

Too close for comfort: the pitfalls of parasocial relationships

Social media means adoring fans can keep up with the ins and outs of their favourite celebrities. But for those in the public eye, a dedicated fanbase isn't always all it's cracked up to be – especially for women

A few years ago, I had a fan. She had read my writing and listened to my podcast, and often replied warmly to my tweets. Occasionally, she would send me private messages, and eventually I started following her back. It was nice. At some point, the volume of communication increased – I began receiving emails, and the notifications and messages spread to Instagram. Then they grew more frequent, uncomfortably so. She wanted things from me: to work for me, to meet up with me, to know how my weekend had gone, to tell me how hers had gone, to tell me about the job she disliked, for me to help her with a project she was launching.

My heart began to sink whenever I saw her name appear on my phone and I started responding less and less in the hope of discouraging her overtures. Then she came to an event I'd organised – the first time we'd actually met – and to my mortification, presented me with a bundle of gifts (which I obviously sent a thank you message for – I'm not a monster).

After a period where rarely a day would go by without some form of contact – invitations for coffee, lunch, to her house (all politely declined) – I texted a friend asking for advice. The attention had become suffocating, but I also felt a little guilty. She was pleasant enough, if somewhat intense.

In the end, I chose the coward's way out. I blocked her on social media and felt an immediate sense of relief as I did so. It probably wasn't the kindest way of dealing with the situation, but I also reasoned that feeling anxious on account of a stranger's expectations of friendship from me wasn't what I'd signed up for as a writer. After that, I never heard from her again.

I'd fallen victim to the consequences of a parasocial relationship. The term describes people forming intense – and crucially, one-sided – attachments to celebrities or public figures. I've seen that word, "parasocial", used on social media to describe everything from speculation around Jennifer Lopez and Ben Affleck's surprise reunion, to Taylor Swift fans' feverish discussion of her relationship with ex-boyfriend Jake Gyllenhaal. Unsurprisingly, during the pandemic these sorts of relationships have assumed heightened importance. For many of us, periodically trapped at home and unable to socialise, our favourite creators and media personalities have stepped into the breach left by our real-life friends. We feel as if we know these people and, indeed, we sort of do – we know how old they were when they had their first kiss, and how long it took them to get over their last break-up, what their bathrooms look like perhaps, and where they're going on holiday next month. We feel like we're sort of friends, or would be friends given the opportunity.

Now, I'm not actually famous, so the intensity of parasocial fandom my writing has invited is generally tolerable, and usually even pleasant – but I often consider what it must be like to have a bigger platform, and to have thousands, or perhaps even millions of people who think of you as a friend.

“I think sometimes people with larger platforms or audiences have a level of protection,” says the actor [Evanna Lynch](#), who rose to fame playing Luna Lovegood in the *Harry Potter* movies, and who says the messages she receives from fans are often prefaced with the assumption that she’ll never actually see them. “When you have a smaller, more intimate audience, I think people do expect a reply, and they feel like you’re very close.” This is the paradox of low-level fame – the kind bestowed on popular podcast hosts or minor media personalities; people who have a public profile, but are still “normal” enough for their followers to assume a degree of kinship.

And, of course, social media, where dispatches from celebrities sit side by side with updates from our closest friends, actively encourages this sense of proximity and the blurring of lines. Our exposure to celebrities is no longer limited to the press junkets accompanying a movie release or album drop – instead the steady drip-feed of social media bestows on us constant updates on the minutiae of their lives. Having starred in one of the most successful movie franchises of all time, Lynch has a colossal following (3.8m followers on Instagram alone) – and though she emphasises the many positive encounters she’s had with fans who’ve reached out to her, the ease of access fostered by social media has also at times invited more uncomfortable interactions. “Sometimes it can go a bit too far with people expecting too much of you. I would find myself busy and not able to reply, and then they’d get angry – with some people even saying, ‘If you don’t reply to me, I’m going to do something to myself.’”

“One guy – I’ll never forget – wrote me novel-length letters on Facebook every day, talking to me as if I was his best friend and telling me about his life. Sometimes he’d be really friendly and sweet, and other days he’d be furious because I actually never replied.” Lynch was a teenager at the time. “I sort of had the sense even then that there’s something not right here,” she adds, though she speaks about this particular fan with considerable empathy. Over time, she has changed the way she engages with fans. “I’m much more guarded now – I usually don’t reply to those messages, because there’s a fragility there that can be quite dangerous to entertain when you’re somebody who they revere so much.”

If ever there was a media format that lends itself to parasocial fandom, it is the podcast. The way we consume them – one-to-one, a familiar voice chattering away in our ears, often in the privacy of our own homes – makes podcasts a particularly intimate experience, and for many listeners that “friendship experience” is a huge part of their appeal. This is something that Zara McDonald and Michelle Andrews, both 27 and co-hosts of one of Australia’s most popular podcasts, [Shameless](#), know all too well. The duo were close friends before starting the podcast, and their weekly analysis of celebrity and pop culture now pulls in an impressive 1.6m downloads a month, mainly from 20-something women – but it’s their friendship as much as their musings on the latest Kardashian scandal that drives the podcast’s popularity.

“People are invested in the dynamic between us and our bond,” Andrews notes. “Even now, four years into doing the show, we still on occasion receive DMs that imply we’re not actually friends, or that we’re trying to deceive people and don’t actually like each other – that we secretly fight behind the scenes and aren’t as close as we appear on the show.”

As well as projections about the nature of Andrews and McDonald’s friendship, some listeners have also projected the expectation of friendship on to the duo. “We’ve been invited out to social events with listeners, who sometimes get a little confused when we don’t respond, or are quite surprised when we don’t want to go to dinner with them,” Andrews tells me – and the consequences of not indulging what fans perceive to be a reciprocal relationship can be disconcerting. The pair describe a “flipping of the

switch”, where their most ardent fans have occasionally become hostile when the pair fail to engage with them, sending aggressive DMs and leaving critical comments about the show on social media.

I, too, have experienced fans whose mood turns sour when they consider themselves spurned – one minute sending congratulations on the publication of my book, the next suggesting that I am “full of shit”.

After Andrews and McDonald published a book in 2019, in which Andrews detailed the sexual assault she’d experienced at 18, she received hundreds of messages from women who’d suffered similar trauma – something she was totally unprepared for. Though she repeatedly took to social media to plead with her followers not to send personal accounts of their assaults, for the sake of her own mental health, she felt considerable pressure to provide the kind of emotional support one would usually expect from an actual friend – or a therapist.

“I really struggled mentally with the tsunami of sexual assault stories.” she remembers. “I had some people get incredibly upset with me, that they’d sent me a story and I didn’t respond or give some form of mentorship. There was 1% of women who got very aggrieved or angry when those stories weren’t responded to.” It’s clear that the pair have learned the hard way to establish rock-solid boundaries as their profiles have risen. When I ask if any of their listeners have ever crossed the line from fan to friend, the answer is an unequivocal “no”. “We will always be polite and friendly with fans who approach us, but there won’t be a one-on-one situation where we’re DMing a fan back and forth over weeks.”

And yet for every creator for whom parasocial relationships are an unintended byproduct of their work, there are many more – influencers, YouTubers, vloggers – who actively cultivate that faux-intimacy with their followers, softening them up so that they might more easily ply their wares, be that waist trainers or make-up brushes. The currency of personal information is something fashion influencer [Camille Charrière](#) is well aware of. As one of the industry’s most established influencers – Charrière has 1.2m followers on Instagram – she is refreshingly honest about the professional incentives to overshare online.

“Sharing your children, your boyfriend, the inside of your home, perhaps about your mental health or other illness struggles, family stuff – all of that performs better on social media. Anything that is very intimate and relatable, and that other people can identify with. The things that used to work – keeping it impersonal and just showing your outfits, like we used to do – don’t really work any more. That’s something that anyone with a large social media following will be able to see: which posts generate higher engagement.” By design, social media algorithms reward the type of disclosure that invites parasociality. In the digital age, many creators’ livelihoods depend on that ever elusive and highly sought after metric of “engagement”, prompting them to offer up an access-all-areas pass to their lives – and the politics of personal disclosure are especially fraught for women.

“I think there is something about women in [media] roles, where they are expected to share more of themselves,” McDonald suggests. Though she acknowledges that she and Andrews have freely chosen to share personal stories with their audiences, there’s no denying that there’s an expectation of women in the public eye to maintain a level of accessibility as part of their actual work, engaging in correspondence with their fans and sharing intimate details about their lives. “No decision exists in a vacuum. We’re making that decision for a reason,” McDonald adds, and her co-host concurs. “At some point along the line, I internalised this belief that if I have a platform, I must expose the most traumatic sides of my life to

help other people,” says Andrews. “And for some reason I don’t see that being the case for the men around me.”

That level of intimacy can be a difficult path to retreat from once you’ve embarked on it. “The more you give, the more people expect from you,” Charrière notes. If you occasionally engage with some of your followers, others feel affronted when you don’t respond to them. If you have demonstrated a willingness to share some personal information publicly, people begin to feel entitled to all of it. Gossip forums such as the notorious [Tattle Life](#) are rife with amateur detectives sleuthing often deeply personal information about influencers that’s hard to justify as being in the public interest, as per the website’s stated *raison d’être*.

And yet there is a fear among many creators that publicly commenting on the discomfort of these expectations would risk appearing ungrateful for the audiences that, ultimately, sustain their livelihoods. And perhaps they’re wise to accept these dynamics as merely the cost of doing business, the Faustian pact of creative work wherein audiences’ investment in your personal life often bolsters your professional endeavours. Still, I can’t help but feel a little depressed by that attitude, and the normalisation of trading one’s boundaries for professional success – not to mention the implications for the type of creative work likely to be produced under those circumstances.

Personally, I’m still torn over the right amount to share on social media, mindful of how easily parasocial fandom can tip into overfamiliarity, and of my own tendency towards petulance when it does. These days I flit between sharing the ins and outs of my ongoing flat renovation with all 37,000 of my Instagram followers, and with a more limited “Close Friends” only audience (about 50 people who are, I suspect, bored senseless by my prevarication over nearly identical swatches of white paint). While working on this article, I decided to remove the “Hi friends!” greeting I’d reflexively opened with in a newsletter I was drafting, suddenly conscious of slipping into the cadence often employed by people with sizeable followings when communicating with their audiences (or “communities”, as they are often called). For now I’ve settled on the slightly awkward sounding “Hello there” – though I still sign off my newsletter with an “X”.

It’s a stab at taking a leaf out of McDonald’s playbook, and her assertion that, ultimately, it’s down to creators to manage the situation themselves. She and Andrews neither check nor respond to their DMs as much as they used to, and in the past year have decided to share less information about their private lives on air. “The responsibility is on us to create our own boundaries,” she concludes. “You can’t expect other people to do that for you.”