

Obsessed with Taylor Swift? There's a line fans should not cross

There is a difference between being a loyal supporter and the obsessives who feel they should have a say in their idol's lives.

David Tan

The relationship between a fan and his hero, between you and the movie star or sporting icon you worship should be a straightforward one. Heroes are inspiring and you aspire to be like them. If only it were that simple.

Two issues have given this relationship a twist. One is that by entering the commercial arena, pushing and endorsing products and services, celebrities have been ramping up their "personal connection" with fans. Related to this, fans think they know their idols – whom they largely see on screen – far better than they really do, become possessive about them, and even think they have a right to dictate how their heroes should lead their lives.

This is a slippery slope, but it can be negotiated. It starts with a simple premise: Celebrity sells. Singer Taylor Swift endorses Diet Coke. Actress Emma Stone fronts Louis Vuitton. Tennis star Roger Federer partners with Rolex. Badminton player Loh Kean Yew touts Grab, and the list goes on... Using a celebrity to advertise a product often gets their fans to want that merchandise too.

This is commonly called the "positive halo effect" within branding and marketing research. In buying a product associated with a celebrity, the consumer can buy into some of the glamour, self-indulgence and decadence of the charmed life of a movie star or into the athleticism and success of a sporting icon.

In other words, celebrities thrust themselves into the limelight, for commercial reasons in some cases. In show business, for example, a performer's fans – such as Swift's millions of

Swifties – are a measure of her success.

But the downside of fame is the public expectation. Cultural studies scholar Chris Rojek has written about the presumed intimacy which he terms "para-social relationships" that the fans and the public establish with their celebrity heroes.

Social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok not only allow celebrities to promote products and services, but they also enable celebrities to provide their fans a glimpse into their personal lives.

No wonder that fans feel like they have a personal connection to their idols or share an emotional friendship bond – even though such relationships extend only one way. Fans also believe they know all about their idols and form strong opinions about how they should behave or whom they should be dating.

While humans are biologically predisposed to forming attachments to familiar others, when the familiar other is a celebrity, it can be difficult for some to make the distinction between someone known in real life on a daily basis and someone known through the media or social media.

In more extreme scenarios, such para-social relationships can be obsessive and dysfunctional, and can develop into erotomania. In our interactions with celebrities, we need to constantly be aware of the divide between the real and the imaginary.

HEROES CAN INSPIRE US

We all grow up with our role models and heroes, perhaps beginning with our parents, and dream of becoming more like them.

It is evident that sporting celebrities can wield immense

power in influencing people's attitudes, choices and behaviours. For example, Federer and David Beckham are not only iconic athletes in themselves, but they are also emblematic of tennis and soccer.

More recently, with his stunning victory at the BWF World Championships in 2021, Loh has come to embody badminton in Singapore and possibly become a role model for young children and teenagers.

The perseverance of such athletes can inspire future generations. Olympic gold medalist Joseph Schooling once said: "One of the stories my parents enjoy recounting is one when we were on a family holiday and I woke them up at 4am to get them to take me training, which started at 5am. I was very dedicated to my training and I would not skip it even while on holiday."

Studies have shown that athletes can have a significant impact on the psyche, mentality, determination and perseverance levels of young children and teenagers. They can also mobilise fan support for good causes and charity.

But the higher the bar these champions set, the greater the expectations their fans have of them. The public, perhaps unfairly, use their past achievements to predict future wins. This often ends badly.

Fans can feel emotionally invested and perceive themselves to be a part of the lives of these athletes: They rejoice with every triumph and despair with every defeat. And when things go wrong, they feel betrayed.

When Beckham received a red card during England's match against Argentina in the 1998 World Cup, public outrage erupted and he even received death threats.

FANS CAN HELP OR HURT THEIR IDOLS

The love and obsession that fans lavish on their heroes can cut both ways.



Celebrities thrust themselves into the limelight, for commercial reasons in some cases. In show business, for example, the millions of fans of Taylor Swift (right) are a measure of her success, while David Beckham (top left) and Loh Kean Yew (top right) are emblematic of soccer and badminton in Singapore, respectively. PHOTOS: ST, REUTERS, AFP

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Fans of Korean pop phenomenon BTS, known as Army, have managed to successfully establish a symbiotic para-social relationship with their idols.

Army was reported to have over 40 million members in 2020, and has an unrivalled level of organisation. It is known to protect BTS from being mobbed at airports by forming a barricade for their safe passage through the terminal, defending the group online against misinterpreted comments,

malicious gossip or racial biases. Its mantra is "BTS & Army Protect Each Other". There is also One In An Army, a transnational BTS fan collective that collaborates with non-profit organisations worldwide. It encourages micro-donations, and its first campaign, launched in April 2018, helped bring medical care

A fan on the opening night of the concert movie Taylor Swift: The Eras Tour, in New York City in October. Things can spiral out of control when fans can't distinguish fantasy from reality, says the writer. PHOTO: AFP

to Syrians.

In her 30-year career in show business, Kit Chan has grown close to some of her fans at the Kit Cat Club, who know about her love for food and often buy her snacks from all around the world.

Chan revealed that some of the oldest fans, who have been with her from the start, sometimes bring their other half to fan meets to get her "approval" of them. She said: "It is a very different kind of relationship. It is warm and familiar, and yet there is a boundary that is respected on both sides. It takes a lot of maturity to sustain such a relationship."

And then there's the dark side. Things can spiral out of control when fans can't distinguish fantasy from reality. Last year in India, it was reported that more and more students needed intervention from psychologists due to their addiction to BTS, with schools hiring full-time

professionals to attend to the mental health of their students.

More extreme behaviour includes cyber bullying and stalking.

In 2019, K-pop singer Goo Hara was subjected to vicious attacks online about her relationships with men, and killed herself, leaving behind a note saying she was despairing about her life. Many pop music celebrities, such as Ariana Grande, Justin Bieber and Swift, had to deal with stalkers who had invaded their homes and even sent death threats when their proclamations of love went unrequited.

IS THERE A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP?

The short answer is yes. We do need our heroes and idols.

Adolescents and teenagers often view athletes as the most heroic celebrities. As adults, they will continue to idolise sports celebrities more intensely than other celebrities, and this hero worship can manifest itself in acts such as collecting idol-related memorabilia or trying to meet the athlete.

Some even try to emulate their idols by putting in extra hours of training to be like Schooling. Others let their fandom follow a somewhat easier route – queuing up for hours for tickets to Jacky Cheung's or Swift's concerts, or taking more Grab rides because of advertisements featuring Loh.

One just needs to be aware that our heroes are really neither real friends nor family.

A letter in the Forum page of *The Straits Times* on Oct 25, suggesting that Loh should have a foreign coach, sparked a heated discussion over dinner with a few of my friends that night.

One said: "He should seriously change coaches; maybe engage someone like Lin Dan or Taufik Hidayat."

Another responded: "Do you really think winning an Olympic medal means you will be a good coach? Did you forget that it was his current coach who got him to world champion status?"

A third, obviously a fan, chimed in: "It doesn't matter. I will buy whatever he endorses!" And so the debate raged on, as if my dinner companions are acquainted with Loh as a personal friend or have the insights into his training process and his relationship with his coach.

It is inevitable that the more famous a celebrity is, the more lucrative will be the commercial endorsement opportunities. But with fame comes a price – compulsive behaviours, irrational obsessions and a presumed right to have a say in the celebrity's career and personal life.

As I told my friends at dinner: "Chill! You don't know him, and you don't own him. Mind your own business."

David Tan is an entertainment law professor at the National University of Singapore, and has published *The Commercial Appropriation Of Fame* (2017), a book that analyses the laws regulating production, circulation and consumption of fame.