

# CONCEPTUALISING *FAN PERSONA*

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The entanglement of identity and performance within fandoms have been central components of fan studies, whether these fans are focused on sports, music, film, television, literature, celebrity, or something else. Their shared interest and investment in the fan object provide fans with common ground on which to build a collective identity, while the fan object can be a rich source of identity markers, from logos and colour schemes to moral values and philosophical positions. As argued by Busse and Gray in *The Handbook of Media Audiences* (2011, p. 426), being a member of a fandom facilitates “a particular identity that affects and shapes its members in ways beyond shared media consumption”.

In this issue, we invited scholars to bring understandings of identity from fan studies into conversation with ideas of a strategic performance of self, extending existing work on fan personas from both within the *Persona Studies* journal and beyond. By doing so, we wished to explore how a ‘fan persona’ might be utilised by fans for specific purposes or in different interactions, or to frame individual perspectives, beliefs or interpretations within collective spaces.

In tandem with Christopher Moore’s (2020) call in *Transformative Works and Cultures* for a “persona-inflected fan studies”, this issue has made space for a fan-inflected persona studies. In clarifying the potentials offered to fan studies scholars by engaging with persona studies, Moore (2020, ¶ 1.9) points to P. David Marshall’s exploration of “the move from representational media (print, film, radio, and television) to presentational media (the internet, social media, and streaming platforms, among many others)”, as well as the concepts of intercommunication, micropublics, and the dimensions of persona (see Marshall, Moore & Barbour 2020). Similarly, research and theorisation around fan objects, names, performances, and communities, and the impact of these on movement between collective and personal identities (see Busse 2017, Chin & Morimoto 2013, Hills 2002, Jenkins 1992, Peyron 2018 among others), can usefully be deployed from fan studies into persona studies.

This issue grew from discussions between the issue editors, Kim Barbour and Mark Stewart, where it became clear that the case studies and models that we were each dealing with were similar and inter-related, and that together they gave a much more holistic understanding of behaviours and phenomena, but that our approaches did not necessarily have a common vocabulary to understand them. As such, we have mounted our own dialogue to try to parse the ways in which these two disciplines might have even more to offer each other than they have thus far.

## EDITORS IN DISCUSSION

KB: This issue has emerged in that slightly messy, serendipitous way that academic work sometimes occurs. Spending December 2023 in New Zealand visiting family, I had the opportunity to attend the University of Waikato’s end of year function, an outdoor picnic style event that took advantage of a beautiful early summer afternoon. Chatting with the undergraduate lecturers from the Screen and Media Department, I was introduced to the newly hired Digital Media expert Dr Mark Stewart. We had followed each other on Twitter for years,

but this was the first time we had properly engaged with one another, and it was quickly obvious we had some shared interests and perspectives. Sitting on a grassy slope surrounded by pre-holiday cheer, we had a lengthy academically inflected discussion about various popular culture, gaming, and niche geek culture topics that culminated in my suggestion we work together in 2024 on what is now the 'Fan Persona' issue of *Persona Studies*. That initial discussion is the prompt for our approach to this issue introduction. This dialogue aims to reflect the potential unlocked by interactions with people from other fields of research and study, and also the dialogue that occurs when two bodies of work can be brought together in true transdisciplinary fashion, becoming more than the sum of its parts.

MS: I've been really excited about the potential of this work - as someone whose work sits most comfortably in fan studies, I've found myself often thinking about the ways that fans present themselves, to themselves, to each other, and to the outside world. However, I haven't always had the language, the frameworks, the concepts to really come to grips with exactly what was happening. The chat I had with Kim made it apparent to me that persona studies offered an extremely generative intersection with fan studies, and I got quite energized about what scholars might be able to do here!

KB: Having taught courses on popular media, and with some amazing colleagues and students exploring fandom and fan practices in their work, fan studies is a field of scholarship that I have been dipping my toe into but never really had an opportunity to leap into wholeheartedly. Christopher Moore's (2020) prompt for fan studies scholars to engage with persona cemented my desire to take this further, but I knew that to do so, I needed to partner with someone more aligned with the field to ensure the depth and rigor of fan studies scholarship was reflected. Mark has provided that expertise in full, and the excellent papers included in this issue illustrate the potentials offered by the intersections between these two areas of study.

MS: One of the things I love about working in fan studies is listening to all the work that other scholars are doing. Attending conferences like those run by the Fan Studies Network always exposes me to a ton of work that I've previously thought I'd love to hear about, but more than that, work in areas that I've never even considered, never heard of, looking at phenomena, practices, texts that are brand new to me. I'm potentially a little bit of an outlier in Fan Studies in that I broadly don't work with transformative fan practices (fanfic, vidding, fan art and so on), instead looking more at areas such as the intersection between media industries and fan communities, and the ways that fan communities engage with each other and internally. The range of work that we received for this edition was wonderful, moving into areas that I had not previously considered, and introducing me to practices that gave me yet another lens to view fans and fan cultures. In working to ensure that we were doing justice to both persona studies and fan studies, I have developed new appreciations for approaches I had not considered, and every single article here strengthens both disciplines in exciting ways.

KB: My focus within persona studies has been on personas as communicative interfaces and strategic performances of identity; that is, I look primarily at the performer rather than at the reception of the persona. I see fan studies as offering a way to consider how personas emerge in response to, and aligned with, other fans and the object of their fandom. Being a fan is explicitly engaged with ideas of identity, with Tullock and Jenkins (1995, in Hills 2007, p. 2) arguing that fans are those "who claim a cultural identity on the basis of their fandom", as opposed to other audience members who, while following a team, show, or celebrity, do not see it is important to their identity. While this framing has been expanded and nuanced over the past 30 years, I see the potential for persona studies to explore the ways that fandom can inform

identity in a self-selected way. A fan's "affective tie toward an entity, such as person, object, text, group, or team" (Bennett 2016, p. 1) can function as a way to align themselves with others to inform a persona that draws on the shared cultural identity of the fandom. The element of agency here is important, as people opt in and out of communities—both imagined and participatory—based on their chosen fan object. Being a fan is often more *optional* than other elements of our identities that are more tightly socially or culturally informed. Equally, the range in scale of fandom offers a useful frame for persona studies researchers to explore personas that draw on niche communities and practices in their creation and performance.

MS: I absolutely agree that fan studies can be a generative space for considering the reception of persona. We only need look at the ways in which fans are presented and discussed in popular culture (such as in Khaliah Reed's piece in this issue, with the representation of a fan in the series *Euphoria*), or in media representations with distinct gendered binaries (the hysterical, over-emotional fan girl, and the socially awkward, overweight, trivia-driven fanboy) to see that images of fan personas are presented to audiences, including fans; the personas they choose to adopt will naturally be in some ways in conversation with these stereotypes, a point that Kim herself has elaborated in relation to women's personas (Barbour 2023, p. 4).

Fan studies has always been inherently interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary. While as scholars we have often tried to carve out our own academic niche, often for very valid industrial and cultural reasons, I believe strongly that our strength lies in when we embrace the knowledge that is being generated in so many related fields, from celebrity studies to queer theory, from postcolonial studies to archival sciences. Persona studies offers new ways to consider what it means to be a fan, to talk about being a fan, and to analyse and understand fan behaviours, just as fan studies may offer new lens for understanding the adoption of self-selected identity and persona characteristics.

## IN THIS ISSUE

This collection of six articles demonstrates the flexibility and range of work that bringing together fan studies and persona studies makes possible, while also highlighting some areas of shared interest between authors. We open the issue by looking at fan persona and Real Person Fiction (RPF), first through Lauren Balser's 'Real Person Fanfiction and the Construction of the (Un)Ethical Fan', then through Khaliah Reed's "'One of the most prolific smut writers on Tumblr': Contested Fan Practices and the Continuum of Fan Personas'. Both pieces are interested in the ways in which fans within the same broader fandom develop their own personas which set them apart from those in the fandom who do not enjoy RPF.

In the first article, Balser focuses on *Taskmaster* fandom and the ways in which the controversial ethics of RPF is managed through the performance of persona. While Balser considers the ways that fan persona can be constructed through engagement with RPF, Reed explores the contestation of a mediated characterisation of RPF writers that occurred within the One Direction fandom and RPF writes more broadly. Balser's work introduces the added element that *Taskmaster* RPF fiction has been actively discussed by the objects of the fic during episodes of the series, immediately bringing the tensions around ethics and consent to the surface in discussions of the practice. Reed is particularly interested in the valuation of certain forms of fan persona over others, specifically in relation to cultural norms, and develops this in relation to the depiction of 'Larry Stylinson' RPF—a One Direction ship of Louis Tomlinson and Harry Styles—through the character of Kat in the TV series *Euphoria*.

Harry Styles is the fan focus in Ava Bucy's contribution to this issue: 'Normalising Fan Parasociality within Pathologising Traces: Fan discourses of 'good' and 'bad' parasocial

behaviours'. Bucy's work explores the translation of the concept of 'parasocial' from academic to popular discourse, and unpacks the ways that parasociality has been deployed in fan settings to both normalise and police fan practices for fans of Styles in ways that contribute to their understanding of fan personas.

Shifting away from popular culture fandom, the fourth article is Natalie Le Clue's 'Opening Doors: African Fan Personas and the Growth of Fan Studies Perspectives'. In this exploration of online political discourse, Le Clue demonstrates the opportunities provided by fan studies and persona studies for those interested in political communities. In analysing role of fan practices in contributing to the persona performance of those using the #voestsekanc tag, Le Clue also reinforces the need for diverse scholarship, providing fresh insights and challenging preconceptions of fan practices through a South African lens.

The penultimate article in this issue is 'Here We Go Again: Cyclical Fandom, Persona and Identity' from Kate Ngai. Ngai draws on the concept of the cyclical fan, who participates actively during the lifecycle of a fandom, but then moves on to another fandom. Through this concept, Ngai argues that these fans' practices can be assessed through the concept of their 'fan persona', and the ways it can be either overt or covert, including in the ways that people choose to talk about their fandom. Drawing on a series of focus group discussions, Ngai is able to add a valuable set of responses and analysis to the literature of the presentation of the fan self.

Concluding the issue, Connell, Moore and Middlemost address non-human persona construction in 'V's Virtual Afterlife: Persona Analysis as a Method for Investigating Nonhuman Online Personas'. Taking as a case study the character of 'V' from 2020's *Cyberpunk 2077*, the authors present a qualitative, mixed-method approach for analysing non-human, highly mediated personas, including those like V that are collectively constructed in a highly dispersed and idiosyncratic fashion taking advantage of both the source text and participatory cultures. In concluding the issue with this article, we hope to spark a generative conversation about the methodological opportunities offered by transdisciplinary work at the intersection of persona studies and fan studies.

This issue could not have come together without the hard work of our anonymous peer reviewers. We extend our heartfelt thanks to each of you for providing insightful and rigorous feedback on the submitted articles.

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