

The Concerns About Parasocial Relationships with Internet Celebrities: Why Are They Raised?

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It is the year 2021 now, and we all have YouTubers that we follow. It has become something akin to following actors or pop musicians. Indeed, even if we do not consider them actual celebrities, YouTubers are definitely a part of the mainstream now, and they definitely do possess the level of fame associated with the mainstream. The fame might be beneficial to YouTubers, or at the very least, that is what they think may be the case, but it is a well-known fact that the relationships of regular people with famous people are often very problematic. This point might seem irrelevant to mention now since it is obvious in the context of celebrities, and YouTube celebrities are no different in this regard than actual celebrities. This assumption is correct, but it is important to draw a line between actual celebrities and online celebrities. In fact, we have been making the distinction all along when we split celebrities into "actual" celebrities and "the others". But what does this distinction actually mean?

"Actual" in this context refers to the "old world" celebrities, if you will. In particular, we use it to mean people like actors, footballers, comedians, etc. The traditional type of famous person. On the other hand, we now have internet celebs. We have been talking about YouTubers as an example, mainly because they are the most prominent element of this new group, but Twitter and Instagram influencers are situated in a very similar position to them as well. Now the group looks to get even bigger as the advent of TikTok has created a new horde of these kinds of celebrities. But how do the new celebs differ from the old? Well, the main difference, and the one that is most relevant to our discussion, is how they seem to be "closer" to us. Think about it. You most likely feel that you live in a different world from the old type of celebrities, but the new people seem to be in a closer realm. The internet explains one part of this. In older days, it was pretty much impossible to reach any kind of celebrity, now they all have Instagram pages, old or new. Times have changed, but the reputation of the old celebrities remained, yet there is no such reputation for new celebs. After all, if someone got famous by posting on Instagram, it is apparent that you can reach them by commenting on their posts. One other factor is the difference in their content, most internet celebrities at least partly dabble in "lifestyle" content and share their daily lives. Even if they do not produce that type of content, most influencers are forced to create daily content in order to keep up with the speed of the internet. In addition, they are more "ingroup" with their fans. TV show creators and TV show consumers are different groups of people, but YouTubers and YouTube consumers are both YouTube users.

"How exactly does all this matter?" you might be asking. Well, it matters in the context of parasocial relationships. The term was coined by Richard Wohl and Donald Horton in the fifties to describe relationships between mass media personalities and their fans. [\(1\)](#) The gist of the theory is that the fans of such people gain a sense of friendship with the celebrities through regular exposure via mass media, but of course, the celebrity is unaware of such a relationship. In fact, the relationship is not even with the celebrity themselves, but the

persona they project in their performances. It is not hard to see how this applies to internet celebrities on a more substantial level. Their content is usually more frequent, so the regular exposure aspect is boosted. They are more likely to make, say, daily vlogs, so you think you know their daily lives, and their community interaction is higher compared to old-type celebrities. All of these lead to a more familiar, more "common" feeling being associated with internet celebs, and that is dangerous. Because even if they do not intend to have a different persona on camera, it is unavoidable. They know they are being filmed, so they are in a "performance" mindset. It is impossible for you to discern their true personalities from their content. We are going to move on to the dangers of this type of relationship, but first, let us explore some other danger factors.

Firstly, all celebrities have fame and money and a following; internet people are no exception. I do not think that it is necessary for us to discuss how that grants people an edge in their relationships, but one example would be how celebrities can weaponize their fan bases to harass certain people they do not like or have had a clash with. Secondly, there is an online aspect to all this, which makes it easier for the interactions to be archived. Indeed, if you are, for example, chatting with someone on Twitter through direct messages, all logs of your conversation will be saved. It is also very easy for these records to be altered, as they are digital. Lastly, the internet changes topics quickly. Very quickly. If you are accused of something by a celebrity, the next week their new video will be the talk, but your reputation will forever be tainted.

Because of all these factors, it is dangerous to get involved with internet celebrities. Now let us combine all that with the strong parasocial relationships between celebs and their fans, and let us see the heart of the problem. When an internet celebrity gets in contact with one of their fans, the fan is often unaware of their true personality, and they are often too late to pull out when they see the true person inside because of the celebrity's power. Even if they are skeptical of the celebrity, and even if the celebrity starts the conversation themselves, they can often distort the context of the conversation and use their fan base to their benefit in order to hurt a person of lesser fame. But that is all stuff that happens out of the relationship. The actual dynamics of the relationship are very distorted as well.

Often, because of the aforementioned reasons, the influencer leads the relationship from a place of power. Because of this, many concerns about grooming have been raised, even when the other person is an adult. It is akin to being hit on by your manager and not being able to do anything because you might lose your job. The grooming concerns are even more justified because many of these people have had a history of grooming underage people, read, children. Most recently, Dan Avidan of the GameGrumps has been accused of grooming an underage girl. [\(2\)](#) And then there is James Charles, who has built an entire career out of hitting on underaged boys and then profiting from the ensuing drama.

Speaking of James Charles, we should get into the matter of how these people repent for their sins. They do not. They receive criticism for a while, and then make an apology video, and then profit off of that as well. It has even become something of a culture for YouTubers to make pointless apology videos. They usually offer no actual content but are filled with sensationalized reactions and engineered words to ensure the maximum inflow of new subscribers, as well as to limit the loss of current ones. We will just look at two YouTube channels to see the prominence of this. These are Shane Dawson and James Charles'

YouTube channels. Searching for "apology" on these channels yields three apology videos within the first five results. [\(3\)](#) [\(4\)](#) And that is not even counting the deleted videos. It truly is a testament to how easily these people can get away from trouble.

At the end of the day, we cannot do much about these people because the nature of the internet means that the transgressions committed will be quickly forgotten, and the celebrities involved will often be better off for it. Still, raising more awareness of the issue is better than nothing. It allows people to be prepared, and more and more people are speaking up against the abuse they have received from internet personalities. If the matter comes out more to the attention of the media, people typically not very involved with these issues will also be exerting their influence. In the meantime, keep speaking up and be wary of internet celebrities.