

University of Northern Iowa

UNI ScholarWorks

---

INSPIRE Student Research and Engagement  
Conference

2023 INSPIRE Student Research and  
Engagement Conference

---

Apr 4th, 1:00 PM - 1:30 PM

## We Would Be Friends: Fans, Musicians and Social Media

Cassidy Byrnes

*University of Northern Iowa*

*Let us know how access to this document benefits you*

Copyright ©2023 Cassidy Byrnes

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/csbsresearchconf>

---

### Recommended Citation

Byrnes, Cassidy, "We Would Be Friends: Fans, Musicians and Social Media" (2023). *INSPIRE Student Research and Engagement Conference*. 84.

<https://scholarworks.uni.edu/csbsresearchconf/2023/all/84>

This Open Access Paper Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by the CSBS Conferences/Events at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in INSPIRE Student Research and Engagement Conference by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@uni.edu](mailto:scholarworks@uni.edu).

**Offensive Materials Statement:** Materials located in UNI ScholarWorks come from a broad range of sources and time periods. Some of these materials may contain offensive stereotypes, ideas, visuals, or language.

WE WOULD BE FRIENDS: Fans, Musicians, and Social Media

Cassidy F. Byrnes, Senior

byrnecab@uni.edu

Marybeth C. Stalp, Advisor

Marybeth.stalp@uni.edu

University of Northern Iowa

ABSTRACT

With social media being one of the most prominent forms of communication today, it has become a pillar in the way our society functions. Social media has completely transformed the way we interact with people we know and with people we don't. Celebrities have taken social media in stride and are using it as part of their brand to communicate with fans, which creates a very interesting dynamic. Musicians and their fans appear to communicate regularly through social media, so fans are doing more than consuming music, they are interacting with other fans and their favorite musicians. Fans, through social media use, begin to feel an extremely personal connection to the celebrity/musician that they do not know. In this qualitative interview research with fans who interact with pop musicians on social media, I explore the depths of fan behavior, fans' relationships with musicians, and social media and what it means for these bonds. I do this by asking these questions: Why do people feel so connected to musicians through social media? Does social media offer a new sphere in which people can form new attachments to their favorite musicians?

Keywords: social media, fans, relationships, musicians

## WE WOULD BE FRIENDS: FANS, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND MUSICIANS

## INTRODUCTION

Social media is one of the most prominent forms of communication today and it has become a pillar in the way our society works. Social media has completely transformed the way we interact with people we know and with people we don't. Many celebrities have taken social media in stride and are appealing to their fans through the sharing of their inner lives, which creates a very interesting dynamic, considering that many of your favorite celebrities probably don't run their own accounts.

With the increasing popularity of social media, the lines between genuine and perceived relationships in relation to celebrities and their fans has begun to blur. No longer do fans have to attend concerts and try to catch their favorite singers afterwards. Now, fans can instantly "connect," regardless of where they are, with a musician's Instagram/Twitter post instead of having to wait to see them in person.

When talking about fans and musicians, it is very clear that the level of intimacy between them is very different than any other celebrity-fan relationship. I link this to the intimacy of song lyricism and the level of emotion that is needed for musical performance. On the same point, social media has played a large role in the level of intimacy as well, considering that fans can interact with their favorite musicians in real time and it rarely takes a financial toll, making it that much more accessible. Between the constant consumption of media and the constant need to be noticed by someone the fan idolizes, it creates the perfect storm for a new kind of bond.

In this research paper I explore the academic literature on this subject by outlining three areas I feel encapsulate fan/musician relationships on social media. First, I will explore in the literature review the general idea of fan behavior, what it means, and what it looks like in a

personal and online setting. The second section will delve into the landscape of social media and how it has impacted the relationships we hold with people we know and people we do not know. The final area I focus on is fan's relationships to musicians and what it looks like with the introduction of social media. After the literature review, I discuss in the data and methods section the process for study participant recruitment and how that was affected by my "insider status" (Beoku-Betts 1994). I then discuss research findings and conclude the paper.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic research literature for this subject is wide ranging so I chose to focus on fan behavior, social media, and finally, fan relationships with musicians. The fan behavior section will allow for a deeper understanding of the actions that fans take and the communities that are built from those actions. Second, I look at how social media is being used by fans. The last section, relationships with musicians will focus on why people feel a connection to musicians. Together the three areas of research literature help set the stage for understanding my research question, why do fans choose to interact with musicians on social media?

### *Fan Behavior*

Relationships between fans and celebrities cannot be discussed without analyzing the world of fan culture and how this behavior develops. So, what makes a fan? While researching, I found that the majority of fan related research looks at fans of sports, which begs the question, is there a gendered component. Dietz-Uhler et al. (2000) studied college sports fans through the comparison of men and women behavior. Glassman et al. (2007) looked at drinking behaviors on college football game day and Park et al. (2011) did not collect any of their own data but proposed how people should study sport fan behavior. The two studies that did collect data, have a skewed set that has a majority of male fans responding. Tiffany (2022:9) argues this point,

stating that in the beginning of subculture studies, sociologists were looking at how men were spending their post-war earnings meanwhile, women were fawning over *The Beatles* and creating their own subcultures which were not being studied. This idea can be related to the overwhelming amount of research related to sports fan behavior which is male dominated. Garimella, Cohen, and Weber (2017), discuss a gendered component as well, in which younger female fans may be more devoted to the performers that they follow compared to other demographics. This could be related to sexual desire, as researchers found that there is a positive correlation between physical and social attraction and the intensity of the relationship between fans and their desired subject (Kurtin, O'Brien, Roy, and Dam 2018).

These ideas of fan behavior offer a little insight in identifying what fans look like and how they act. With ideas of gender in mind, I was able to apply these previous findings to my own,

### *Social Media*

The interactions between fans and celebrities in the past have been limited to concerts and paid meet and greets, but through social media there is a whole new chance for fans to communicate with their favorite celebrities. These interactions can lead to something researchers call the "less is more" effect (Norton, Frost, and Ariely 2007), when fans lose interest in their favorite celebrities because they already know everything about them. However, Kim and Song (2016) researched the balance of communication and intimacy between celebrity and fan through a survey created for Twitter users. Suggesting that fans feel closer to celebrities who choose to disclose their personal lives to them through the use of social media.

Garimella, Cohen, and Weber (2017) developed categories of behavioral traits associated with fans on social media. They are as follows, *involved* (regular interaction with performer on

social media), *casual* (interacted once within a year), and *random* (no interaction beyond following the performer). These categories allow for further exploration into specific behaviors that fall within them. While these researchers developed categories for fan behavior relating to celebrity, they did not look at the communities that are built by fans.

Tiffany (2022) studied music fan communities on social media, looking at accounts related to the boy band, *One Direction*. She discussed the importance of creating online spaces where music fans, in this case many of those fans are young girls, can exist outside of the pressures of curating music taste based on others in their lives.

Through a gained understanding of how social media works today and how it is being used in connection to musicians and their fans we can begin to see how social media may play a large role in how fans are developing relationships with celebrities and musicians.

### *Relationships with Musicians*

Society's fascination with celebrity culture and its further development on social media has created an idea among younger generations that celebrities really are "just like us." But before the creation of in-depth YouTube interviews with your favorite celebrities (*73 Questions with Vogue* and *Open Door with Architectural Digest*), there was a special kind of relationship that was built between musicians and their fans based purely on the in-person interactions that were shared. For example, O'Guinn (1991) researched the Central Midwest Barry Manilow Fan Club in association with ideas of consumerism and its relation to celebrity culture. In fandoms, a term for subcultures created by fans, the artist or celebrity is "everything" to the people associated (O'Guinn 1991).

Bond (2016) discusses the idea of authenticity and how it may affect the relationship, as many musicians do not run their own accounts, but the perceived authenticity could help promote their image as well as sell more merchandise and albums.

Along with authenticity, there is also the issue of being too authentic and having fans lose interest in the musician which is discussed by Kurtin et al (2018) and Norton et al (2007). This idea, the “less is more effect,” is discussed in the way that fans can find more similarities with their favorite celebrities because they know little about them and with the addition of new personal information, those similarities slip away (Norton et al 2007). On the other hand, this may breed a deeper connection to the performer, with an increasing connection to the individual, fans may feel that they have developed a genuine relationship to them (Kurtin et al 2018). There was also no correlation found between the ability of the musician’s craft (ability or talent) to why fans may feel the need to form an attachment towards them (Kurtin et al 2018).

In relation to the literature, there are several instances in which my interviews reflected some of the literature findings. Kurtin et al. (2018) discussed the idea that sexual desire is tied to the level of connection that fans feel for their favorite celebrities or musicians. Lydia, a 26-year-old Jewish transwoman, talked about her connection to her favorite musician:

If I’m being honest, I think part of like the interest in Phoebe [Bridgers, an indie-pop musician] at the start is like, I considered her a pretty attractive looking woman. Where I’m like, I feel like I’m not the first person to be interested in a musician or another entertainer because I thought they were like, you know, hot.

The same interviewee, Lydia (26-year-old Jewish transwoman) also discussed topics found in Bond (2016) about authenticity. Again, discussing indie music darling, Phoebe Bridgers, who is somewhat active on social media and will often share her own political beliefs:

Like I feel like Phoebe [Bridgers] is pretty genuine. Like, I don't know, she might have to keep like, some stuff slightly reigned in to not like piss off people in the music industry or whatever. But like, I feel like Phoebe [Bridgers] is pretty much her genuine, authentic self. And I have no idea how much Taylor Swift is actually, her genuine self.

With just a small taste of the findings I found through my interviews, I could begin seeing how the reviewed literature could be applied to other research.

## METHODS AND DATA

In order to address the research questions about music fans and social media, I conducted 5 qualitative telephone interviews with music fans who also occupy social media spaces. I recruited through my own social media accounts on Twitter and Instagram but limited participants to be above the age of 18 and reside in the United States. Social media is such a wide-ranging topic and there are scholars who have researched this topic through the use of other methods, which I outline later in this section. I chose to focus on people who operate in the same music/social media spaces as me because I know how to navigate that space and already had access to potential participants. Through focusing on a particular taste in music (pop, indie-pop, indie-rock, indie-folk), I was able to narrow the scope of the research enough to get particulars from the participants. So, what will this tell us about the world? This research will help us to understand how social media has impacted the way society views relationships, online or other, and why fans seem to care so deeply about people they know seemingly little about.

Originally, I wanted to focus my recruitment on Instagram and Twitter because that is where the majority of musicians hold "personal" accounts and where interactions between them and their fans would take place. While it is true that the majority of interactions happen on those two platforms, it was extremely difficult to get anyone to volunteer for a phone interview. Not to



mention, there were hordes of people discussing leaving Twitter because of the change in leadership and the reinstating of harmful accounts, in late 2022 and early 2023 (see APPENDIX A). In reaching out to some of my mutuals, people who I follow and who follow me back, on Twitter with the recruitment materials (see APPENDIX B), the ones I did hear from stated that they would enjoy helping but would like to know what the questions are and did not want to do a phone call. Instead, they stated they would be more comfortable texting, emailing, or direct messaging through the platform.

As someone who had been operating on fan Twitter for roughly 8 years and is extremely familiar with all social media platforms, I assumed that I would be welcomed with open arms to the people that I have been interacting with, however, this was most definitely not the case. Researchers have often called this phenomena “insider-status” and “outsider-within” (Baca Zinn 1979, Beoku-Betts 1994). “Insider-status” refers to the ability of the researcher having a shared identity with the subjects that they are studying (Beoku-Betts 1994). While this usually occurs in participant observation and field research (Baca Zinn 1979; Beoku-Betts 1994), I found that I was experiencing the same phenomena within my own experiences while recruiting and, subsequently, collecting data from subjects. Another issue I found to be problematic in this methodology was the fact that the majority of the active participants in fan or “stan,” which can be described as an overzealous or overenthusiastic fan, Twitter are under the age of 18, making them unable to participate in this study. This age idea could also play into the stigma that surrounds being an adult fan or stan which could be another reason for the lack of interest from possible participants.

Through the use of telephone interviews, I had the ability and opportunity to mold the conversation based on how the participants were reacting and contributing to the conversation.

This allowed for the growth of a much more personal aspect to the research and a greater understanding of the inner workings of fans' minds and the behaviors that develop. While there has been peer-reviewed, published research done on this exact subject, the methodology of all of it is extremely narrow. Almost all literature reviewed, focused on other areas of methodology. Bond (2016) chose to collect data from middle and high schoolers through an online questionnaire, which was then used to measure their connection to their favorite media persona. Garimella et al (2017) used their previously mentioned levels of fandom to analyze fans in each of the three categories: involved, casual, and random. These researchers only used the data that the fans' Twitter accounts gave them. Similarly, Tiffany (2022) studied fan culture, specifically *One Direction*, through the use of data scraping or simply taking posts and analyzing them from Twitter and Tumblr. Kim and Song (2016) also utilized an online survey, but it was distributed on Twitter. With that said, I am contributing to this subject by conducting qualitative telephone interviews.

With the collection of 5 semi-structured phone interviews November 2022 and February 2023, I was able to create this analysis. Volunteers for the phone interviews were required to be of at least 18 years of age and reside within the United States. The method collection method was approved by the University of Northern Iowa Institutional Review Board (see APPENDIX C). Following the collection of demographic information, the created interview guide utilized closed-ended questions and open-ended questions (see APPENDIX D). Closed-ended questions focused on social media usage and music listening habits, whereas the open-ended questions allowed respondents to elaborate on their personal experiences with social media, music, and their connections with musicians and other fans on the social media platforms. Questions ranged from simply asking how much time they spend on a particular social media site to asking if they

could describe their connection to the musician, they consider themselves to be a fan of. This question variation and progression allowed for the subjects to get comfortable with the material and open up about their extremely personal experiences.

## FINDINGS

I organize the findings section into three different areas that highlight the data points that are the most significant when looking at the research questions asked. Again, the research questions are: why do people feel so connected to musicians through social media, and does social media offer a new sphere in which people can form new attachments to their favorite musicians? The first of the three sections, *Sometimes My Phone Disgusts Me*, focuses on how participants are using social media and how they feel about it. The second, *OMG I Love Them Too!*, looks at how fans are building communities based on their shared connection of the love for the musician/s and/or the music. Finally, the third section, *I've Loved Them Since I was 10*, focuses on participants' connections to the musicians they consider themselves to be fans of, this section is important in finding out why people form such deep connections with people they do not know.

### *Sometimes My Phone Disgusts Me*

The first area of this findings section will discuss when social media began being used by participants and how they use social media today. The data collected from the phone interviews yielded the same results across all the participants in regard to the age at which they began using social media. All interview volunteers stated that they began using social media between the ages of 10-15 and the majority did so without parental permission. Many stated that they rarely use social media in the ways that they used to because of the negative effects it had on their mental health. One interview participant, Rose, a 27-year-old white woman, stated:

Especially in college, like when I would be on social media a lot. It was really like negatively affecting me. I felt like I, it was very much I was looking at everybody else and being like, “Well, I’m not doing any of that,” or “I don’t look like that.”

Interestingly, participants also stated their use of timers for particular social media applications, especially the widely debated TikTok, recently under scrutiny by United States politicians (Oremus 2023). Participants stated that they were somewhat addicted to TikTok, one, Alex, a 21-year-old white woman, stated “TikTok has stolen my soul,” hence the need for the timers. Tori, a 24-year-old white woman, and another participant talked about her feelings towards particular applications and the time she spends on them:

I have tried to mitigate my use of TikTok because I spend way too much time on there. I have app limits on all of them [social media applications] on my phone. So, Instagram and Twitter, I think it’s like 20 minutes for both of them. TikTok is a 30-minute time limit. Facebook, I really only open that if I am desperate, really bored and then I’m on it for like 5 minutes and then, I’m like this is horrible.

The average number of hours these participants spent on mobile social media applications (i.e., Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, TikTok) was about 4 hours a day. This findings section exists to show how much time participants are spending on social media and their feelings about that amount of time. I found that many participants were previously extremely active on social media but have since moved away from it because of mental health reasons or they have less time to be on it. This could be a part of the age demographic of participants with the average age being 26, many of them have full time jobs and adult responsibilities. Tori (24-year-old white woman), speaks to this idea:

Like shifting from being a 13-year-old/14-year-old in like the *One Direction* community to a 24-year-old, kind of viewing it more from the outside because I'm not active in it.

I'm not actively tweeting about Harry Styles or posting about Harry Styles anymore. I'm kind of just watching it from the outside.

So, while many are attempting to move away from their use of social media, they may feel the need to stay connected because of the communities that they have found themselves in online.

In the next section, I discuss this idea of connection to other fans in further detail.

### *OMG I Love Them Too!*

Being a part of a community is a large portion of the online music world. Between discussing one's favorite song or arguing about which album is the best in an artists' discography, there is also the general social interaction that happens between fans as people. There are discussions about which fans have the right to attend certain concerts, what being a "true" fan means, and what it's like to share an interaction with one's favorite musician online or in person and how that effects the rest of the community. From the collected interviews, there is also reference to in-fighting and the negotiation of what makes someone a big enough fan. Tori (24-year-old white woman), stated:

It's, like this, "I need to prove myself as a bigger fan than you." And there are moments where I am, I don't do it, I don't post these things online but like, when people are talking about *The 1975*, I'm like, I have been a fucking fan of *The 1975* since 2014. Shut up. Shut up. And it's really hard not to. Or like, with Harry Styles, I'm like I have loved Harry Styles since 2012. Shut up. I don't care if you know all of the words to "Cinema." I don't want to learn all the words to "Cinema," I'm an adult. That is not on my list of

priorities. It's like this war between proving yourself. It's a different type of toxicity, than what it was [referencing the early day of the One Direction fandom].

Online interaction is only one way in which fans build community, concert attendance is another.

One interview participant, Avery, a 27-year-old black woman, shared that she is attending roughly five shows or festivals all of which are out of the United States for the British pop band, *The 1975*. Attending concerts is one the biggest ways for fans to show that they care about an artist or band, but fans will often share experiences with other fans who are also in attendance. Avery (27-year-old black woman) is attending her shows with several people whom she met and befriended through social media, namely Twitter and people she has met at previous shows.

Fan communities will also often be compared to each other in complex ways. Rose (27-year-old white woman) discussed the difference in communities based on how active their favorite artist or band is on social media.

I think it is also like, makes us [fans of *The 1975*] like a community, closer [talking about fans of *The 1975*], if that makes sense. Like I definitely, like it brings because, okay, like Harries [Harry Styles' fans] on Twitter. They are like constantly talking about themselves. Does that make sense? And we're like constantly talking about the band.

In this instance she is comparing fans of *The 1975* and fans of Harry Styles, with members of *The 1975* being much more active on social media than Harry fans.

During interviews, we would often discuss how capitalist ideas play into how fan communities operate and how they interact with opposing communities. Two artists who were prominent in these conversations were Taylor Swift and Harry Styles, both of whom, have made household names for themselves. Lydia (26-year-old Jewish transwoman) talked about how an artist can be so culturally relevant that their fans no longer discuss the meaning behind what they

are doing, with Taylor Swift's fan base against Phoebe Bridgers', stating that, "She [Taylor Swift] will capitalize off of every single thing that she can. And I think that's, I don't know. The other thing is like Phoebe, specifically I think in her community, people, if she does something that they don't agree with, they're going to talk about it." This idea is important in understanding that fan communities are complex consumers who can have meaningful discourse, not just teenaged girls who think their favorite performer is hot. Not to say that also doesn't happen.

Fans will also hold each other accountable. There was another instance where several fans of *The 1975* came forward on Twitter talking about their experiences with another fan which ended in several sexual assaults. Collectively, the fans banded together and made a point to call out the perpetrator and even reached out *The 1975*'s manager, Jamie Osborne, to make him aware of the situation because the assaults happened at shows for the band. I am not aware of the conclusion of this instance, but I think overall it shows that fans are a complex community.

In this section, it is clear fan communities are complex and are often created and upheld through interactions at concerts and online. Through holding each other accountable and having conversations about the artists, fans can create their own worlds that are developed through the music but most importantly the musicians. This brings in the final area of the findings section.

#### *I've Loved Them Since I Was 10*

Many interview participants stated that they felt a deep connection to their favorite musicians because they had connected to them through song lyrics/material but more importantly, they grew up with them. Tori (24-year-old white woman), when asked about her connections to Harry Styles, stated:

Like, I don't know, for me, he's [Harry Styles] been really impactful because I didn't really grow up with like a good male role model in my life. And so like, as a young girl

with fucking daddy issues, I was like, oh, there's this like guy who, especially when he went solo and was very much like 'Treat people with kindness,' and 'Be a good person,' it felt really good to see someone who I've always admired and looked up to, like, turn out to be, like, a decent person.

In the same vein, Rose (27-year-old white woman), a fan of the *Jonas Brothers*, shared her experiences and deep rooted connection to the band:

My dad, when I was younger, my dad took me to every single *Jonas Brothers* concert. So even when I could drive myself, he still took me. And we had fun together. My dad died in 2019 and like, the *Jonas Brothers* had been broken up for like 5 years at that point. Like a month after my dad died, they got back together. And I remember sitting there and being like, oh my God, like it was the on thing, and it sounds, I think again, stupid but I was in such a horrible place. Like, genuinely, and it was the one thing in my life, and I still loved *The 1975* at that point but there was just something about the *Jonas Brothers* being such a part of me and my dad's relationship and in my life since I was a literal child, like it was so comforting and stabilizing, that happening.

This quote, along with others, suggests that to many fans music and the people who create it mean a lot to them. They are often taking on roles in fans' lives without even knowing it. This deep connection can be performed or realized in many different ways, with Rose (27-year-old white woman) stating that the *Jonas Brothers* have been a true staple in her life, "I'll be 28 this year and I've liked them since I was 10. That's like 18 years of my life. So, I think something like that, to me, is never going to go away."

Another interviewee, Avery (27-year-old black woman), who spends a lot of time and money going to concerts as well as operating a stan account on Twitter, specifically for the



previously mentioned, *The 1975*, made this comment when asked about her connections to musicians, “I feel like, and it’s different with other artists, because there’s other artists, like I could give less of a fuck about if Harry Styles knew who I was. But I really want to be best friends with the guys [*The 1975*].”

Rose (27-year-old white woman), who is also present on Twitter, stated:

It’s not exactly fake, like I am talking to you [in reference to musicians on social media]. Like, and that’s what’s crazy. And that’s why I think that today, having a para-social relationship is pretty normal because of the level of interaction that is just like every day. And it’s, it’s not even, I think like, I don’t even think the interaction has to happen directly to you. Like, I love Joe Jonas. I would kill a family for Joe Jonas, okay. And there is like, he has never interacted with me, like on Twitter or anything like that but I see him interacting with other people who are regular people. So it’s not even happening to me and I’m still like, oh see he talks to people. It could be me one day.

This dreaming of interactions from one’s favorite musicians is actually a common theme among fans and all of my interviewees discussed the want or need for interactions in order to feel close to the performers. Alex (21-year-old white woman) talked about her time as a “Directioner,” a fan of the popular British boyband, *One Direction*, during their height of fame:

I remember when I was like, 11-years-old, I would go my library, and just watch hours and hours and hours of *One Direction* interviews. Those little like ‘10 Things You Didn’t Know About One Direction’ videos on YouTube, like the ones where it’s just like a floating head cut out of them in like black and white, and it would be like, ‘Liam doesn’t like spoons.’ And it would just be those for like, literally four hours, five days a week.

Alex (21-year-old white woman) was also able to see several of her favorite artists in concert and talked about how that experience may have interrupted her perceived closeness to the musicians:

When I went and saw Harry [Styles], we were in like, the nosebleeds like our backs were against the wall, like we're the very last row. He didn't really, I mean, it was an awesome concert, but it didn't really feel right. Like I couldn't see the sweat on his face. Like I couldn't, I mean he felt real, but you know what I'm saying? Like, it wasn't, we were pretty close when I saw *5 Seconds of Summer* [Australian pop band] and it's like you can see them move the mic cords. Like they're real people. You know, I'm saying like, real human being in front of me, rather than just like, people that I've like, followed so closely for so many years. I didn't really feel like I knew them on a personal level.

While fans may feel close because of the things that they know about the musicians' personal lives, it can wax and wane based on the performers' "realness" to the fan. Seeing them in concert may affect the feelings the fan has towards the artist based on the fan's experience at the show.

Avery (27-year-old black woman) was discussing her extensive experiences at *The 1975* concerts that she has attended over the years, and while she has never had an interaction with any of the members, she was disclosing several instances where the security detail, that has been with the band for ages, has interacted with her. The head of security even managed to recognize her on several occasions and Avery (27-year-old black woman) was even gifted a bass pick [which her favorite member played with earlier in the evening] from him, "I have so much love for that man [Mark, the head of security]. So much." So even if the fan doesn't have a direct interaction with the musician/s, even an interaction with someone in their circle is enough. Another example of this finding is Avery (27-year-old black woman) discussing an online interaction she shared with *The 1975*'s manager, Jamie Osborne:

I drunk tweeted Jamie [Osborne] one time because there was like a time where like, everyone was like, you know, he used to be really active on Twitter. And so there was a time where like, he would, people would ask him questions, and he was always answering them and so I like, I was drunk at a bar one time and I remember tweeting like, “It’s always like, Matty [Healy] this, Matty that, no one ever asks Jamie how he is,” and he replied and he was like “I’m doing great.” And I started crying in the middle of the bar.

None of my interviewees had an interaction with the performers that they consider themselves fans of, online or otherwise, but several of them did discuss the interactions that others within their respective communities had with the musicians. Rose (27-year-old white woman) recalled an instance in which Matty Healy interacted with fans in an Instagram group chat:

He just popped in it, like that was real. That was a real conversation that happened. And it’s like, how do you not? When things like that happen? How do you not attach yourself? And I think that it’s also like, obviously, we don’t know him in real life. So, like, the version that I have of Matty in my head could very well be who he is, in real life, it could very well not be, at all.

Many fans dream of this happening to them, me included, Rose (27-year-old white woman) makes a good point by stating, “You [Matty Healy] feel like if I met you in person, like we’d be best mates. But I think that that’s also to a certain extent detrimental to some people. Because I think that that’s where the weirdness happens. Because I think for some people that feels too real.”

While fans may not share one-on-one interactions with the celebrity, they still hold deep and meaningful connections to them and are aware of the implications of such thoughts.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

My findings showcase the massive potential that is fan research through a sociological lens. In understanding these kinds of communities, we can further comprehend how social media is impacting the relationships that we hold with people we know and with people that we don't know. These findings also showed that fans do really care about "their musicians" and that they hold meaningful connections with them because of their persona as well as their music. I hope that my research can inform and further push for more of its kind.

In *Sometimes My Phone Disgusts Me*, participants were introspective, and they felt like they were spending too much time on social media, to the point that it impacted their mental health in negative ways. This finding is important because society has a very negative and limited view of people online, and so, my research has helped illuminate that social media users are conscientious and recognize that there are issues.

In *OMG I Love Them Too*, I demonstrated how participants discussed their various roles in the online fan community. My research builds on work previously mentioned by Tiffany (2022) and Garimella et al. (2017) in that qualitative interviews allowed for a more in depth and interactive discussion in real time, revealing the complicated identity of being a fan online in contemporary times.

Finally, in *I've Loved Them Since I Was 10* participants share their individual relationships with musicians and why it matters to them. Given that many of the participants were in their late 20s, we can see that the fan-musician relationship extends beyond the teenage years, and intensifies throughout the life course. While fan behavior is often stigmatized and not taken seriously especially during the teenaged years, these relationships are actually very important and hold deep meaning for fans.

As you can see, my findings yielded a new perspective on some aspects of music fan communities, and there is still much work to be done. Using semi-structured, qualitative, phone interviews, I was able to connect with fans on different levels than the previous studies which utilized surveys (Bond 2016, Kim and Song 2016, and Kurtin et al. 2019). Interviews allow for participants to share their thoughts about subjects that are meaningful to them and with my previous experiences in the music fandom world, I was able to ask, what I believe to be, the right questions.

It is important to remember the struggles that went along with this research, namely participant recruitment. There are several reasons as to why I believe this was so difficult. First, Twitter users, especially those who occupy fan spaces, want to remain anonymous. Second, many of the possible participants were excluded because of their age (I recruited study participants who were US residents 18 years of age or older). In using Twitter, I have come to realize just how many users I see on the platform are actually under the age of 18 (this coincides with my findings as people generally start using social media with/out parental supervision between 10-15 years of age). Many Twitter users who are in the 10–15-year age range are following musicians that are 10 to 20 years older than them and they are interacting with fans who might be their age (but might not be their age). The Twittersphere is complicated and it was difficult to find study participants.

Recruitment through social media is a great way to advertise a study and recruit participants, but it does take some work to gain the trust of the population as would be the case in any in-person setting containing human beings (Baca Zinn 1979 and Beoku-Betts 1994). Some changes that would benefit future research but would also take more resources, would be to remove the restrictions of age (which would require parental assent rather than consent),

advertise globally, rather than just in the U.S. (although scheduling interviews globally would have unique time challenges), and gain a wider range of demographic variation. As for research in the future, I think the use of interviews allowed for the deeper understanding of fan behavior and the feelings that go along with being a fan of music artists.

## REFERENCES

- Architectural Digest. "Open Door: Inside Celebrity Homes." Retrieved February 25, 2023 ([https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLpi4YdMCC439sN\\_5vIza6IfQm0qc-IqPO](https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLpi4YdMCC439sN_5vIza6IfQm0qc-IqPO)).
- Baca Zinn, Maxine. 1979. "Field Research in Minority Communities: Ethical, Methodological, and Political Observations by an Insider." *Social Problems* 27(2):209-219.
- Beoku-Betts, Josephine. 1994. "When Black Is Not Enough: Doing Field Research Among Gullah Women." *NWSA Journal* 6(3):413-433.
- Bond, Bradley J. 2016. "Following Your 'Friend': Social Media and the Strength of Adolescents' Parasocial Relationships with Media Personae." *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 19(11):656-660.
- Conger, Kate, and Lauren Hirsch. 2022. "Musk Sews Up Deal for Twitter and Wiends Ax." *The New York Times*, October 28, 2022, A1.
- Dietz-Uhler, Beth, Elizabeth A. Harrick, Christian End, and Lindy Jacquemotte. 2000. "Sex Differences in Sport Fan Behavior and Reasons for Being a Sport Fan." *Journal of Sport Behavior* 23(3):219.
- Glassman, Tavis, Chudley Werch, Edessa Jobli, and Hui Bian. 2007. "Alcohol-related Fan Behavior on College Football Game Day." *Journal of American College Health* 56(3):255-260.
- Garimella, Kiran, Jonathan Cohen, and Ingmar Weber. 2017. "Characterizing Fan Behavior to Study Para Social Breakups." *arXiv preprint arXiv 1705.09087*.
- Kim, Jihyun, and Hayeon Song. 2016. "Celebrity's Self-disclosure on Twitter and Parasocial Relationships: A Mediating Role of Social Presence." *Computers in Human Behavior* 62:570-577.
- Kurtin, Kate S., Nina O'Brien, Deya Roy, and Linda Dam. 2019. "Parasocial Relationships with Musicians." *The Journal of Social Media in Society* 8(2):30-50.
- Mark, Julian. 2023. "Taylor Swift's Ticketmaster Meltdown: What Happened? Who's to Blame?" *Washington Post*. Retrieved November 18, 2022 (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/11/18/ticketmaster-taylor-swift-faq/>).
- Norton, Michael I., Jeana H. Frost, and Dan Ariely. 2007. "Less Is More: The Lure of Ambiguity, or Why Familiarity Breeds Contempt." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 92(1):97-105.
- Park, Seong-Hee, Daniel Mahony, and Yu Kyoum Kim. 2011. "The Role of Sport Fan Curiosity: A New Conceptual Approach to the Understanding of Sport Fan Behavior." *Journal of Sport Management* 25(1):46-56.
- O'Guinn, Thomas C. 1991. "Touching Greatness: The Central Midwest Barry Manilow Fan Club." *ACR Special Volumes*.

- Oremus, Will. 2023. "America's Online Privacy Problems are Much Bigger than TikTok." *The Washington Post*. Retrieved March 24, 2023  
(<https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/03/24/tiktok-online-privacy-laws/>).
- Tiffany, Kaitlyn. 2022. *Everything I Need I Get from You: How Fangirls Created the Internet as We Know It*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Treisman, Rachel. 2023. "The Senate's Ticketmaster Hearing Featured Plenty of Taylor Swift Puns and Protesters." *NPR: Morning Edition*. Retrieved on January 26, 2023  
(<https://www.npr.org/2023/01/24/1150942804/taylor-swift-ticketmaster-senate-hearing-live-nation>).
- Vogue. "73 Questions." You-Tube Website. Retrieved February 25, 2023.  
(<https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLztAHXmLMZFQnEL2hPOHFDyROa3h--xl>).



## APPENDIX A: Setting

*Twitter*

Recently, there has been some controversy regarding the social media platform Twitter. Up until October 27, 2022, Twitter was owned and operated by the founder, Jack Dorsey, the CEO, Parag Argwal, and the company's board of directors (Conger and Hirsch 2022:A1). In January of the same year, business mogul, Elon Musk, began purchasing shares in the company and in April, became the largest shareholder. With that, the company had no other choice than to discuss a buyout. Twitter users were in distress during this uncertain time. The possibility of the platform being taken down was also a reality; with rumors spreading that the only reason Musk wanted the company was to take out the competition before launching his own platform. Shortly after the final purchase on October 27, 2022, Musk began removing employees from the company as well as reinstating previously blocked accounts, again making users question whether they wanted to remain on the platform.

*Ticketmaster*

Other recent events within the social media/music world, Taylor Swift announced on November 1, 2022, that she would be touring the United States in 2023. Of course, the alive and well Swifties [Taylor's fandom name] took to Twitter to discuss ticket purchasing and theories about what surprises Taylor may have in store. None of them could have foreseen the events that would take place during the ticket presale put on by the ticket monopoly company, Ticketmaster, which is merged with Live Nation Entertainment, the largest ticketing management company in the world. On November 15, 2022, presale for Taylor Swift's tour kicked off with a "historically unprecedented," (Mark 2023) amount of traffic on the website, causing it to crash for several hours. During ticket purchasing, fans were able to add tickets to their carts but were unable to check out. I, personally, spent a total of 9 hours on the website waiting for the chance to purchase tickets (fieldnotes 2022). Since then, there has been a large push by fans, politicians, and musicians to make changes to the monopolized system (Treisman 2023).

*Specific Artists*

Being on Twitter while musicians are touring creates a whole new dynamic for fans and artists alike. For example, *The 1975*, a British pop band, was touring in December of 2022 while I was collecting data and I found myself a part of their extremely active fan base on Twitter (fieldnotes 2022). Through my personal Twitter account, I was able to access and document the happenings while they were touring. The band's front man, Matty Healy, is notorious for his online presence, often interacting with fans on Twitter and posting daily updates on his Instagram story. Again, in December of 2022, Healy deactivated his Twitter account (fieldnotes 2022) which sent the fans on Twitter into a tailspin. Healy did return at the beginning of January (fieldnotes 2023) but again, deactivated and subsequently allowing his account to be deleted through inactivity. The artist's presence on Instagram is still felt though, with some fans adding Healy to a group chat in March of 2023 (fieldnotes 2023), ending in him actually replying and interacting with them.

APPENDIX B: Recruitment Materials





Office of Research & Sponsored Programs

---

November 2, 2022

Cassidy Byrnes  
University of Northern Iowa  
Cedar Falls, IA 50614

Re: IRB 23-0041 – Exempt Category 2

Dear Cassidy:

Your study, *We Would Be Friends: Fans, Social Media, and Musicians* (IRB 23-0041), has been approved by the UNI IRB through the review procedures authorized by 45 CFR 46.104, Expedited Category 7, effective October 25, 2022. You may begin recruitment, data collection, and/or analysis for your project on this date. You are required to adhere to the procedures and study materials approved during this review, as well as to follow IRB policies and procedures for human subject research posted on the IRB website.

If you need to make changes to your study design, samples, procedures, or study materials, please email [lisa.ahern@uni.edu](mailto:lisa.ahern@uni.edu) to request approval of the changes **before** they are implemented, and attach any revised study materials with edits highlighted. You may expect a response within a couple of days.

Your study will not require annual review and approval by the IRB. However, you will receive an annual study update request, which will ask if the study is still active and if any problems have arisen.

Problems or adverse events related to your research that were not anticipated must be reported promptly after being discovered, either within 7 or 14 days, depending on the seriousness of the event, as outlined on the [Reporting Problems and Adverse Events](#) page. Examples include unexpected injury or emotional stress for study participants, missteps in the consent process, or breaches of confidentiality. The IRB will advise on any next steps that might be necessary.

Best wishes for success with your project.

Sincerely,

Lisa M. Ahern Digitally signed by Lisa M. Ahern  
Date: 2022.11.03 14:33:57  
-05'00'

Lisa Ahern  
IRB Administrator  
Associate Director Research & Sponsored Programs

## APPENDIX D: Interview Questions

1. Demographics
  - a. Can you please tell me your age?
  - b. How would you define your gender and what pronouns do you use?
  - c. How would you describe your race/ethnicity?
  - d. Can you tell me how you would describe your sexual orientation/sexuality?
  - e. What is your highest level of education?
    - i. What was/is your major?
  - f. What state are you currently living in?
  - g. What is the size of the city that you're living in? Is it rural or urban?
2. Social Media
  - a. How old were you when you began using social media?
    - i. How did you access social media (phone, ipad, home/school computer)?
    - ii. Were they your personal accounts or did your parents start them?
    - iii. Were your parents supportive of your use of social media?
    - iv. Were you monitored in any way?
  - b. What platforms did you first start using, and why did you choose those?
    - i. How did you use them?
  - c. What platforms are you most active on now?
    - i. Why?
    - ii. Are there any that you don't use or have chosen to get rid of? Why?
  - d. How much are you using social media per day/week?
    - i. Has this changed over time?
    - ii. Did the pandemic affect your social media use?
      1. Examples?
3. Musical Preferences
  - a. How often do you listen to music throughout the day? How do you listen to that music?
  - b. When did you start listening to your own music choices/developing your own preferences?
    - i. Did your parents influence this?
    - ii. Did your friends influence this?
  - c. What kinds of music do you enjoy listening to now?
    - i. Why? What do you like about this kind of music?
    - ii. When did you start listening to this kind of music? Did someone bring this music to your attention?
    - iii. Do you share these interests in these musicians with your friends or family?
    - iv. Have you made online or concert friends with other who also like this/these musicians?
  - d. Do you see a lot of music content on your social media platforms? Are you introduced to new music there?
4. Fan of specific artists

- a. Are there specific artists/genres that you gravitate towards? Examples?
    - i. Why? How long have you been listening to them? How do you listen to them?
  - b. Would you consider yourself to be a “fan” of any of these artists?
    - i. For example, do you attend concerts, listen to them on streaming, watch their social media feed?
  - c. When did you become a fan? Are you a part of the original community?
  - d. How do you feel about other fans of the artist?
    - i. Can you tell if someone is a fan of this artist?
  - e. Would you consider the fandom to participate in gatekeeping?
  - f. If you have any “merch” of this musician/artist/band, can you describe it? Any collectible items, or items that are very special to you? Posters, etc.?
  - g. How much time/money do you spend annually on this musician/artist/band?
  - h. Can you tell me a concert or merch story?
  - i. Can you tell me about a time that you interacted online with this musician/artist/band?
5. Level of Interest
- a. How would you describe your connection to the musician/artist/band?
    - i. Do you feel the same way about other artists/musicians/bands?
  - b. Do you interact with any artists (and their fans) that you follow on social media?
    - i. When you do, what’s that like for you, can you give me an example?
    - ii. Can you tell me about those experiences and how they make you feel afterwards? Do they push you to post more or try to start more interactions?
6. Stan?
- a. So, when you’re interacting with musicians online, are you using your personal accounts, or have you set up any stan accounts?
    - i. When did you create that account? Was there a specific reason you wanted that account rather than your personal account?
  - b. If you have both, can you tell me why and when you set up a stan account, and how you interact through these two accounts?
    - i. Do you post about the artist on your personal account as well or just on your other account?
    - ii. Stan account for the multiple artists, or do you have multiple for different artists?
    - iii. Do you often have interactions with the artist you stan on that stan account? Could you tell me a little bit about those experiences?
7. Are there any other things you wish to add? Questions you wish I would have asked?