

# The Complicated Relationship Between A **Creator** and Their **Fans**

Toxic internet fans are anything but rare in this day and age. Chances are even the words “toxic fans” or “toxic fandoms” is enough to make one sigh. Although they were around for much longer than just the past few years, it seems like the presence and even normalization of unhealthy and obsessive fan behavior has grown tremendously. Creatives who make or are involved with projects that gain heavy traction often become swallowed by the large, looming horror of fans that take things much too far. Today, it feels like this issue has become a little too outdated to still be a problem. The issue of toxic fan behavior is one that should be addressed as it is incredibly harmful for both creators and their fans. With the resources and self-awareness of social media today, it may even be quite plausible to try and make some significant changes,

First things first: what makes fan behavior “toxic”? Of course, being passionate about something you love, whether it be a show, movie or any kind of media, is not in itself a bad thing. Rewatching your favorite show ten times will not hurt anyone (if not you). What turns this love for a creation into something unhealthy is when obsession and entitlement become factors in how a person enjoys things as a fan. Parasocial relationships, or one-sided relationships, play a large role in toxic fan behavior. As Veronica Espinal defines it in her article for Envimedia titled “Parasocial Relationships In K-POP: Emotional Support Capitalism”, “Parasocial interactions are a phenomenon where a one-sided relationship is formed when a person extends emotional energy, interest and time, towards media personalities, despite the personality being unaware of the other’s existence”. By definition, any fan-to-creator relationship would fall under this category, since it could take the form of “fanart, to fan-hosted events — such as cup sleeve —

for their favorite celebrity” (Espinal). This in itself is not unhealthy, however it is when the relationship becomes all too real for the consumer to the point of obsession that it can become harmful. Personal livestreams, events where fans can go up and even hold hands with their favorite celebrity and more all provide

opportunities for a fan to overstep their boundaries as a fan. That is not to say that this is not the fan’s fault, but there is a reason as to why the obsessive nature of K-pop fandom has become so prominent that there is even a term for



Hyungwon of K-pop group Monsta X interacting with a fan at an event

such crazed fans: sasaengs, or fans who “[seek]

out idols in their dorms, mobbing them in airports, or stalking them during official and unofficial schedules” (Espinal). Here, where it puts the creator and/or the fan at risk, is where this parasocial relationship can be considered dangerous and therefore toxic.

The entitled aspect of fandoms often leads to fans feeling as though they are owed something from creatives or creators, which can result in unreasonable attacks or demands. Examples of this entitlement at play are referenced in Episode 77 of Elizabeth Minkel and Flourish Klink’s podcast *Fansplaining*, such as the infamous Kelly Marie Tran situation in which she was harassed for her role in a Star Wars movie in 2018 that got so severe that she withdrew heavily from social media and even a reprising role in a later film (*Sharf*). In no scenario would a fan of a franchise have the right to harass an actor simply because they do not like the character, however this type of entitlement feeds into unreasonable behavior and even crowds up entitled

fans that make it harder to shake. Of course, it would seem like it would be easy just to tell people to stop or to take public figures such as Kelly Marie Tran off of social media as a means



Kelly Marie Tran as Rose Tico in *The Rise of Skywalker*

of protection. However, interaction with obsessive fans is not that easy. As Klink puts it, “I mean, obviously it’s easy to say ‘Don’t harass Kelly Marie Tran on Instagram, just don’t do it, folks!’ Which, I

mean, don’t do it, I support this

statement. But I think that also this has gotten tied up into a conversation... about the rights of creators to not have people dictate to them what they should create, et cetera, et cetera”. As an actress playing a role for a massive franchise such as Star Wars, ignoring the harassment is nearly impossible since these attitudes are taken as feedback towards the film and affect Tran’s work just as much as her mental health.

Entitlement does not just take the form of direct harassment either. Another example of your everyday complaint getting a little out of hand was the recent falling out *Genshin Impact* had with its fans over anniversary rewards. *Genshin Impact*, a popular role-playing style action game, has recently celebrated its one year anniversary (Young) and with many games that do successfully, the game company Mihoyo rewarded its players for all the love and support the game received this past year. The company had given each player in-game currency and provided many events the players could partake in to celebrate. However, this did not make

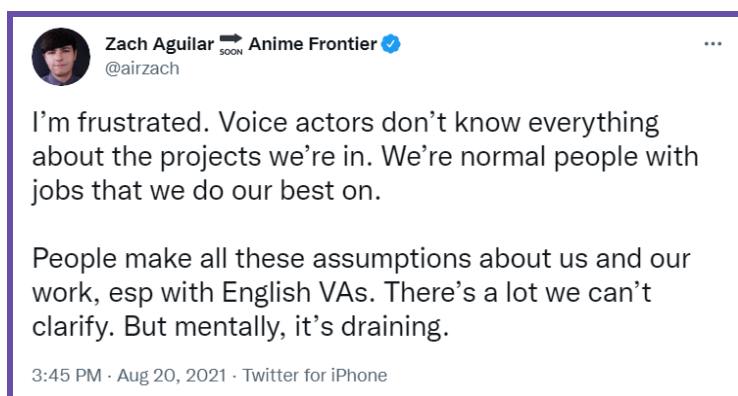
many fans happy. Soon after these anniversary rewards were released, “*Genshin Impact*'s Google Play shop rating has dropped from over four and a half stars to under three” with “at least 70,000 negative ratings have been submitted” after the initial launch of the rewards (Young). Not only was this review bombing directed towards the game itself, but fans also attempted bombing apps such as “Google Classroom, League of Legends: Wild Rift, and other popular mobile games not developed by Mihoyo” (Alford). Unreasonably attacking other apps while also ruining the rates for the fandom’s own game risks the reputation of multiple games and applications, each with their own company and teams, all because a few fans wanted to throw a tantrum over anniversary rewards. Complaining about components that make you unhappy in a game is not bad and it is even encouraged that a company should listen to what its consumers have to say. However, this instance is not how you inform a game company of your grievances. This is how a fanbase harms the main source of their beloved content.



Image of *Genshin Impact* characters taken from Mihoyo

Okay, now that you know what toxic fandoms are, why is this an issue that must be addressed? Toxic fan behavior is not just something annoying that you can block on social media when you do not want to hear from it anymore. It actively hurts creators. In an age where basically everything and everyone has a face on a social media platform, creators are at the mercy of anyone who can send a tweet or direct message. Under the performative guise that many creators put on for their job, anything from acting to streaming a video game, at the end of the day, everyone is human. Surely no one expects you to be able to emotionally handle millions of harassing tweets, right? The same goes for these creators that make the things we love.

Voice actor Zach Aguilar, who voices in a lot of mainstream media such as games, anime and shows, spoke up about the harassment voice actors get on Twitter earlier this year, tweeting that “I’m frustrated. Voice actors don’t know



Zach Aguilar's tweet from earlier this year

everything about the projects we’re in. We’re normal people with jobs that we do our best on”.

Many of the issues and examples brought up earlier are infamous incidents from past years, however this is still an ongoing issue. As Aguilar elaborates, “To clarify.. People have been relating this to only one thing, but this is about the YEARS of hate that I and other actors have seen as English VAs. It’s not a recent issue that really drives me to say this, but it’s more the buildup of things we’ve mentally had to deal with”. This behavior was never okay to begin with but the fact that we have so much commentary and calls to attention over the past years makes the scale of this issue overwhelmingly large. The numerous retweets and add-ons from other

voice acting colleagues such as Sarah Miller-Crews, Alejandro Saab and many others display an almost general agreement that this kind of behavior is concerningly commonplace. If the issue has come to hurt so many to the extent where it is almost universally understood between colleagues and co-workers, it is most certainly an issue big enough to address.

Another reason as to why this issue is one that is worthy of our attention is the effects that unhealthy parasocial relationships have on the fans. As Annette Choi puts it in her article "The Parasocial Phenomenon" for PBS, "Though parasocial relationships are not 'real' in that the people involved do not actually know or interact face-to-face with each other, the psychological effects of the relationships can be genuine". The example Choi alludes to in her article is a viewer of Youtuber Bunny Meyer, the viewer feeling as though "their relationship is effortless and real—or at least, it feels that way. 'It's comforting and easy because you don't have to try,'" despite never having met this person outside of a screen. There are benefits that come with these parasocial relationships, such as avoiding the fear of rejection or discomfort that come with real life relationships (Choi). However, there is also a downside. Relationships like these often lead to the individual becoming disconnected from being able to actually socialize, as in many cases this unnatural and sometimes unhealthy form of interaction becomes almost desensitizing. Especially in our digital age and with the ongoing results of the Covid-19 virus keeping many of us in quarantine with nothing but our screens, we have never been so deeply connected to media. Which makes this issue all the more potent. Now, more than ever, it is important to make the distinction between reality and fiction. Never has it been easier for individuals to fall into an unhealthy cycle of finding joy, not through connecting and socializing with someone else, but

imagining it all with someone that can never reciprocate those feelings. As discussed earlier with how the K-pop industry thrives on obsessive parasocial dynamics, these parasocial relationships, although usually normal, have a high chance of becoming unhealthy depending on the environment.



Images taken from another Bunny Meyer unboxing video

Of course, there are reasons this issue has not been addressed head on yet and why some may not even consider it an issue. It's too normal. One could argue that this issue is not worth addressing because it is simply a part of the culture of consuming media that could be fixed with the hit of a button and the closing of a tab. While that statement is true, that does not mean this issue is not worth addressing. Simply ignoring this kind of toxicity may make it seem like it is gone but that is only true in the sense that it no longer bothers you. Blocking and ignoring does not affect the sheer volume and consistency of the harassment creators get all the time. Deeming it to be "normal" by any stretch neglects the mental health of so many creators. A large component to why this issue is still so potent is because people act as if harassment was the norm, both fans and creators. However, just as I have grown to be much more aware of this issue



compared to the generation before me because of the vast expanse of social media, so too will generations after me. Particularly in today's age, the reach social media has is astounding and it would be a shame not to use the connectivity and education we have today to approach the issue at its source, as most of toxic fan behavior stems from online activity. Ceasing the spread of unhealthy behaviors and educating on a platform with an international reach such as Instagram or Twitter may not get rid of toxic fanbases entirely. But it is a step in the right direction.

Everyone has their favorites and everyone is a fan of something. It is not only important that we respect and care for who makes the things we love but we do so genuinely. In a time where the digital space allows us to connect to nearly everyone and anyone, it is about time we use that to our advantage. The issue itself has gone on much too long and in a time where people are more prone to toxic fan behavior, it is crucial that we begin directly addressing it. Whether it be ourselves or an awareness of others, it is important that we begin to show care not just for what we love but the people behind it as well.

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PBS.org is a largely reliable source for news and science, the author Anette Choi being an example of their credibility. She has been awarded multiple awards for her scientific articles (UC Berkeley Master's Fellowship, Dean's Merit Scholarship, Jonathan Rodgers Fellow, 2016 Forbes Under 30 Summit Scholarship, Elma Lewis Scholarship) and is also a part of multiple associations (Asian American Journalists Association, National Association of Science Writers, UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism Equity and Inclusion Strategic Planning Committee). The intended audience are those who happen upon the article and those who are well versed in spaces such as social media and platforms such as Youtube which provide more personal connections with content creators. PBS Nova's website is based particularly on science, which means that the articles published there also have an intended audience of researchers or

people with an interest for science. The point of view of this article is a scientific/non-opinionated one as the article is solely trying to educate and not trying to persuade its readers. Although the article was published in 2017, many of the topics mentioned are still relevant today and the science of parasocial science that was brought up in the article still applies to fandoms that overstep their boundaries today. Parasocial relationships are one of the, if not, biggest aspects to unhealthy fan to creator relationships. When fans become too comfortable or too entitled with the creator of the content they are consuming, it creates an environment where the creator is nearly dehumanized and treated with disrespect and may even have their safety threatened.

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Minkel, Elizabeth, and Flourish Klink. "Episode 77: The Truth About Toxic Fandom." *Fansplaining*, 2018, <https://www.fansplaining.com>. Accessed 7 Nov. 2021.

Elizabeth Minkel has written and edited fandom-related articles for *New Statesman*, *The Millions*, *The Guardian*, and *The New Yorker*. Her co-host is well involved in fandoms themselves with writing (fanfiction) and other collaborative fandom related projects. The dialogue between these two is not one by those outside of the issue that do not understand it and are making surface level observations. They experience first hand unhealthy fan dynamics and have

experience in detailing these kinds of things. Their podcast (Fansplaining) is entirely dedicated to the topic of fandoms of content. The intended audience here is anyone who is unfamiliar with this kind of fandom behavior (as this episode works well as a starting point). It also provides an interesting dialogue for more experienced listeners (who are more aware of unhealthy fan activity) to think about. The point of view of the narrators of this podcast is of fans who are familiar with toxicity who are having a casual dialogue about the issue. This episode was recorded and published in 2018, which is not only fairly recent but it touches on some of the more infamous incidents of fandom toxicity (ex: Marie Tran's harassment after her involvement in the Star Wars franchise). The dialogue in this podcast episode serves as a good general explanation to what exactly toxic fandom communities are. The term "toxic" gets thrown around a lot in present-day and this episode does a great job of clarifying and providing examples of these fandoms. It is also important to get multiple perspectives of this issue and since the creators are well versed in this topic, there is some credibility to their dialogue.

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