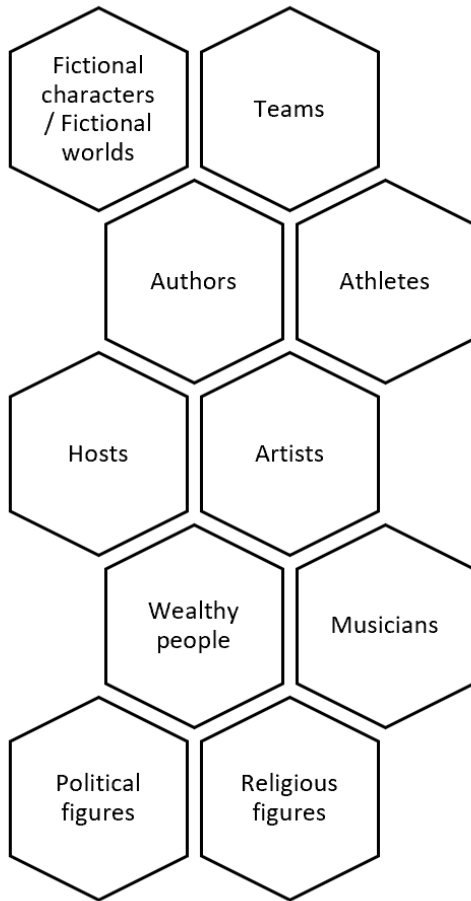




Fandom

Why do we care what happens to people we don't know? How universal is the practice of being a fan? How consciously do we choose to become a fan? Why do we value fandom and parasocial relationships?



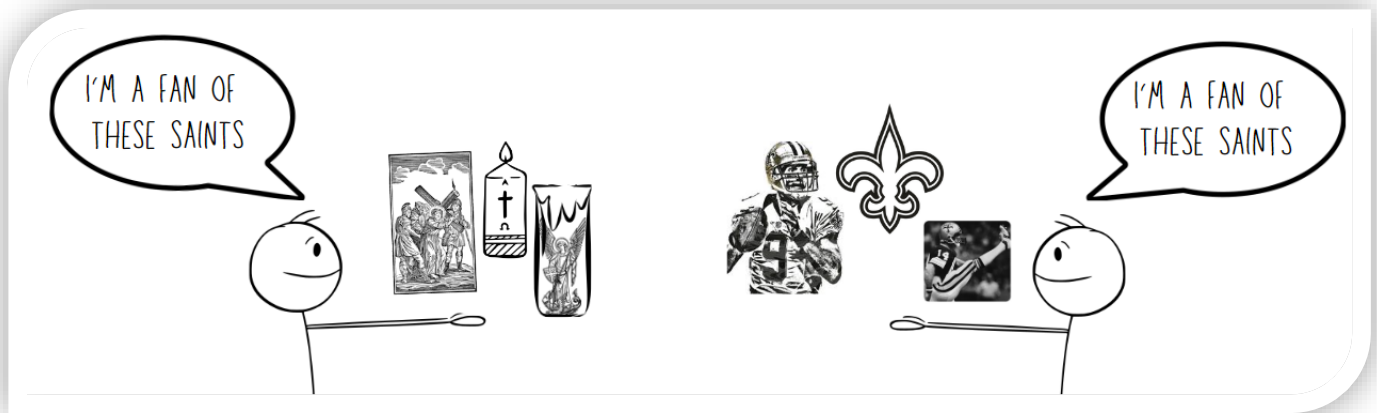
In 2023, a lot of Americans learned the term “parasocial relationship,” thanks to trendy coverage by [TIME](#), [The Atlantic](#), [Forbes](#), and others. But the term was actually coined in the 1956 psychology [paper](#), “*Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance*.” The paper was written in response to the advent of television, which brought famous people and fictional people right into your living room—right into your life—in a way that had never happened before. The authors noted that “television, and the movies...give the illusion of a face-to-face relationship with the performer,” or with “a character in a story,” or with “quizmasters, announcers... [and other] ‘personalities’ whose existence is a function of the media themselves.”

In examining this phenomenon and contrasting “para-social” with “ortho-social” (traditional) interactions, the authors helped frame studies of human behavior and consumer behavior that continue today.

In short, a parasocial relationship is a one-sided relationship that a person has with a celebrity or fictional character. And parasocial interactions are the non-reciprocal experiences that compose that relationship. Notably, fandom is a parasocial relationship, but the bonding that occurs among fellow fans is not.

The 2023 articles linked above are focused on parasocial relationships within today’s internet culture. And, understandably, they address today’s generalized unease about whether our digital lives are supplanting our “real” lives, and whether that’s okay or not.

But fandom is not a new phenomenon. It wasn’t created by the internet. It wasn’t created by TV, or newspapers. There are timeless forces driving what we call fandom—humans seeking **belonging**, **companionship**, and **personal identity**. Declared allegiances have always helped people define “us” and “them,” which seems an inevitable part of human society.



Consider:

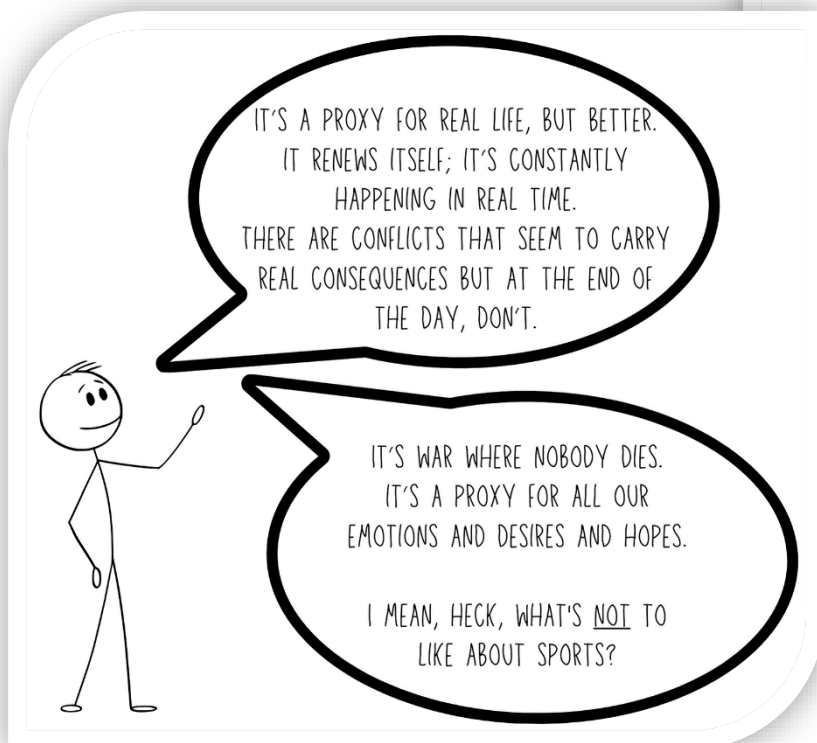
Individualistic (Western) cultures vs. collectivist (Eastern) cultures: How does fandom change?

Is fandom something that people grow out of?

Do some demographics value fandom more than others?

Stephen Dubner, host of *Freakonomics* podcast, on why we like sports:

Parasocial relationships can impact behavior, including overcoming our optimism bias



How consciously do we choose to become a fan?

Do we ascribe different value to being a fan of an athlete, a celebrity, a fictional character?

Is our allegiance always related to admiration—or can we be a fan of a villain?

Many psychology papers examine the "Celebrity Worship Scale," or "Celebrity Attitude Scale." One version of such scale is presented below:

Entertainment—Social

My friends and I like to discuss what my favorite celebrity has done.
One of the main reasons I maintain an interest in my favorite celebrity is that doing so gives me a temporary escape from life's problems.
I enjoy watching, reading, or listening to my favorite celebrity because it means a good time.
I love to talk with others who admire my favorite celebrity.
When something bad happens to my favorite celebrity I feel like it happened to me.
Learning the life story of my favorite celebrity is a lot of fun.
It is enjoyable just to be with others who like my favorite celebrity.
When my favorite celebrity fails or loses at something I feel like a failure myself.
I like watching and hearing about my favorite celebrity when I am in a large group of people.
Keeping up with news about my favorite celebrity is an entertaining pastime.

Intense—Personal

If I were to meet my favorite celebrity in person, he/she would already somehow know that I am his/her biggest fan.
I share with my favorite celebrity a special bond that cannot be described in words.
I am obsessed by details of my favorite celebrity's life.
When something good happens to my favorite celebrity I feel like it happened to me.
I have pictures and/or souvenirs of my favorite celebrity, which I always keep, in exactly the same place.
The successes of my favorite celebrity are my successes also.
I consider my favorite celebrity to be my soul mate.
I have frequent thoughts about my favorite celebrity, even when I don't want to.
When my favorite celebrity dies (or died) I will feel (or I felt) like dying too.

Borderline—Pathological

I often feel compelled to learn the personal habits of my favorite celebrity.
If I was lucky enough to meet my favorite celebrity, and he/she asked me to do something illegal as a favor, I would probably do it.
If someone gave me several thousand dollars to do with as I please, I would consider spending it on a personal possession (like a napkin or paper plate) once used by my favorite celebrity.