

Online relationships between celebrities and fans are changing — and getting more personal.

While celebrity idolization has existed since the dawn of media, the Covid-19 pandemic has blurred the traditional lines dividing stars and fans. It's making researchers question — if celebrities are reciprocating attention, are these relationships still one-sided?

By Addison Schmidt

Olivia Levin, owner of the “Swiftiesforeternity” fan account, is not your average Taylor Swift fan.

Levin, who began running the account in 2015 on Tumblr, a social media website, has been a dedicated superfan of Swift for nearly ten years, and has met Swift in person twice.

Her account, which describes itself as providing “Taylor Swift Updates” in its Instagram biography, has nearly 150,000 followers, and has been “recognized” by Swift multiple times, through likes and comments on the account’s posts.

“She’s constantly doing things for her fans,” Levin said. “[Swift] is such a hard worker that we get new content all the time, and it keeps the relationship [between us] flowing.”

Swift is no longer doing private meet-and-greets — Levin stated that she’s “far too famous” for in-person interactions to be safe anymore — but Levin believes the relationship between Swift and her fans hasn’t suffered — if anything, it’s strengthened.

“She reciprocates for us through her music and her marketing,” Levin said. “She’s always shown that she cares about her fans, and she does now more than ever.”

Swift may not be the only artist who’s relationship with her fans has grown more personal.

Parasocial relationships — which are often the driving force behind the creation of fan accounts — are defined as one-sided relationships, in which an individual devotes considerable emotional energy and time towards another person, who is often unaware of the individual’s existence.

While parasocial relationships have existed since the dawn of media, with new forums for interaction — such as Instagram and TikTok — relationships between celebrities and fans are becoming increasingly less one-sided.

Parasocial relationships have existed since the earliest forms of entertainment, but have grown rapidly in popularity over the past several years, in part because of the forced isolation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

According to research done by Bradley Bonds, chair and associate professor of communications studies at the University of California, San Diego, while relationships with in-person connections were mostly maintained throughout the pandemic, personal relationships with celebrities increased significantly from levels pre-pandemic.

These relationships have come to define the discourse surrounding fan accounts, with many researchers arguing that the often unreciprocated nature of these relationships makes them unhealthy for both fans and their idols.

“It’s kind of like living in a fantasy world,” said Carol Jarzyna, a social psychologist and litigation scientist. “Because of the pandemic, people relied on parasocial interaction more, so they got in the habit of forming these bonds.”

But not all parasocial relationships are totally black-and-white, argues Jarzyna.

“We used to have a greater distinction...it used to be that a relationship was parasocial or it was real,” Jarzyna said.

Social media has enabled quick connection between fans and artists — such as Swift’s “Secret Sessions,” or even the ability for artists to like and comment on fan account pages — the relationship between fans and artists is no longer entirely unreciprocated, Jarzyna argues.

“Once that starts happening, it might not be a parasocial relationship...and now that we have the reciprocity aspect, it has to be rated on a continuum,” Jarzyna said.

But even as this continuum grows for fan and celebrity relationships, some fan accounts claim that hearing back from the artist isn’t even their top priority.

“I feel like because our account is more for updating [fans], it’s mostly just nice to know that people rely on us,” said TheOliviaNews, an Instagram-based account which provides updates on pop singer Olivia Rodrigo’s career.

TheOliviaNews account owners, who wished to be addressed only by their account handle, further elaborated that their reason behind maintaining their account has less to do with Rodrigo herself and more with finding a community.

It makes a strong case for another research perspective — fan accounts that don't care about their relationship with the artist at all.

“Yeah, usually you get nothing in return from the artist,” said TheOliviaNews, “but it still [feels] nice to show our support and create this kind of community out of that support.”