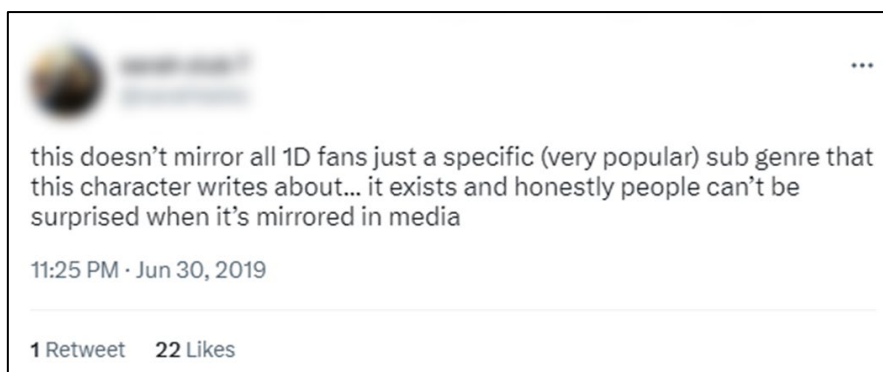


Figure 3: "This doesn't mirror all 1D fans." Twitter. June 30, 2019.

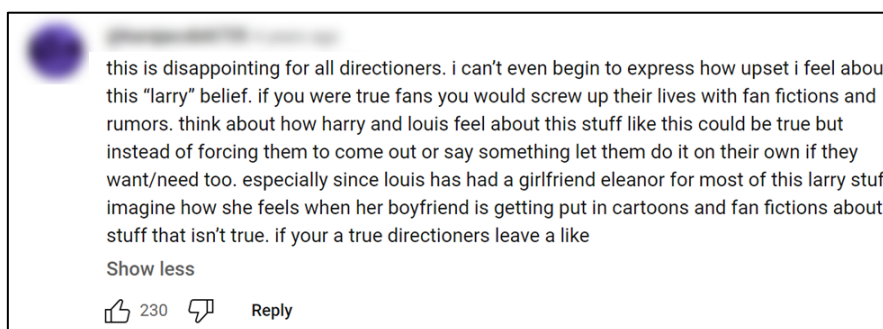


Figure 4: "This is disappointing." YouTube. 2020.

Such a strong backlash against Larry Stylinson fanfiction by other One Direction fans reflects an acute awareness of persistent negative stereotypes that portrays the fans of boy bands in particular as superficial, "unserious...obsessive, hysterical, frivolous, silly, or unable to control their emotions" (Coleman & Lyons 2023, p. 1727). These fans, in turn, police the boundaries of what makes someone a "true Directioner", sometimes justifying harassment to enforce community norms and taking "harmful actions toward others they might not otherwise" (Dym & Fiesler 2020, p. 155:11). These fans seek to separate themselves from the nonnormative fans that earn the public's ire through their tendency to "segregate, gate-keep and create hierarchies" to distance themselves from "'bad' fans" (Yodovich 2021, p. 874). Shippers already have a contentious relationship in fandom, slash shippers even more so⁴. Some believed that Larries crossed a boundary between fans and the band by shipping Larry Stylinson. This notion was further compounded by the fact that their actions drew attention from outsiders, including the creators of Euphoria. As a result, the Directioners turned against Larries, despite everyone ostensibly being fans of the band.

The ostracization of "improper" fans suggests that parts of fandom operate under the belief that fandom can become more culturally legitimate and normative by "engag[ing] in 'stigma-management strategies'" that involve "distancing themselves from perceived others—such as non-fans, fake fans, or even rabid fans" and excising individuals or groups counterintuitive to this goal (Reinhard, 2018, p. 83). This presents a particular irony, however, as One Direction fans, as a collective, have been treated with the same suspicion historically directed at all fans of boy bands. Their interests have been trivialized, their behaviours marginalized, and their fandom pejoratively labelled immature "compared to the 'true' rock and roll fan" (Coleman & Lyons 2023, p. 1723). Directioners, in their responses to the episode, echoed the language of dominant cultural discourses, berating Larry shippers with pathologizing and stereotyping critiques that fans of boybands more generally have faced for

generations. Because their fan participation is read as aberrant and abnormal, they, in turn, hide certain fan practices and police others to ensure they “behave.”

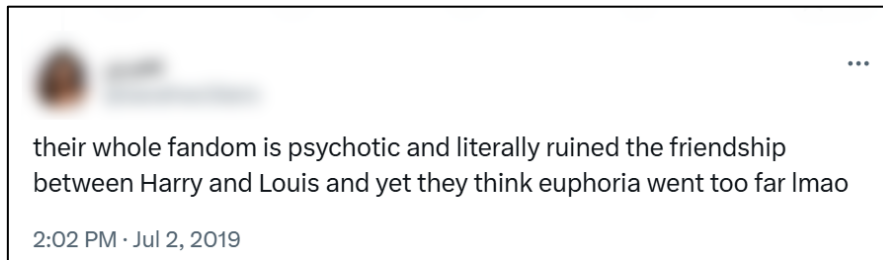


Figure 5: “Their whole fandom is psychotic.” Twitter. July 2, 2019.

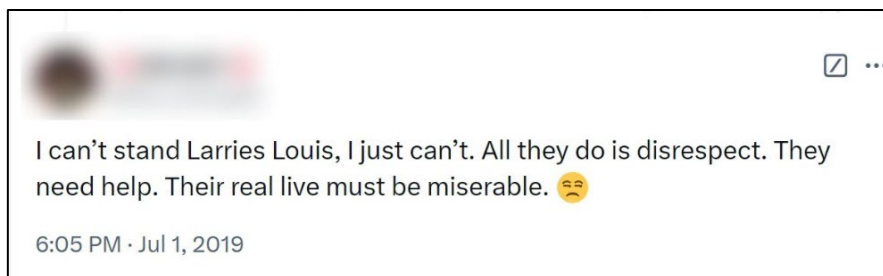


Figure 6: “I can’t stand Larries.” Twitter. July 1, 2019.

By animating explicit RPF, the *Euphoria* episode brings to life Directioners’ fear that such fan practices may lead to the celebrities they adore being “either terrified or disgusted by their own female fans” (Larsen & Zubernis 2012, p. 69). The effort to repudiate Larries for violating a boundary reflects a process of conditional belonging, where certain fan behaviours are constructed as a “potential threat and contamination of the collective” (Yodovich 2021, p. 878). Drawing on Erving Goffman’s work on stigma, Neta Yodovich argues that fans use stigmatization to justify treating certain fans with suspicion, reinforcing group norms through marginalization and harassment.

Interestingly enough, this dynamic extends to the subgroups within the Larry Stylinson fandom. Larries, marginalized by Directioners, further distinguish themselves from “Bluegreeners”. Larries consider themselves more rational, adhering to a shared set of rules, the most important of which is maintaining boundaries between themselves and the two stars. In contrast, Bluegreeners are criticized for crossing that boundary such as posting on the social media pages of family members and harassing current female romantic partners. Those who self-identify as “actual” Larries place the blame for on Bluegreeners the *Euphoria* episode and the negative stigma attached to Larries, arguing that they embody the traits outsiders commonly associate with Larries. These “actual” Larries contend that Bluegreeners’ lack of boundaries is responsible for the negative reputation of the Larry subfandom, and are at fault for exposing the “secret” of Larry to those outside the in-group.

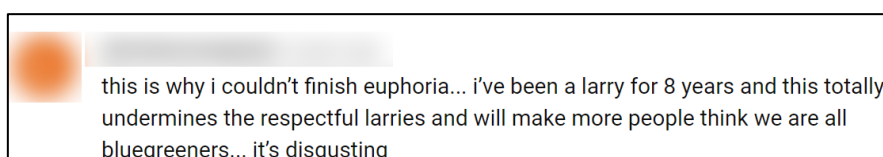


Figure 7: “this is why I couldn’t finish euphoria.” YouTube. 2020.

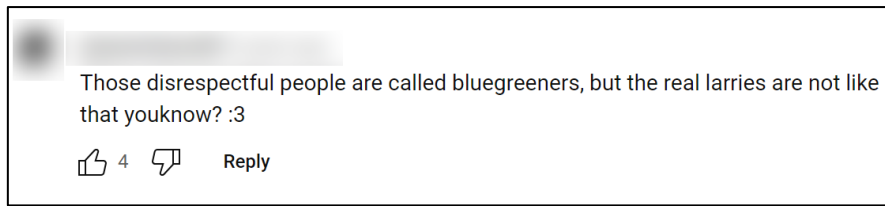


Figure 8: "Those disrespectful people are called Bluegreeners." YouTube. 2020.

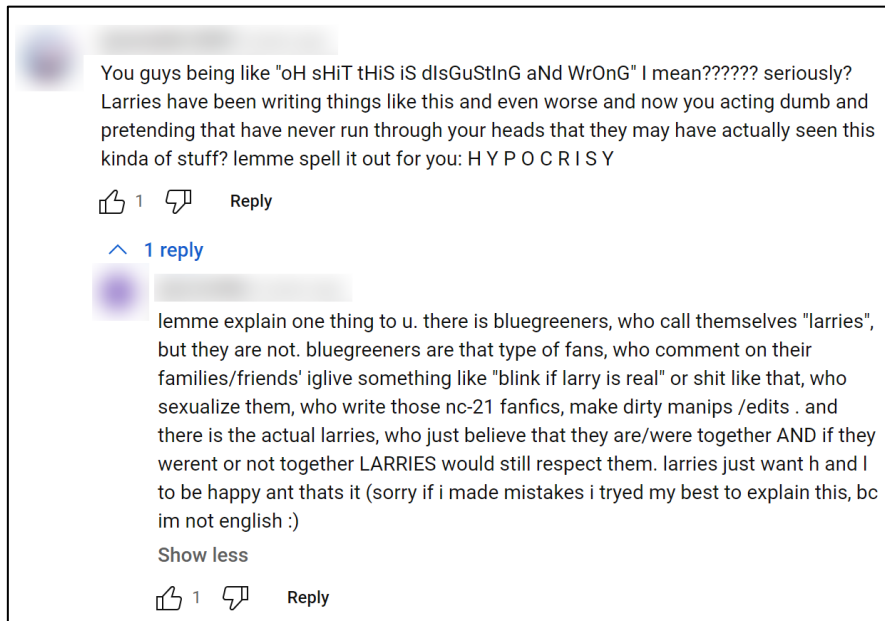


Figure 9: "You guys being like." YouTube. 2020.

These distinctions—between Directioners and Larries, Larries and Bluegreeners, and so on—demonstrate the layered and hierarchical nature of communal standards and the necessity of communal personas. Directioners and Larries tweeted and commented in ways that suggested the *Euphoria* episode was merely the culmination of long-standing frustration and resentment toward Larries for violating accepted fandom norms long before the show even premiered.

Selective Persona

In maintaining the communal persona, fans navigate pressures to follow broader fandom norms to protect their in-group status. However, for those whose fan practices cross the boundaries of what is considered acceptable, like writing or reading RPF, the communal persona can create a limited fandom experience when assumed in all fan spaces. Fanfiction, NSFW fan art, and Tumblr treatises on bandmates' interactions are meant to exist comfortably within a specific fan context, as reflected in comments from Larries themselves.

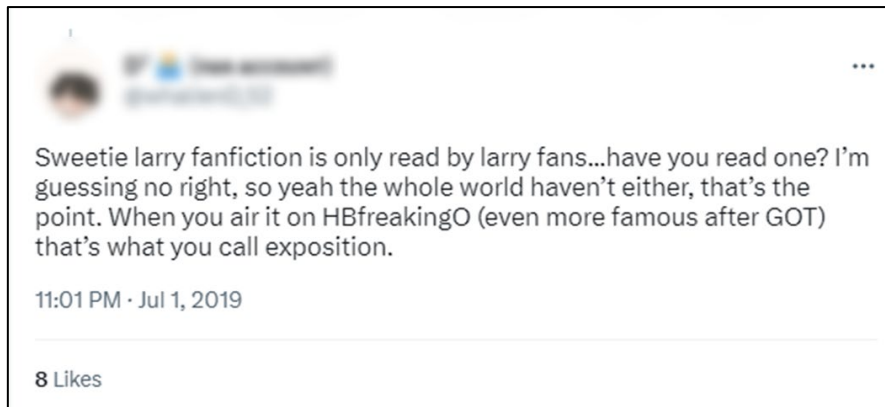


Figure 10: “Sweetie Larry Fanfiction is only read by larry fans.” Twitter. July 1, 2019.

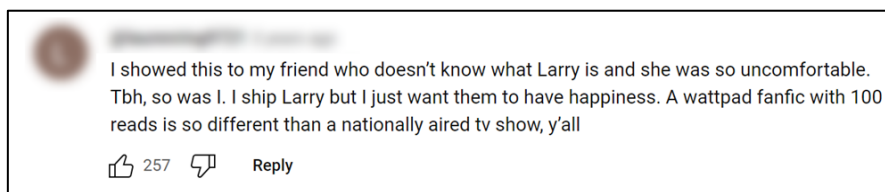


Figure 11: “I showed this to my friend.” YouTube. 2020.

However, as the user in Figure 11 explains, when these practices are exposed to a wider audience, Larries are forced to confront the vitriolic condemnation of their fan behaviour that they never have to address within their trusted fan spaces. The episode imposes a public persona curated by outsiders—such as the writers of *Euphoria*—rather than allowing them to present themselves selectively within their own spaces where they explore their interpretations of Harry and Louis without external scrutiny. This backlash led many fans to draw a firm divide between fan works and the celebrities or creators they follow, as well as from other fans who may disapprove in the first place. This boundary not only protects fans from the consequences of being publicly associated with certain fan activities but also preserves the integrity of their selective spaces, where they can enact a persona free from external judgment. Carrielynn D. Reinhard (2018, p. 12) labels this phenomenon a fracture in fandom, where differences in fan practices “hold the potential to cause problems in how individuals treat one another, and can impact people’s behaviors in such a way that what once seemed brilliant and fun becomes unwelcoming or even threatening”. These fractures are why spaces within fandom where fans can freely explore practices like RPF writing without fear of cultural stigma or external judgment are so highly valued. This deliberate distance fans may place between themselves and others recognises that “they’re not necessarily doing something that’s acceptable in the fandom or in the wider world, generally” (Ewens 2020, p. 101) and is a defining feature of the selective persona.

The selective persona is an important intermediary, where fans curate and take on this persona only in specific, trusted subgroups of fandom. As Larsen and Zubernis (2012, p. 9) explain, “[d]ifferent spaces meet different needs and attract different types of fans, offering validation, inclusion, artistic inspiration, escape, freedom of expression, or whatever an individual fan is (subconsciously at least) seeking”. Thus, the selective persona arises, allowing fans to share more controversial or stigmatized practices in a controlled, supportive environment. Fans carefully create and engage with content based on trust and shared understanding within this subgroup.

Larry Stylinson fans expressed frustration that their sub-fandom, which preferred to “keep the fantasy within a circle”, was exposed to a wider audience, including many who were previously unaware of Larry Stylinson or real-person fanfiction (Zhang 2021, p. 346). What was once known primarily within the fan community, even by those who did not ship Harry and Louis but still participated in the fandom, was now publicly visible and they were now exposed to critical voices of an entirely new demographic. This exposure violated the boundaries of their selective persona and forced them to navigate a deeply personal aspect of their fandom in a very public way. Several Larries took to social media to proclaim they did not support the episode and were not to blame for the inclusion of the RPF:

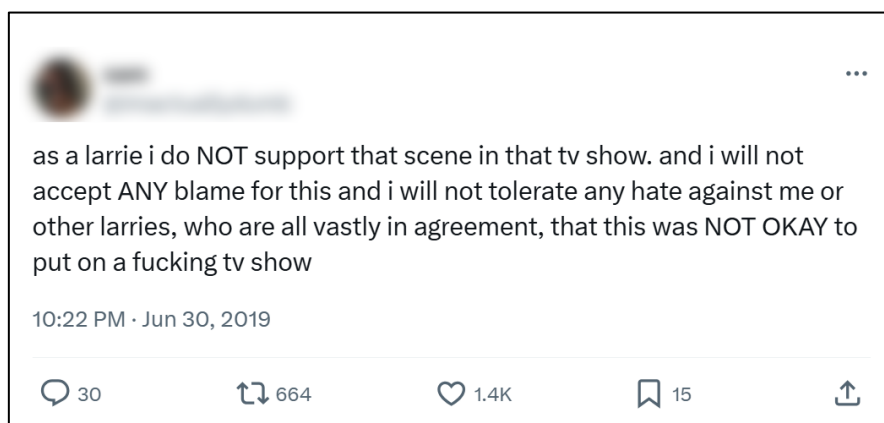


Figure 12: “As a Larrie.” Twitter. June 30, 2019.



Figure 13: “I literally just saw.” Twitter. June 30, 2019.

The mainstreaming of fandom practices such as shipping and fanfiction is a double-edged sword. Because fandom has been historically pathologized and “haunted by images of deviance” with its participants read as psychologically perverse, then such exposure gives greater society access to dig for evidence to confirm these assumptions (Jensen 1992, p. 9). And this is what Larries are aware of when they decry the episode. For them, *Euphoria* places a spotlight on these fans to be ridiculed, pathologized, criticized, or a combination of all three.

In response to this spotlight, a Change.org petition was created to have the scene removed from the show. Many Larries were among those who wanted the scene edited out, with many comments stating they did not ask to be represented on the show in this way and that it reflects poorly on them. One signee explained that she signed “for Louis, Harry, and all the Larries who are constantly ridiculed because we are painted to be crazy people, as this scene shows”. Another highlights the priority some people place on how fandom appears to others, stating: “Im [sic] a larrie and I can speak for all of us when I say that we're disgusted with this. H

and L don't deserved [sic] this shit. It makes them dirty, it make [sic] us (larries) dirty when we don't ask for it". Larries seek to control how they are perceived and resist having their identity exposed and distorted in public settings. The show's portrayal violated the boundaries Larries sought to establish around themselves and their sub-fandom, forcing them to confront what they consider a public misrepresentation. This further illustrates how selective personas can be a necessary dimension of fan personas, safeguarding against unwanted visibility and cultural stigma. This also makes the rumour of a Tumblr account posing as a Larry more problematic, breaching the barrier that Larries had established for themselves.

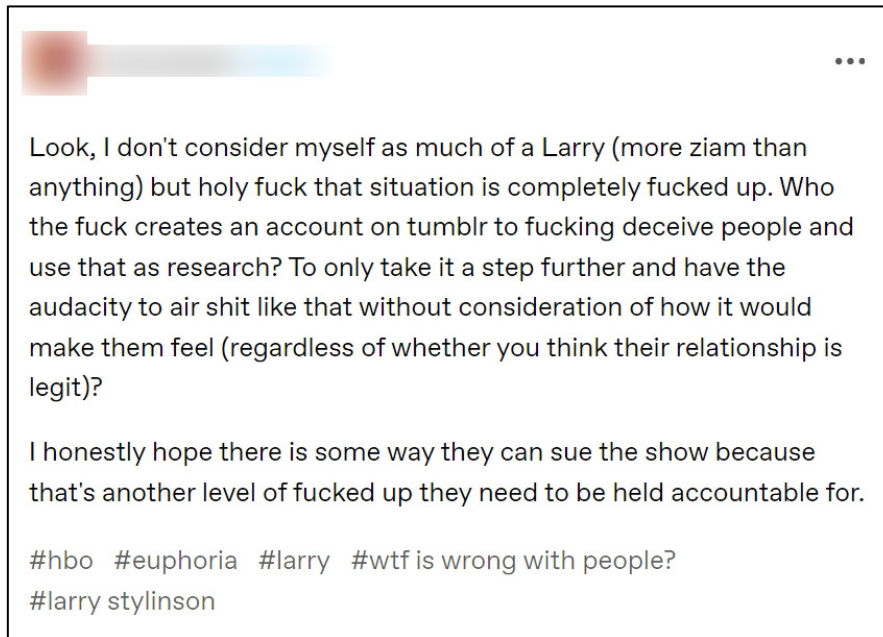


Figure 14: "Look, I don't consider myself." Tumblr. July 1, 2019.

Larries are a subset of fans who are regarded negatively within the One Direction fandom, and "[t]he hierarchies, taste policing, and internalized shame within the fandom...collide awkwardly with the projected shame and derision that is applied from outside" (Asquith 2016, p. 79). As mentioned, the fan persona is increasingly gaining cultural capital and is "no longer purely a 'subordinate identity within the cultural hierarchy'" (Moore 2020, 2.2), but Larries still largely occupy such a position within the One Direction fandom. As many of the posts from Larries suggest, they operate with the understanding that shipping and fanfiction are supposed to remain within fan spaces. Fanfiction and many disavowed fandom behaviours are practiced in designated spaces with "token invisibility" to prevent clashes between participants and those who disapprove of their behaviour (Califia 2000, p. 206). However, when fanfiction readers and writers exit these spaces and share their fan works and interests with broader audiences—or in this case, when their work is made visible without consent—they are exposed to public shaming and censure.

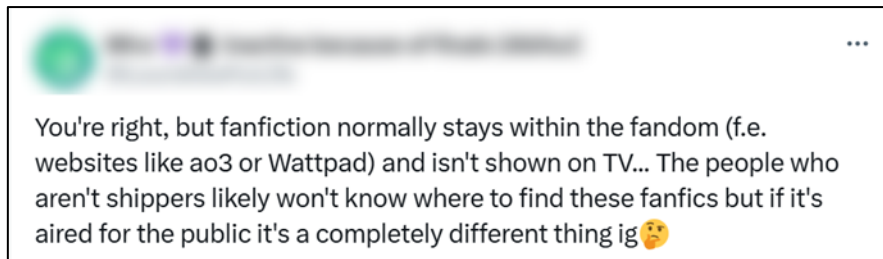


Figure 15: "You're Right." Twitter. July 2, 2019.

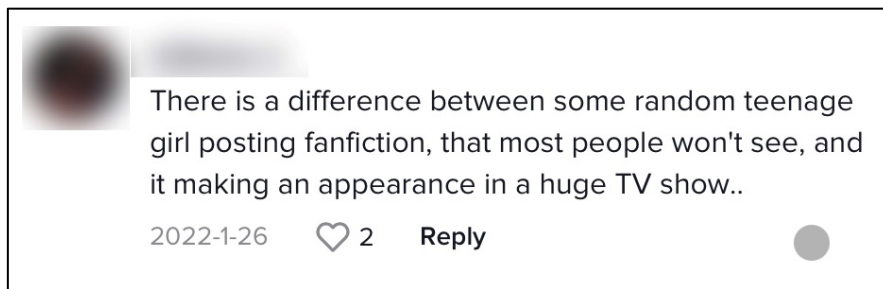


Figure 16: "There is a difference." TikTok. January 26, 2022.

Larries do not operate under a veil of shame in specific Larry Stylinson spaces because everyone within their fan ecosystem subscribes to the Larry Stylinson narrative. There is a shared range of interpretive practices when reading certain actions—hugs between Louis and Harry, glances across the stage, subtext of interviews. Together, Larries dissect and narrativize those glances across the stage the same way. However, once these practices are taken outside of a fan context and placed on an immensely popular HBO show, Larries become vulnerable. Outside of spaces like Tumblr, Wattpad, and Archive of Our Own where the selective persona is embraced, fan practices such as shipping, photo manipulations, and fan edits often become sources of embarrassment and shame due to overwhelming derision from broader audiences.

Even among fanfiction writers, there exists a hierarchy and shaming for different types of fanfiction. All fanfiction is fictional, but as Victoria M. Gonzales clarifies, some stories are subjected to more scrutiny and regarded as pushing the bounds of what qualifies as fanfiction. Gonzales (2016, 5.1) argues that RPF provokes questions around "the notion of how far is too far when it comes to fan fiction". This hierarchy, both within the fandom and imposed by broader cultural forces, makes selectivity a necessary dimension of the fan persona. Selectivity, coupled with the pseudonymity many assume in these spaces, allows fans to separate their online identities from their offline lives and engage in fan practices without fear of real-world repercussions. One viewer's response to the Larries' defensiveness exemplifies how they are perceived and why Larries may retreat to selective spaces away from the larger fandom:



Figure 17: "Euphoria Really Held." Twitter. July 1, 2019.

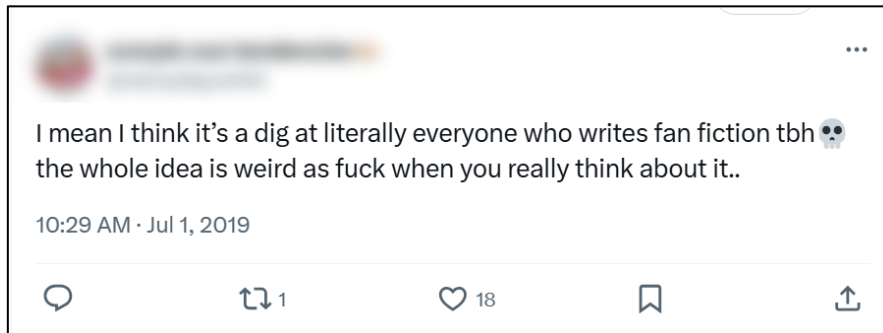


Figure 18: "A dig at literally everyone." Twitter. July 1, 2019.

Using the descriptor of "stan" and adjectives such as "weird" "weird as fuck" (Figures 17 and 18) supports the argument that hierarchies are established and maintained even among members of the same fandom, and these boundaries are usually structured according to what is deemed proper fan behaviour. It is not necessarily that Larries write or read fanfiction. It is not even that they are shippers. The issue for many detractors is that they have devoted their time and attention to a pairing made of two living people, as seen in Figures 19-21.

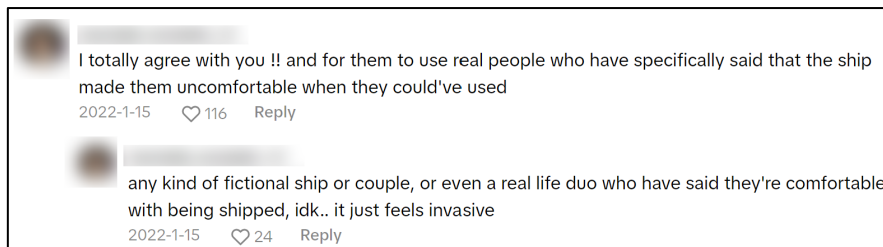


Figure 19: "I totally agree with you." TikTok. January 15, 2022.

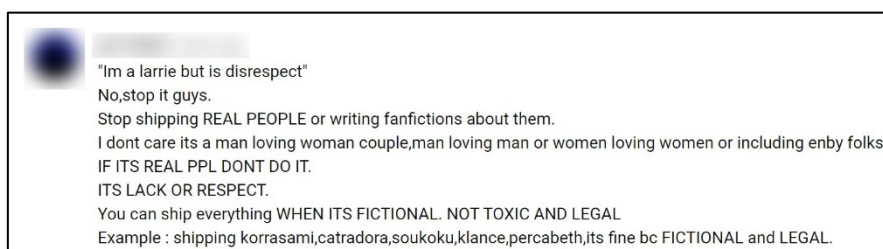


Figure 20: "No, stop it guys." YouTube. 2022.

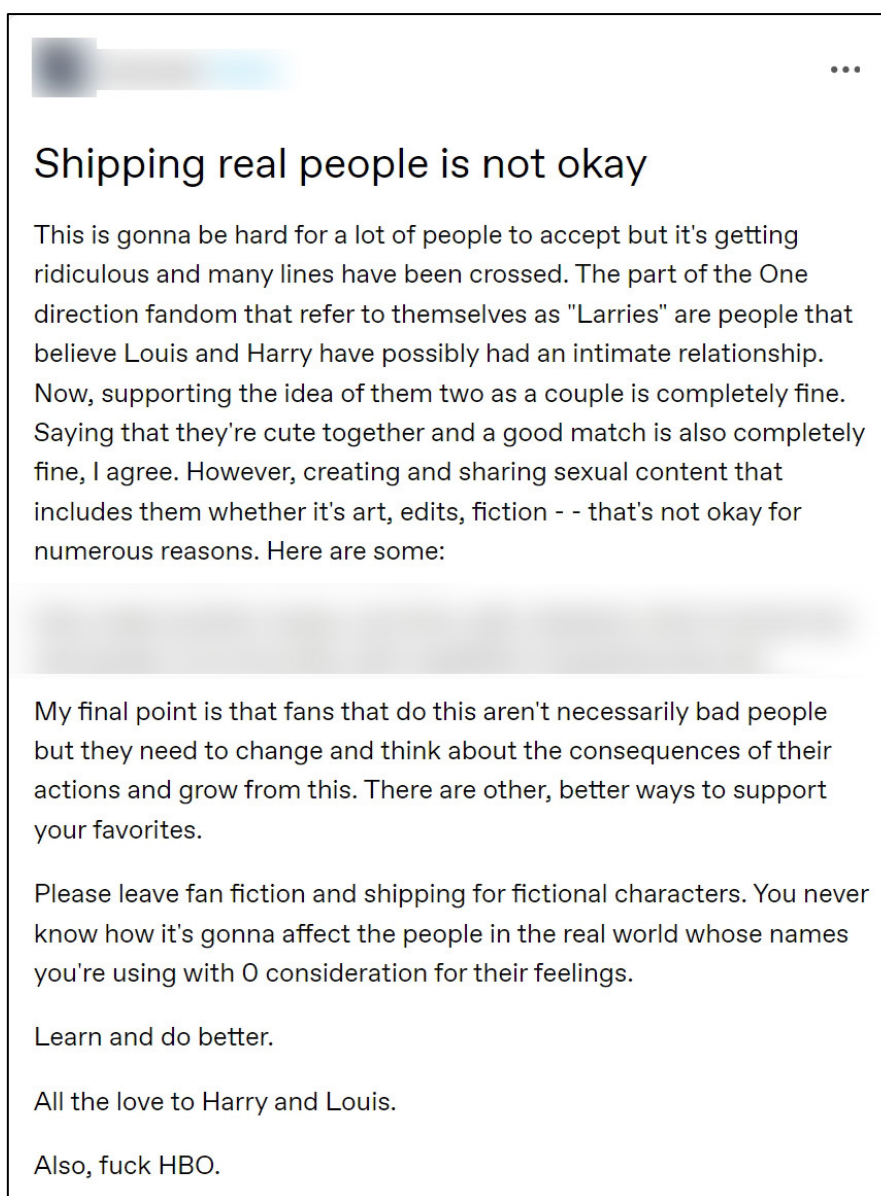


Figure 21: "Shipping real people is not okay." Tumblr. July 2, 2019.

RPF writers adopt selective personas because they are rarely granted the benefit of the doubt regarding their fan practices. Their interpretations of celebrity personas are often seen as insidious or harmful forcing them to retreat into selective fan spaces. For instance, many fan responses to the episode from *Directioners*—such as those included above—often veered into directly blaming Larries for ruining or destroying Harry’s and Louis’ friendship. By embodying a selective persona, RPF writers attempt to gatekeep a practice they know is culturally taboo and shield themselves from the broader stigma tied to their fan engagement with Harry and Louis.

The need to keep Larry Stylinson fanfiction in specific fan spaces reflects the feelings of the petition signee who lamented that the episode only fuelled a culture where Larries “are constantly ridiculed because [they] are painted as crazy”. There is a shared tone underlying many of these tweets and comments, and that is a fear of how they will be perceived as an RPF shipper and how the RPF fanfiction reflects on them more personally. If a group of people are called obsessive, crazy, and immature enough times, the group understands this how they are viewed and operate accordingly, even if they do not internalize the shame. RPF participants are

used to being misunderstood and their fan practices read in bad faith, and this is clear in their insistence that they do not approve of these fics leaving fandom spaces:

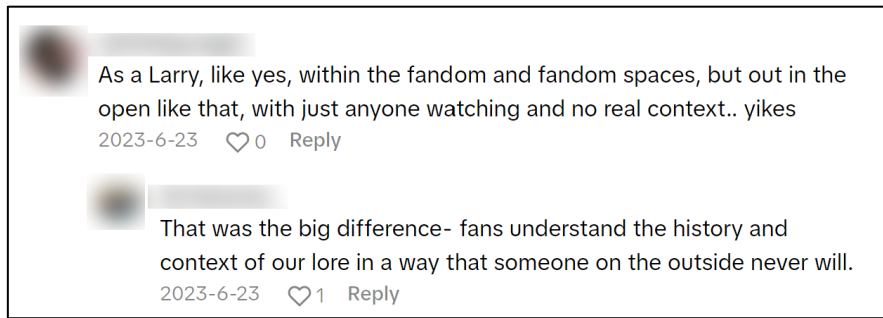


Figure 22: “As a Larry, like yes.” TikTok. June 23, 2023.

One change.org signee explains

[I] think even though fan fictions are a part of the fandom they don't have to be displayed on the telly because its disgusting and H and L don't deserve this [sic] yes i am a larrie and yes i [sic] ship them but i [sic] don't support this one bit what's in the fandom stays in the fandom.

This *Euphoria* episode places Larries in a position to be touted as an example of the uncontrolled abnormal fandom and “allows for moral judgment and scorn of such behaviors from those on the ‘outside’ peering in from different social and cultural contexts” (Proctor 2016, p. 73). RPF writers usually work to maintain a boundary between their fandom and the celebrities they write about, adopting a selective persona of “Larry” online in like-minded company. *Euphoria* intentionally breached this boundary, which was made even more significant by the fact that the violation came not from a fan, but from someone within the entertainment industry. To borrow Daisy Asquith’s (2016, p. 87) descriptive language, “Larry is in the closet and the closet is Tumblr”. *Euphoria*, with its pastel pallet and anime-style animation, outed the Larry Stylinson ship and the fanfiction readers and writers who support it.

Private Persona

The selective persona grants a level of protection to certain fan performances, shielding it from judgment from those who do not “get it”. However, there are some fannish elements that fans may choose to keep hidden even from the semi-public spheres where they perform their selective persona. These aspects, engaged through a fan’s private persona, are known only to the individual fan and are not intended for external eyes. The private persona is the most intimate level of fan identity and refers to the practices fans keep to themselves even within selective spaces. Fanfiction writers are aware of the stigma and risks associated with their fandom practices, and that their actions are often seen as abnormal. This sense of shame and caution surrounding fanfiction more generally, but RPF specifically, stems from internal factors that make participation feel wrong or inappropriate, as well as external pressures from fellow fans and cultural authorities. Given that no single fan practice is received positively across all spaces, sometimes a fan may need to discern if some things are better reserved for the private sphere of their fan persona. A few Directioners implied as much that the Larries would have avoided the backlash if they kept their interests to themselves.

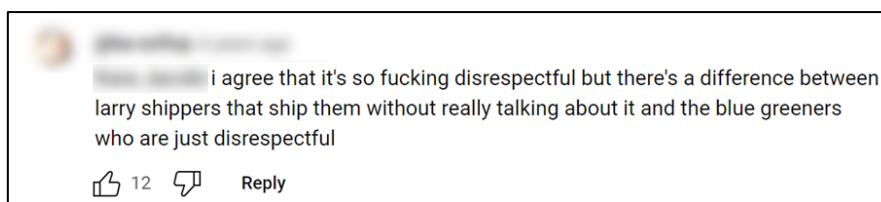


Figure 23: "I agree." YouTube. 2020.

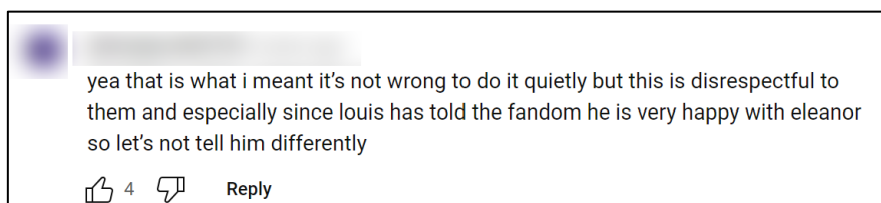


Figure 24: "Yeah that is what i meant." YouTube. 2020.

The private, a merging of what Moore (2020, 5.2) calls "unpublic fans" and Barbour's (2015) register of the intimate, reflects a fan's most intimate and unfiltered engagement with a fan object. This is the domain that can only ever truly be accessed and assessed by the self. As Paul Booth (2015, 1.4) proclaims: "There are as many ways of being a fan as there are fans in the world," and some fans choose to keep certain "ways of being a fan" known only to themselves. While fans often rely on the other dimensions of fan persona to participate in fandom, some elements of their fan interests are considered too personal or unconventional to be shared publicly, even in selective spaces. Even in the highly permissive Archive of Our Own, many take advantage of the option to publish anonymously rather than pseudonymously. To assume a private fan persona is to acknowledge that maybe some things are too weird or niche even for fandom.

CONCLUSION

The image of fans is constantly negotiated, and the exposure of fandom and its practices to celebrities, industry people, and outsiders places certain fandoms under a spotlight for mockery. *Euphoria* pointed a spotlight at Larries that set the stage for Directioners, nonfans, and the mainstream alike to criticise fans deemed weirder than themselves. What the variegated response to the animation demonstrates are the ways that fan spaces, despite often being the target of this sort of thinking by broader society, have organized in similar ways that align with the very ideologies that condemn them. Certain fans negotiate and monitor fan behaviour to not only cement their place in their particular fandom as a "real" fan but also to curate and maintain the image of fandom that those outside receive. As Busse (2017, 184) identified, this structuring is informed by the norms of greater society, with fellow fans using these external definitions of normal behaviour to determine who is a fan and who is not a fan.

Fans are left to grapple with a constantly shifting fandom landscape, where in one instance they may garner thousands of readers for their fanfiction, while in another, a large part of the fandom believes they have permanently altered the dynamics of their favourite band. A layering of fan personas becomes necessary to manage the tension between personal interests, fandom values, and mainstream cultural expectations. Ideas around being a "good fan" or "true fan" emerge from this negotiation, as fans try to conform to acceptable behaviours in public and communal spaces, while also navigating the stigma surrounding their more selective or private fan practices. Whether fans are performing in public, communal, selective, or private persona registers, they respond to cultural hierarchies that value certain forms of fan engagement over

others. As established at the outset of the paper, having a fanfiction story on national TV is something most fanfic writers never imagined could happen. However, considering the ways that fans must navigate the different dimensions of their persona—balancing societal judgment, community belonging, and personal expression—perhaps it is not something they would want either.

END NOTES

¹ NC-17 (No One 17 and Under Admitted) is the Motion Picture Association’s highest rating for films released in the United States, equivalent to R18 ratings elsewhere.

² Portions of this article are adapted from the fourth chapter of my PhD dissertation.

³ Fan Casting is the “casting” of real people such as actors, singers, models, etc. to represent fictional characters who do not otherwise have canonical visual depictions.

⁴ While not all RPF is slash, the introduction of homoeroticism into a relationship is often seen as doubly egregious by those who already disavow the practice of writing fanfiction about real people.

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