# NORMALISING FAN PARASOCIALITY WITHIN PATHOLOGISING TRACES: FAN DISCOURSES OF 'GOOD' AND 'BAD' PARASOCIAL BEHAVIOURS

AVA BUCY UNIVERSITY OF HUDDERSFIELD

## ABSTRACT

*The past decade has seen an influx of academic work on and popular usage of the term 'parasocial', but this work largely theorises fans rather than listens to them. This paper corrects that. Drawing on 16 focus groups with fans of Harry Styles, I explore fans' understanding and appropriation of the once-forgotten academic term, parasocial. Fans, here, are quite aware of Styles's star persona and the illusion of their intimacy. They use the concept of parasociality to manage, understand, and police both their own behaviour and that of other fans. The paper argues that the fans actual parasociality and their usage of the term exists as a multisocial, fandom-wide experience, and mimics well-explored concepts in fan studies, including performativity, playful engagement with "easter eggs", the "fangirl as pathology", and boundary policing. Their performance of parasociality positions the concept as a normal part of the fan persona to be explored further academically, and at the same time, their self-conscious and hyper-nuanced use of the term contradicts its very definition.*

## KEY WORDS

Parasocial; Multisocial; Harry Styles; Focus Groups; Celebrity

## INTRODUCTION

Of common critiques on fan behaviour wielded today, "It's the parasocial relationship going crazy" might be one of the most popular. This once-forgotten media psychology theory from the 1950s has become intrenched in fan discourses today, and despite increasing attention to the theory, there is relatively little work on how fans actually use the term. In this article, I explore fans' understanding and appropriation of the term 'parasocial' as both an individual and fandom-wide experience. The paper draws data from 16 focus groups with fans of Harry Styles to argue that fans' actual parasociality and their usage of the term demonstrate well-explored parts of the fan persona, including performativity (Bennett and Booth 2015), playful engagement with "easter eggs" (Beaty 2016), the "fangirl as pathology" (Dare-Edwards 2015), and boundary policing (Busse 2017). Importantly, the critique of fan behaviour that started this paper is not a hypothetical, but a direct quote from a focus group participant. In fact, parasociality was discussed directly in nine different groups and "parasocial" was said 31 times despite the term not being used in the prepared questions. Even in groups where the term was not used, the behaviours and discourses associated with parasociality were discussed at length.

To properly explore how fans use this concept to manage, understand, and police fan behaviour, it is worth first reviewing its theoretical grounding.

Horton and Wohl (1956) originally defined the parasocial relationship (PSR) as a result of improved technology, where "radio, television, and the movies… give the illusion of face-to-face relationship with the performer" (p. 215). While they present the possibility of PSRs as being compensatory for some, they overwhelmingly construct it as a natural response to the "illusion of intimacy" (p. 217) purposefully created by the entertainment industry.

The theory received little attention until the 1980s, where Alan Rubin "began to develop the concept extensively within the field of communication science" (Giles 2009, p. 280). Media 'effects' on the individual has been of increasing interest to psychologists since the 1990s and academic interest in PSRs has similarly grown (Giles 2009). Meanwhile, debates around the 'reality' of the PSR and its potential as a compensatory pathology continue.

The varying arguments about the PSR largely come down to a difference in field and a difference in the definition of 'social'. In general, psychoanalytic work view PSRs as a "maladaptive" potential pathology and "slippery slope to mental illness" (Stever 2017, p. 96), something "compensatory" in Horton and Wohl's words. These one-sided relationships can cause a range in emotions due to the fans' over-invested interest in a celebrity (Giles 2009; Cohen 2016), including, in the most feared cases, violence, stalking, or harassment towards the celebrity (Caughey 1984; Ferris 2001). Even works that position PSRs as a normal result of media engagement or human evolution do so with the caveat that "Participant observer ethnography over a period of 25 or more years confirms that such cases [of pathological 'celebrity worship'] exist" before confirming that "these cases are more the exception than the rule" (Stever 2017, p. 99). Fan studies, on the other hand, has consistently and from its outset argued against this pathologising view of the PSR and fandom more broadly (Jensen 1992; Hills 2015).

In reviewing PSR theory, Matt Hills argued (2015) that in attempting to revalue fans' parasociality two key issues remain: first, that "both attacks on, and defenses of, fan–celebrity 'para-social' interactions have tended to reductively characterize 'social' relationships" (p. 463), and second, that discussions of the PSR assume an individualised fan experience, rather than a social and fandom-wide relationship. Because of this asymmetrical relationship between the celebrity and the fandom at large, individualised interactions with celebrities still do not constitute a separate type of relationship or interaction. That is, where Stever discusses fans becoming "friendly acquaintances" with celebrities as "ordinary behaviour" rather than an extension of the PSR (2016), and where others question how increased reciprocity might change the definitions of PSRs (Click et al. 2017; Kowert and Daniel 2021), Hills maintains that these are all still a version of the hierarchical and unbalanced PSR as originally theorised. He says:

> As long as hierarchies between "media people" and "ordinary people" continue to be naturalized then, no matter what kinds of fan–celeb interactions and "micro-celebrity" activities are facilitated within digital culture, a symbolic gap will remain between "celebrity" and "fan" cultural categories. (Hills 2015, p. 479)

At the same time, rather than positioning PSRs as impactful despite being based on illusion, Hills argues that both 'real' social and parasocial relationships result from fantasy and illusions of intimacy (2015). In an upcoming book chapter, Alfred Archer and Catherine Robb make a similar argument while discussing the ethics of PSRs (in press). Like Hills, they argue that both 'real' and parasocial relationships rely on an understanding that we can never truly 'know' any

individual, just as fans can never truly 'know' a celebrity. Though fans usually only have access to the public persona of a celebrity, "Even if the celebrity successfully negotiates the divide between their private and public selves, it remains the case that the public self is part of who they are" (Archer and Robb, in press, p. 5).

Archer and Robb contextualise this divide between the private and public self in a celebrity studies context, whereby the individual celebrity is understood as a star "text" produced and constructed by the media (see Gamson 1994; McDonald and Dyer 1998; Rojek 2001) . The star "text" here can also be usefully understood through the persona, where the celebrity image is a "mask" adopted by the individual (Marshall and Barbour 2015). While this celebrity persona has always been a distinct identity from the 'real' personhood of a famous individual – and every individual has distinct personas depending on context (Broady 2015) – the proliferation of social media has made this construction more visible and more flexible. Moore, Barbour, and Lee (2017) synthesised the "five dimensions" of the online persona as public, mediatised, performative, collective, and having intentional value. Viewed through these dimensions, the celebrity persona is not a singularly constructed mask that individual fans or audiences consume, but instead is a performance that is produced and managed variously by the individual star, public relations and marketing managers, physical appearance maintenance, press coverage, the constraints and offerings of social media platforms, the star's projects, and the fans and audiences who engage with this persona.

While this is similar to Dyer's early construction of the collectively produced star "text" (1998), and public relations teams (Mackey 2016) and celebrity journalism (Usher 2020) remain key to these constructions, the online persona makes room for both new celebrities and new types of celebrity, and allows the celebrity more agency over their star image and relationship with audiences (Moore et al. 2017). Sometimes this is obvious, such as in the well-explored persona of Lady Gaga, adopted by Stefani Germanotta (Deflem 2019; Giles 2020) or the new example of Kaleigh Rose Amstutz, performing in drag as Chappell Roan (Graffam-O'Meara 2024). But any celebrity, particularly one made famous in the digital age, will lead the production and management of their star persona. Where the past star system was created by the industry and consumed by audiences, the star persona is now increasingly co-constructed between the star and audience/fan (Lovelock 2017; Fairchild and Marshall 2019). So too, it is not only the celebrity that goes through this online persona curation; every individual in the mediatised world constructs their own collection of personas (Broady 2015; Moore et al. 2017).

It is not surprising, then, that in exploring the PSR between celebrity and fan, the existence of the star persona can increasingly be understood as a non-issue in the possibility for 'real' connection. Archer and Robb argue, "[Fans] relate to these celebrities as unique individuals… The emotions that fans feel… are genuine person-directed emotions even if they have an incomplete picture of who that person is" (in press, p. 6). This incomplete picture thus does not infringe on the possibility for a 'real' relationship. In fact, as the data will show, fans are very aware of their incomplete knowledge and use these knowledge gaps to manage their personas as fans. However, understanding the PSR as 'real' does not negate the asymmetry between fan and celebrity. First, the fan will have more information about the celebrity, both their star persona and 'real' personhood, than the celebrity does about the fan: "A celebrity might have some [general] knowledge about their fanbase... but this knowledge does not amount to an awareness of information about specific individual fans" (Archer and Robb, in press, p. 7). Even in the cases Stever (2016) discusses where the celebrity has a "friendly acquaintanceship" with individual fans, the celebrity often only recognises their faces or only knows surface level information. Second, communication from the celebrity will largely be broadcast to the whole fandom, whereas the fan will be either "receiving" that information or

speaking directly to the celebrity (Archer and Robb, in press). In cases where a celebrity is addressing an individual fan (Stever 2016; Click et al. 2017), these interactions are often shared throughout the fandom as a "multisocial" moment (Hills 2015, p. 464). Thus, while PSRs were initially understood as an experience individual fans have towards celebrities, it is more accurate to explore them as something that individual fans experience within the fandom and collectively towards a celebrity persona, mimicking how celebrities engage with the fandom at large.

As a shared and fandom-wide experience, PSRs can thus be understood in the context of other normal expressions of the fan persona and in the context of other discourses attached to certain types of fans or celebrity. Further, framing these multisocial experiences of parasociality as happening within a fandom makes visible how these relationships are had by fans as a distinct category as they make choices and express themselves through their fan persona. As the star negotiates their star persona, so too does the fan negotiate their fan persona, managing their distance or proximity to the fandom according to the context (Broady 2015; Moore et al. 2017). While there is a breadth of work exploring the celebrity persona, and the field of fan studies dedicates itself to the fan identity and experience, this special issue highlights the relative lack of attention paid to the fan persona. So too, while some work points to the co-constructed nature of the celebrity persona (Moore et al. 2017; Fairchild and Marshall 2019), the way fandom impacts personal identity (LaCasa et al. 2017), how anti-fandom might be used to question an influencer's persona (McRae 2017), and how the fangirl persona has been accused and used in political campaigns (Smith 2017), the parasocial relationship (and specifically fan discourses of parasociality) has been an overlooked topic, despite its clear connection to the construction of both celebrity and fan personas. To address this gap in research, this paper develops an understanding of PSRs as a normal, multisocial expression of the fan persona and explores how fans understand and wield the concept of parasociality. The next section overviews the methodology before turning to the data itself.

## Methodology

The data used in this paper is drawn from 16 focus groups that were held between 3 February and 18 April, 2024 as part of the researcher's PhD study. The broader project uses fans of Harry Styles as a representative case study to explore the experiences of fangirls[1] as an overlooked category within the generalised 'fan'. Focus groups allowed fans to 'tell' about opinions or fandom experiences, but also captured them 'showing' fangirl interaction in 'real life'.

Focus group participants were recruited largely through a gatekeeper (Emmel et al. 2007): *HSDaily*, a Harry Styles 'updates account' on Twitter and Instagram. The call for participants indicated the project was about pop music fandom and community, and only asked that individuals were a fan of Harry Styles and 18+ years old. The call featured 'Harry-coded' imagery and information about the researchers' long term fandom participation to mitigate the researcher/participant hierarchical dynamic (Wilkinson 1999).

A total of 203 people responded to the call, with 50 people between 18 and 67 attending one of the 16 sessions. Participant pseudonyms were assigned from a list of 50 'Harry-Related' feminine names, following Carroll's (2023) convention of using fandom-related pseudonyms[2]. Participants joined from 11 countries: 33 from the USA, six from Europe, five from England, three from Canada, two from Brazil, and one from Lebanon. Nine participants self-identified as people of colour, and 20 as neurodivergent and/or disabled. Only 24 participants identified as heterosexual. All participants used she/her or she/they pronouns, 48 identified as women, one as genderqueer and one as nonbinary.

While the call was intended to be broad enough to include 'casual' fans, recruiting through self-selection (and requiring unpaid time) favoured highly-motivated and fandom-engaged participants. This 'level' of fandom likely impacted participant opinions and displays of parasociality, even though several participants indicated they had other fandoms/fan objects they prioritised over their 'Harrie' fandom. Future research might explore discourses of parasociality with 'casual' fans and how/if a fan persona is claimed.

Groups were hosted and recorded on Microsoft Teams and lasted around two hours each. The groups started with participant introductions and a discussion of their favourite photos of Styles (supplied with their consent form), grounding the group dynamic in participant interests (Wilkinson 1999; Harrison and Ogden 2021). From there, groups were semi-structured around guiding questions, leaving plenty of room for participants to shape the direction of conversation (Wilkinson 1999). Discussions were transcribed verbatim; however, the quotes included in this paper were lightly edited to remove disfluencies and asides while maintaining the fannish elements and overall 'feel' of the quotes.

Though the topics of parasocial relationships, privacy, and Styles's public persona were expected, questions that might lead participants to these topics or encourage more 'academic' answers were avoided, and I used the term 'parasocial' sparingly and only if one of the participants had used it first. Some groups were asked about Styles's decision to remain 'private' or about the 'real Harry' compared to Harry Styles the 'brand', but these were spontaneous follow up questions, not pre-planned ones asked to all groups. As such, data for this paper comes from throughout each group, rather than from answers to specific questions. Minute markers are included at the start of participant conversations or statements to demonstrate the varying position of these discussions.

While participants performing for the researcher is always a worry with the institutional environment of focus groups (Sim and Waterfield 2019), the recruitment, group organisation, and questions were designed to encourage the performance of their fan persona (Marshall and Barbour 2015; LaCasa et al. 2017) rather than their position as research participant. While this not only made a more 'authentic' representation of fan interaction for the broader PhD project, it also makes the data selected for this paper more credible. Usage of the term and displays of parasociality were naturally occurring within the group environment and thus provide a better representation of how fans experience and talk about these relationships. In respecting fandom use of Styles's name, and participant distinction between Harry Styles the 'brand' and the 'person', instances discussing fans' relationships with or opinions about 'Harry' use his first name (as one would with a character in 'media' fandom). My 'outsider' input follows the convention of addressing public figures by their surname, while his full name is used in instances where this distinction is particularly muddy.

As mentioned above, nine of the 16 groups used the term parasocial, and it was said 31 times total. All groups discussed discourses surrounding parasociality and all participants 'showed' their PSR with Harry Styles. What follows is analysis of how fans directly discussed this term, how they understand the "illusion of intimacy", and how they asserted 'bad' parasociality to police fan behaviour.

## "IT'S SO PARASOCIAL": FAN USE OF ACADEMIC JARGON

Parasocial relationships were largely expressed by participants as something they were self-conscious about, even if in a joking manner. While many fans used the term (or discourses imbued therein) as a method of policing fan behaviour (Busse 2017) the instances when fans used the term to discuss their own relationship to Harry expressed worry or fear of judgement:

> Anna, 22 (Group 14, minute 33): I would've slept at the train station that night if it wasn't for Harry. Like [Kalia] said, it's so parasocial to be like, there isn't anybody like him [chuckles] and I know him, but it's true – he notices his fans. It's something that I don't really notice in other celebrities and in other fan bases, I guess.

Anna was explaining what makes Harry important to her, telling a story about meeting other fans at a concert in Paris and swapping contact information. When Anna missed her train the next day, she was saved from being stranded by those fans offering her a place in their hotel room. Anna uses this story as evidence of the kind and welcoming community she says Harry has created. She then subtly undercuts her own argument by admitting that she may think this because of her parasociality, before providing further evidence for these claims – "It's something that I don't really notice in other celebrities and in other fan bases" – and then *again* undercutting her point with "I guess". This back and forth of certainty in her words is what Willis (2009) calls "hybrid girlhood", where her tween participants consistently re- and de-value traditional femininity in order to justify their opinions and pre-emptively save themselves from critique. Anna is sure of herself and her opinion, both through her own evidence and the consensus among other participants, but is aware of how this opinion may be viewed by 'outsiders', and thus pre-emptively, semi-jokingly describes the behaviour as parasocial.

Later in the group, Kalia does this more directly. I asked if other people knew they were big Harry fans, and Kalia indicates first that yes, people know, but they don't *really* know, because she fears their judgement:

> Kalia, 22 (Group 14, minute 105): Not that I think they're going to be super, super judgy about it. […] Like parasocial relationships, I don't want to tell anyone that. Same with writing fanfiction, it's just one of those things where, I don't know, I keep those parts hidden because it's considered weird.

In mentioning her 'stan' Twitter account, her PSR with Harry, and her fanfiction writing, she makes clear that even 'normal' social relationships have an element of fantasy through the construction of personas (Broady 2015; Moore et al. 2017). Kalia's friends and family know that she regularly travels for and attends concerts, loves the music, and cares deeply about Harry Styles, but she has hidden the particular details of her fan persona she thinks they may not approve of or 'get'. In these moments, Anna and Kalia both introduced the concept of the PSR in a way that feels like an aside. They mention it to call attention to their self-awareness of the behaviour they know others "consider weird".

This self-censoring initially signals that participation in fandom or the performance of fan personas might not be as de-pathologised as academic work likes to claim (Jenkins 1992; Coppa 2014; Stewart 2023), particularly with the growing popular usage of terms like parasocial. However, in the context of these being young female fans of a male pop music (former boyband) artist, this might additionally evidence the continued pathologisation of the fangirl as a distinct fan persona (Smith 2017). Dare-Edwards (2015) has explored the "fangirl as pathology" in depth, and considered instances of fans devaluing or pathologising themselves, not because they are self-hating or unaware of this position, but because they would rather do it

before someone else does. Similarly, Busse (2017) has examined 'feminine' fan practices – including interest in the celebrity rather than the media, being too emotive, and writing fanfiction – as being at the bottom of the fan hierarchy. Fans of male artists, and boybands in particular, carry an additional stigma both towards the fans for apparently only being interested in the artists for their appearance (Duffett 2012) and towards the artist themselves for being manufactured and inauthentic (Coleman and Lyons 2023). While accusations of parasociality might exist across a variety of fandoms and fandom types, in these instances the PSR has been wielded as a new addition to the "fangirl as pathology" (Dare-Edwards 2015) and "gendering of the good fan" (Busse 2017).

## "YOU KNOW EVERYTHING ABOUT THEM THAT'S BEEN MADE PUBLIC": THE ILLUSION OF INTIMACY BETWEEN FANS AND CELEBRITY

While the usage of the term 'parasocial' is often wielded self-consciously, the participants were quite comfortable playing with and exploring the illusion of intimacy created by Styles's star persona. Participants discussed how these different personas influenced their feelings towards Harry Styles and how 'real' the star persona was compared to the 'private' version, and showed how playful engagement (Werning 2017; Nybro Petersen 2022) with this illusion could be experienced by the fandom at large (Hills 2015). Consider the below conversation between the three participants in Group 1, in response to the participant-provided favourite photos of Harry:

> Gemma, 24 (minute 17): Whenever we see these caught off-guard pictures […] even if it's literally just a picture of him swimming. Our brains just go, "Oh. Human."
>
> Darcy, 29: Like, "What do you mean he can swim? He's a popstar." [laughs] I think it makes us feel more connected to him as a human being. Versus just some magical persona on stage. Even the 'frat boy Harry' one, I know that's an official photo […] but he was just a teenage boy there.
>
> Kendall, 20: Maybe it's feeding my parasocial relationship […] but it almost feels like you [know him personally]. Because you know everything about them that's been made public. So the funny pictures, it's like, "Oh yeah. This is – *Harry*"[…] The first time I saw him, I was like, "He's just not real." Then he looked at somebody. And he smiled. *That* – [laughs] that's *my Harry*. That's not the Harry Styles of everyone.

The participants are discussing two photos in particular: a 2024 paparazzi photo of Styles swimming in London (looking like "a little cat" with "water up his nose" according to Darcy), and a 2013 (One Direction) touring photo of him sitting shirtless in a stadium and looking over his shoulder at the camera. Elicitation materials also on-screen included photos of Styles performing on stage, on the cover of *Vogue*, and music video stills, but it was these and other 'candid' moments from his career that many groups focused on.

The comparison between the "real Harry" and the "popstar" was less about his public and private self, and more about the idealised ("magical") star persona compared to the real "human" version of Styles. As Andrew Tolson discusses, celebrities often use the publication of "backstage" moments to construct their celebrity persona more authentically for fans (2001). Because the moments Tolson discusses are purposefully created they remain a "performance of ordinariness" in service to the PSR's "illusion of intimacy". Darcy notices this performance of ordinariness with the "frat boy Harry" image, calling it an "official photo" but then pointing out the parts of the performance that make it feel real and reveal Harry as "just a teenage boy". The construction of the authentic persona works for fans here, despite its visibility (it does not

always - see McRae 2017). Other photos Group 1 discuss, however, have that layer of performativity removed and are understood representing an *even more* "real" Harry, recalling the history of "stars are just like us" discourses (Gamson 2011). These captured 'candid' moments that make fans feel closer to Styles also often come at the expense of his personal privacy, something which these fans consistently returned to (discussed below).

While Darcy and Gemma separated the "real" Harry and the "popstar" Harry Styles as a difference between on and off stage, similar to Tolson's front- and backstage moments, Kendall recalled a moment when she realised that front stage, "popstar" Harry Styles *was* real. She initially felt disbelief at her first "Love on Tour" (2021-2023) concert after joining the fandom in 2020: he couldn't be "real" because he was too perfect. And then he "looked at somebody" and smiled, and suddenly she recognised *her* 'Harry', the 'real Harry'. This moment exemplifies instances of reciprocal connection (Stever 2016; Click et al. 2017; Kowert and Daniel 2021) where Styles, even on stage, connects with an individual fan. However, it also indicates the "multisocial" (Hills 2015) experience that lives within a seemingly singular PSR. Kendall called him "my Harry" but she was not excluding Darcy, Gemma, me as a researcher/fan, or other non-participant fans. Instead, it was the "real" Harry that fans know, not the "Harry Styles of everyone", where the everyone *else*, everyone *who doesn't know him like us*, is implied. This same sentiment is discussed outright in Group 11:

> Felicity, 18 (minute 42): I think he's a very genuine person. I do understand that there's a brand aspect of him […] But I think – he knows what he wants to show to us. And that's the difference between the [Trademark] and his personal life.
>
> Camille, 26: The way that fans experience him is very different to the way the rest of the world views and sees him. […] I would talk to [one of my co-workers] about Harry […] And it completely changed his perspective […] Because what he sees is the *Vogue* covers. He sees what is presented to the general population.

Here, Felicity and Camille make distinction between Harry Styles the *brand* and Harry the *person*. They exemplify what Archer and Robb (in press) discuss in terms of the celebrity's public persona being connected to their private self, and evidence this opinion of Styles's brand being genuine to his 'real' self by quoting him and recalling 'genuine' moments. At the same time, Camille makes a distinction between two different versions of this 'star' Harry. There is the public opinion of Harry Styles – the constructed star "text" (Gamson 1994; McDonald and Dyer 1998) or persona (Mackey 2016; Moore et al. 2017; Fairchild and Marshall 2019) – and the 'star' Harry that *fans* know (and who Camille is able to 'introduce' her co-worker to through sharing her fan knowledge). Camille formulates the former as something Harry or even his management lacks control over, and as separate to the 'real' fandom experience of him. However, this at once uncontrollable and constructed version of the star persona is still an integral part of how fans engage with Styles and is thus not as easily disarticulated as Camille indicates, only removing the stars' agency over their persona construction (Mackey 2016). But, as the participants in Group 4 discuss, the branding and marketing of Harry Styles, as a star text/celebrity persona distinct from and yet connected to the 'real person', is a major pleasure of fandom:

> Helene, 20 (minute 10): He has the vibe of wanting people to [find] these things […] While it is obviously a marketing technique, it's still a fun way to have fans be involved […] It also probably gives them some feedback.

> Leigh, 62: Yeah, it all hit so perfectly, with the Discord and the Easter Eggs and the fan base growing. And like, you know, who else can you talk to about all these things but another Harrie?

In fact, Helene explores the enjoyment of this marketing technique specifically as a moment of reciprocity between Harry Styles's marketing and the fans, not between the marketing and the general public. The "easter eggs" (Beaty 2016; Carroll 2023) function as a reactionary cycle between marketing and connection to the 'real' Harry, and demonstrate all five aspects of the curation of the online persona (Moore et al. 2017). These moments of what Beaty describes as "fan service" are included as a branding strategy to encourage fan participation and let the marketers receive "feedback" from fans, as Helene puts it. They also allow fans to feel like they are getting to the 'truth' of Harry that the general public cannot access, and provide space for fans to 'play' with (Nybro Petersen 2022) and speculate about this 'truth' (Carroll 2023).

## "I'D ALSO HATE TO BE THAT PERSON": ACCEPTED FANDOM BEHAVIOUR AND BOUNDARY POLICING

The popular discourses surrounding PSRs were present in a few different boundaries participants set within the focus groups. Just as the negative connotations and pathologising traces of the term influenced a self-conscious usage when discussing fans' own PSRs, participants used parasociality as a shorthand for fans 'going too far' or not seeing the 'reality' of the situation. At times this was directly in reference to other non-participant fans, while in others it served to police their own actions. Either way, they marked the boundary of acceptable fandom behaviour.

Pheobe and Matilda from Group 10 expressed anxiety around the idea of meeting Styles 'in real life' because they fear the possibility of displaying 'negative' fan behaviour. Specifically, Pheobe discusses a video posted to TikTok where fans meet Harry in public, say "Hello", and suggest he takes a less busy route; he thanks them and follows their advice. This is a short and somewhat unexciting encounter, mostly just recording his and the fans' legs, but it was easily recalled by Pheobe and Matilda:

> Pheobe, 25 (minute 92): I don't know if anyone remembers – that TikTok video […] Like, I'd want to do that. I'd just want to be helpful and not interrupt the day.
>
> Matilda, 24: Yeah, I'd also hate to be that person where like… obviously he's famous, so we know things about him, but could you imagine if you just said something and then he's like, "What?"

Pheobe frames this TikTok as an example of fans behaving well – being "helpful" – and as how she hopes to behave if she meets Harry. The video documents this encounter for a multisocial experience, one which now includes Pheobe, but does so without infringing on the 'relaxed' individual encounter and without "interrupting his day". Matilda's mention that "we know things about him" alludes to the perceived place of the PSR in the negative behaviour they avoid for themselves and police in others. While this video features fans, some of the fan-favourite interactions that get shared multisocially are actually between Styles and non-fans. These interactions are seemingly unclouded by fannish-ness and are valued similarly to Camille's anecdote of her co-worker's changed opinion. It is implied, then, that 'good' parasocial behaviour is to act as if you are not parasocial at all, to adopt a non-fan persona where you do not "know things about him" – even though the advice fans give Harry in the video is based on that very knowing. Matilda and Pheobe go on to discuss 'bad' fan behaviour, which often makes fan knowledge too visible: following him to a restaurant or walking around his neighbourhood.

That these examples are based in real situations from the past few years (and were mentioned by multiple participants across groups), indicates a clear delineation between 'good' and 'bad' fan behaviour (Busse 2017). Attributing this behaviour to parasociality becomes a shorthand for participants, one which has been replicated in the popular press and in academia alike and provides ongoing cultural power to the pathologisation of fans.

Some participants similarly critiqued behaviour of fans who become 'too entrenched' in the lives of Styles's family and friends, as well as on fans who speculate about Styles's sexuality when he has not labelled himself (Stein and Busse 2009; Banks 2020) *and* on fans who heteronormatively assume he is straight despite what participants call years of 'evidence', quotes, and 'queer-coding' in his art (Banks 2020; Gross 2020). While these varied critiques by fans of fan behaviour is distinct but related to their critique of paparazzi or media behaviour (for example, for invading Styles's privacy by taking and publishing the swimming photos), it is worth noting that these, too, exist as "hybrid" (Willis 2009) moments of fandom. Participants often critiqued and refrained from engaging in invasive behaviours while still enjoying access to the 'invaded' moments that blur the distinction between Styles's star and private persona. Fans loved the swimming photos, and some used them to speculate about Styles's sexuality (as the location was men-only and had ties to the local queer community), but most did so in conjunction with showing disdain for paparazzi.

There are instances, however, where this boundary of sharing 'private' captured moments is firmer. As a recent example, fans were overwhelmingly against the sharing of photos and 'private' information about the death of Styles's ex-bandmate, Liam Payne[3]. Fans flooded Twitter with 'happy' photos of Liam to hide leaked crime scene images, critiqued the media coverage surrounding his death and funeral, and discouraged intrusive fan behaviour. While photos of Styles swimming might be a somewhat expected and accepted invasion of his privacy as a celebrity in a public place, fans seemed to foreground 'real' personhood in the wake of Liam's passing, disregarding the traditional role of the press in celebrity deaths (Mackey 2016; Usher 2020). The opinions and critiques of these invasions of privacy or displays of 'bad' parasociality, and the willingness to consume/enjoy the resulting stories or photos, thus vary according to the perceived 'level' of the action in quite a normative way.

Participants also discussed these boundaries in terms of behaving poorly towards other fandoms in defence of Styles. Laura, from Group 5, criticises fan behaviour surrounding the 2023 Grammys, where *Harry's House* (controversially) won Album of the Year against Beyoncé's *Renaissance*. Adding to the controversy, Styles ended his acceptance speech with, "things like this don't happen to people like me", which most non-fans read as ignorance of his privilege as a white cisgender man. Fans, even if they understood the irony of the statement, largely took "people like me" to mean people from tiny English towns or ex-boybanders. Arguments ensued:

> Laura, 22 (minute 73): They have such a bad parasocial relationship with Harry and they can't see outside of it […] You think that everyone's attacking him for no reason. It's not about Harry […] There are real problems. […] The systems [the Grammys] have in place, like why is this continually happening?

In invoking parasociality here, Laura positions fans' blindness to the "real problems" as caused by their PSR with Harry and their dedication to him. The boundaries of accepted fan behaviour are clear for her: don't get stuck inside fan culture, see the broader picture of "real problems", move beyond excitement and consider "the systems they have in place" that have repeatedly overlooked Beyoncé. Topics surrounding race and privilege have always been particularly fraught within fandom and fan studies alike (Morimoto 2021; Pande 2021), and Styles's 'progressive' persona based on past engagement with civil rights causes (Gross 2020) makes

this an obvious position for fans to take. Fans defend him because they believe they know what he *actually meant*, but they also might do so because critique of Harry can signal critique of the fan:

> Florence, 32 (Group 8, minute 92): If you want to talk about it to bring down another person, that's not what he's about. But there's also times when it's more like I need to defend myself.

Though Florence is not discussing the Grammys drama directly, she both signals knowledge of "what he's about" and a need to defend her own fan persona. There is a long history of devaluing feminine interests (Huyssen 1986; Railton 2001; Coleman and Lyons 2023) or feminine ways of 'doing fandom' (Dare-Edwards 2015; Busse 2017), and so defence of Harry can often be seen as a defence of self (Dare-Edwards 2015; LaCasa et al. 2017). Missing the "real problems" may be less about fans' PSRs with Styles and more about a misunderstanding (or wilful ignorance) of the issue (for a broader discussion on "toxic fandom" see Stanfill 2024). However, it might also be fuelled by an attachment to his past, politically engaged, persona (Smith 2017; Deflem 2019), rather than accepting how he/his persona is constructed today:

> Sarah, 24 (Group 2, minute 64): I realised that my parasociality was going too far and that I was projecting my political beliefs onto him. […] He's refused to say anything about the [Palestinian] genocide. He did speak up about Russia's invasion of Ukraine. […] It's just a little confusing, and in my view, hypocritical, to come out so strongly in one of those situations and not the other.

While at first Sarah's comments seem to acknowledge a 'bad' previous parasociality so she can claim her new, 'good' parasociality, what she does instead is call into question the existence of the relationship at all, now that she is no longer blinded by her parasociality gone "too far". Sarah then discussed past instances of Harry being politically aligned with her own beliefs: advocating for and donating to Black Lives Matter campaigns, encouraging American fans to vote against Donald Trump, and creating a welcoming environment for queer fans. She expresses a dissatisfaction with these actions, however, acknowledging that many of Harry's 'politics' have been either vague and non-committal (like, she says, his "Treat People with Kindness" slogan) or were late and lacklustre (especially his engagement with the Black Lives Matter campaign, see Gross 2020). In particular, Sarah highlights his refusal "to say anything about the [Palestinian] genocide" as the reason she re-evaluated her view of Harry's politics and her fandom participation. While participants across the groups shared similar dissatisfaction or discomfort about Styles's recent political silence, many also highlighted the fact that he is very 'offline' and that he rarely posts outside of official tour or brand information. This implies that if he was currently touring he might have posted and maintained the construction of his political persona, or at least that participants would have higher expectations of him.

What Sarah demonstrates here, and what the fans in Laura's, Pheobe's or Matilda's points might not, is what Archer and Robb (in press) explore as an important ethical consideration for fans. While participants imply a 'good' parasociality distinct from the 'bad' parasocial relationship they warn against, Archer and Robb argue that the PSR itself is not the 'problem' when it comes to fans reacting negatively to celebrities (or to other fandoms). Instead, they say this negative behaviour happens when fans do not accept change in the celebrity, when they would allow and even expect change in other social relationships:

> Fans who fail to give uptake to a change in a celebrity's identity and continue to hold her to outdated narratives, wrong the celebrity by restricting their agency… [Fans have no] responsibility to maintain their fandom as the identity of a celebrity undergoes changes. Rather, they have a responsibility not to put

> the celebrity under undue pressure to adopt or retain a certain persona, nor to continue to interpret the celebrity's behaviour in relation to their previous public persona. (Archer and Robb, in press, pp. 10–12)

Sarah is accepting new information about Styles's persona into her PSR and modifying her own engagement with him, later discussing her feelings of moral uncertainty in continuing her fandom and how she no longer attaches her fan persona to him online. To other fans, this might still fall under 'good' parasociality, akin to "being helpful" or seeing the "real problems". To Archer and Robb, this is simply individuals behaving ethically in a relationship. While the fans have designated 'negative' behaviour as 'bad' parasociality, it might be more useful to understand negative fan behaviour as Archer and Robb do: as fans behaving badly in the context of any social relationship, rather than behaving in that way *because of* their parasocial relationship.

## Conclusion

This paper has explored fan understanding and appropriation of the parasocial relationship. While the term was once a niche piece of academic jargon, it has now been accepted and adopted by fans, celebrities, academics, and the popular press. Though normalised into everyday use, this paper has shown that normalisation does not equate to viewing these relationships as 'normal'. Instead, it has argued that today's accusations of parasociality fit neatly into the continued pathologisation of the fangirl (Dare-Edwards 2015) and the feminine gendering of 'bad' fans (Busse 2017).

Despite the pathologising traces of the PSR, parasociality should be understood as one of many normative and well-explored fan behaviours, akin to and often overlapping with the performance of fandom (Bennett and Booth 2015) and fan persona (LaCasa et al. 2017; Deflem 2019), the playful engagement with "easter eggs" (Beaty 2016; Carroll 2023), and boundary policing (Busse 2017). Generally, the work has explored the fan persona, the celebrity persona, and the PSR between these personae, in the context of an increasingly online and mediatised world (Moore et al. 2017). While these personae are understood as constructed and context specific, the PSR between them has been theoretically positioned as a multi-social experience (Hills 2015) that shares many of the same elements of 'knowing' and fantasy as 'real' social relationships (Hills 2015; Archer and Robb in press). The 'negative behaviours' fans framed as 'bad parasociality' have been reframed as the result of individuals behaving badly in any social relationship, rather than poor behaviour caused by parasociality (Archer and Robb in press). The paper has also highlighted that future research might explore the 'casual' fan's discoursing and display of parasociality, particularly in context of multisocial experiences.

It is also worth considering the inadequacy of 'parasocial' as a term when removed from its academic home, and potentially, now, even when returned to the academy. Fans today are hyper-conscious of parasociality. They use it as a blunt shorthand to manage, understand, and police their own and others' fan behaviour, and to reinforce hierarchies of the 'good' and 'bad' fan. However, through using the term in this way, fans display incredibly nuanced readings about their own subjectivity which, first, show the limitations of parasociality as an organizing principle and second, ultimately serve to contradict the term altogether. Just as fans are aware of the illusion of intimacy between them and the celebrity persona they all know and love, they are also aware of how their own image has been constructed and managed into a fan persona, known and loved (and policed) multi-socially by the fandom.

## End Notes

[1] I expand on the use of 'fangirl' as a gendered theoretical term in a forthcoming paper: Bucy, A. 2025. Finding the Fangirlscape: Understanding fangirl as a gendered transfandom category. Participations 21(1).

[2] Carroll uses names that appear in Taylor Swift songs (many of which belong to people Swift knows) as an engagement with fan knowledge/pleasure. My 'Harry-related' names draw from songs (Anna, Matilda, etc) and fictional characters (Solene, Dorothy, etc) but my sample size required including 'real people' to maintain the theme. While I have kept pseudonyms consistent across my work, it may be worth revisiting and critically exploring the implications of borrowing names from people with 'real' relationships to Styles, particularly in the context of parasociality.

[3] As Payne died on 16 October 2024 after my data collection period ended, this example and discussion comes from my observation and experience as an academic working within my own fandom, rather than as an example brought up during focus groups.

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