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# Parasocial Engagement for Musicians and Artists: A Systemic Review of Theoretical Foundations with Applications

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## Abstract

This study presents a systemic review of evidence-based engagement research and develops a best practices model for the online engagement of musical artists or entertainers. Findings show that online engagement is best maximized for artists and entertainers by creating online postings that contain artist authenticity, intimacy, insider commentary, and a quick response time to posts. An applied model or application is presented as best practices for online engagement, as well as the tools for building a long-term fan community.

Keywords: online engagement, artist engagement, online fan base, parasocial engagement, music industry, social media

## Introduction

Social media is playing a fundamental role in creating both disruption and opportunity in the music entertainment industry. For most artists, a growing emphasis is being made to engage fans and build fan communities through online engagement (Evans 2015). The question then arises: what are the foundational variables of online engagement? What elements are shown to be the most effective, or have the best possibilities to build communities of like-minded fans? This systemic review summarizes previous theoretical foundations and derives a broader application for online engagement based on prior research—rather than anecdotal online evidence. The traditional fan-artist relationship has undergone a drastic change through social media. The ability to “engage” from person-to-person has transformed the performer-audience relationship from a static unidirectional relationship to an iterative social online relationship. This transformational change challenges the strategies that previously fueled localized, regional, and national success of an artist through traditional promotion and marketing by record labels. These distinctive competen-

cies of the record company, while still important, are now moving toward shorter life cycles based on online promotion and engagement through what is now called parasocial relationships (Christensen, Anthony, and Ross 2004; Hitt, Keats, and DeMarie 1998).

## Parasocial Relationships

Early parasocial behavior was defined as a one-way relationship that consumers of media develop with media personas over time (Horton and Wohl 1956). Parasocial interaction was further defined as imaginary social relationships (Perse 1989) that mirror face-to-face relationships (Rubin and Step 2000, Schramm and Wirth 2010). Essentially, this one-way communication between fans and media personalities replicate social interactions. The relationship is developed through message cues and content that becomes somewhat pseudo-intimate to audience members (Rubin and McHugh 1987, Rubin and Step 2000). This process involves identifying with social cues created by lyrics, onstage banter, or online messaging that cohesively connects the artist with the fan (Auter and Palmgreen 2000, Kassing and Sanderson 2009). Online users relate and identify to those with similar interests, values, and personality constructs as themselves—developing an affinity or identification with the celebrity persona and fan community where the fans believe they “know” the artist or each other in the community (Auter and Palmgreen 2000). Therefore, although communication might be perceived as passive (observational) or active (communicating/participating in the online community), the process is essentially two-sided and does resemble off-line social relationships.

## Types of Users

Kozinets (1999) posited that online relationships were based on two non-independent factors: 1) the relationship a person has with a consumption activity (level of interest), and 2) the intensity of relationships with other members of the online community (friends or fans). Kozinets proposed a typology of four online community types: *devotees*, *insiders*, *tourists*, and *minglers*. *Devotees* are active members (fans) who have a strong interest in the online activity, but have few social ties to other members. *Insiders* have strong personal interest in an artist or activity and have strong social ties to the community members, and *tourists* lack strong ties with the activity, the artist, or online community. Finally, *minglers* have strong social ties with other members, but little interest in the activity/art-

ist being discussed. This then defines *devotees/insiders* as artist-centered, *minglers* as group- or fan base-centered, and *tourists* as not engaged to the artist or group. While this classification serves as more of a labeling typology, it might be studied in the future for communication content that is idealized to serve each grouping.

## Social Theory

Cole and Leets (1999) provided an early overview of Berger's (1986) three social development theories in order to provide a framework for on-line communities. First, *uncertainty reduction theory* links the increase of engagement relationships to the increased certainty of behavior—or uncertainty reduction. As behavioral uncertainty decreases, liking increases, inferring that the predictability of behavior increases likeability. Second, the same *personal construct theory* outlines that we develop this sense of “knowing” by applying our interpersonal construct systems to the parasocial context (e.g., Perse and Rubin 1989). This means our values, likes, or feelings are gleaned through verbal and nonverbal cues that are the expression of our personal values. Third, *social exchange theory*, similar to earlier work by Homan (1961), describes a process whereas the connection between intimacy and relationship importance is linked to a *cost and reward* assessment. The reward (expectation of positive reinforcement) is balanced against the negative value or negative reinforcement/non predictability. Thus, the higher the expected reward, the higher the parasocial engagement. Conversely, high cost, or negative non-reinforcing interactivity generates low parasocial engagement.

## Repetition/Time of Engagement

In an early work, Horton and Wohl (1956) defined the “illusion” of face-to-face relationships as a process of *repeated interaction* that developed through exposure to repeated messaging, commentary, observation, and even lyrics. The more this repeated interaction occurs, the more the perception is developed that the celebrity is addressing the fan with private and personal communication—which creates a response between the artist and fan that is both intimate and personal. Following this same repetition of interaction, Kozinets (1999) noted that the more *time* internet users spend online, the more they will gravitate towards online groups, fan bases, or friends of like interest. Kozinets (2002) later wrote that as consumers connect online, they become members of groups that become their pri-

mary source of information and social interaction. Additionally, Bagozzi and Dholakia (2002) wrote that the concept of *groups* results from the individual's enhancement of positive anticipated emotions, desires, community, and social identity. Similarly, Chou and Edge (2012) wrote that this approach of similar emotions, desires, and community creates a social identity that may also affect those who may not actively participate in on-line communities, but instead simply unobtrusively read without participating—thus modeling a more traditional one-sided parasocial communication direction based on expectations. This demonstrates that Kozinets' (1999) *tourists* can become engaged as passive online readers as well.

### Expectations and Predictability

Parasocial relationships are based on fan expectations and the predictability of the artist. Ballantine and Martin (2005) wrote that the behavior of online opinion leaders affects the expectations or influence of followers. They also posited that the predictability of behavior strengthens the security and expectations of the online members by what might be called a safe harbor (Ballantine and Martin 2005). Secondly, they also held that expectations were generated as “consumers form ideas and knowledge of a performer or celebrity by applying their own interpersonal constructs to the parasocial circumstance” (Edward et al. 2017; Ballantine and Martin 2005, 199). These interpersonal constructs are generated from the collection of small behaviors and comments that cumulatively create a personality construct that is represented by generalities such as *nice, thoughtful, cool, honest, friendly*, etc. Casaló (2008) found that trust, derived from response predictability and shared values, fostered increased communication. Trust was the fulfillment of expected interaction, honesty-authenticity, and positive affirming interaction. When trust was established, it encouraged participation, increased relationships and loyalty with the community, and increased the promotion by the community to others (Casaló, Flavián, and Guinalíu 2008).

### Intimacy

Earlier, Horton and Wohl (1956) found that repeated interaction creates the illusion of intimacy. Auter (1992) found that both repeated encounters and direct communication with audience members increased engagement intimacy. Bennet (2014) wrote that the breaking of the fourth wall greatly increases intimacy. The “breaking of the fourth wall” occurs

when an artist removes his or her separateness from the audience and allows an audience member to see behind an artist's professional persona or façade as if one is a member of the show or a close friend. This increases the parasociability for three main reasons: 1) breaking the fourth wall increases the awareness of the audience in a more personal way, 2) it lets the audience member know that the person or performance is a fiction and pulls back the curtain for the fan (the fan becomes an insider), and 3) by directly addressing the audience, akin to speaking to the audience in a film or theater, one humanizes oneself to the fans. Bennett (2014) and Masur (2014) furthered this concept by finding that lifting the veil creates an *unfiltered* sense of being spoken to directly—evoking a strong sense of intimacy. For example, this intimacy can be created by sharing life's daily activity, sharing *behind the scene* concerns, talking about how things went wrong, asking for advice, or any other commentary that creates a sense of trust, closeness, or authenticity. Bennett called these *confessional texts* a tool that can create a sense of closeness that removes the gap between the artist and the fan that was created by the older hierarchies of mass media.

## Social Comparisons

There is a similarity between parasocial and typical offline social relationships. Perse and Rubin (1989) found that parasocial interactions resemble interpersonal friendships in three ways. First, parasocial relationships (like friendships) are voluntary and contain a personal focus—the more engaged one is personally—the stronger the friendship. Second, both parasocial and offline relationships provide companionship that when mutually reinforcing strengthens the relationship. Finally, mutual social attraction can only exist with mutually shared values and interests. Interestingly, even though online engagement is based on vicarious interaction, online users feel that they somehow know and understand the online persona with the same intimacy as their non-online friends. Perse and Rubin (1989) describe this as a linear progression whereas increased interaction and personal self-disclosure by the online user leads to a reduction of uncertainty, creating a deeper perceived intimacy. This reduction of uncertainty, or predictability of content, helps “individuals gain a sense of identity, predictability and stability; of purpose; and of meaning, belonging, security and self-worth” (Cohen 2004, 679). Online communities therefore provide the platform, or virtual community, where members benefit from the social relationships that build social support and reduce

isolation. Thus, when a safe online harbor is created that allows active participation, the stronger the sense of community. Social media then offers the opportunity to have direct, authentic, and intimate interaction with fans at a level above normal live event interaction or performances. The more artists can generate intimate access to their professional and personal lives, the greater the affinity or relationships a fan will develop towards a performer or online persona.

## Recent Models – Engagement

Recent works have further quantified the process of engagement. Taylor and Kent (2014) wrote that, “Engagement is part of a dialogue and through engagement, organizations...can make decisions that create social capital” (384). Johnson (2014) further defined engagement as showing a *commitment* to building a relationship. Labrecque (2014) defined elements most useful to engagement in a study using confirmatory factor analysis with a sample of 185 targeted social media users chosen for their heavy use of social media. The confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) is a statistical model indicating the degree of correlation between variables and how the data fits a predicted model. It reflects a percent of correlation to the fit of a predicted model. “1” would be a perfect fit (rare) and .70 would mean 70% correlation to the predicted fit. The closer to 1 the higher the fit to the overall model. Labrecque found that fans preferred to *communicate directly* with the artist—not professional middlemen (CFA = .83), and that the *speed of response* by artist (.81) was a strong correlation to engagement by fan. This builds upon Song and Zinkhan (2008), who also found that *speed of response*, as well as *contextual content* (relating posts to prior messages) dramatically heightens engagement. Labrecque (2014) went on to note that *openness in content shared* (.83), or using authenticity and honesty, was also a strong engagement factor as well. Bennett (2014) further defined *intimacy* as posting content as if you were speaking to a close friend—sharing personal and intimate stories. What is striking is that the longer this connectivity is active; a *group loyalty* factor (.92) develops that is the highest correlation of all elements (Labrecque 2014). The *group loyalty* reflects the willingness of members to remain in the group, willingness to defend the group, and willingness to share the group with others outside the group. Tsotsou (2015) also defined somewhat detailed relational categories, and similarly used confirmatory factor analysis (cor-

relations within a predicted model) applied to a convenience sample of 320 social media users. Her results are seen in Figure 1.

Tsiotsou's results indicate an alignment with a similar study by Chiu (2015). Online members find attraction with members who reflect their own interests and values. Online community members are like-minded and enjoy predictability of other members. Members seem to enjoy positive engagement and love to encourage others to achieve similar like-minded goals (Chiu et al. 2015). Once "attached" to a group, members participate actively and recommend the same group to other like-minded friends. What is surprising is the level of loyalty to the online group (.65-.75) (Tsiotsou 2015). This indicates that as the celebrity and followers build and reinforce the same values and behaviors, the affinity or connectedness increases over time. Although we intuitively know that we identify with those who have the same qualities as ourselves—celebrities/artists should especially be careful to meet the expectations their audience has of the artist. This market segment identification is best achieved by posting information that *reminds fans of themselves* (.73) and posting information that *exhibits the same qualities/lifestyle/values* of their fan base (.65). As well, online commentary should always *express positive encouragement and care* to fan group members (.70) and *affirm member's opinions, attitudes, and goals* (.63) (Tsiotsou 2015). Watkins (2017), using a confirmatory factor analysis within a sample of 271 participants chosen from a convenience sample from a large university, found that high engagement was more predictable when posts were *attentive to what was said* (.87), reflected a *sense of belonging with their fan base* (.83), and reflected values that were *natural and down-to-earth* to the fan base (.88), which cumulatively led fans to feel that their online activity was *like interacting with a friend* (.81).

## Application from the Literature

Grouping similar values derives an application based on the literature. While other guides available are somewhat intuitive, this application is rooted in research and behavioral theory and can serve as a foundation for further exploration as an evidence-based model—rather than anecdotal. The model is somewhat distilled for simplicity following the concept of Occam's razor, where the complex is best represented by the simplest answer. This application or conceptualization is certainly open to future study, discussion, or analysis. See Figure 2.



## 2015 Tsiotsou Factor Analysis

### Identification with Social Media Members

- Other members remind me of myself (.73)
- I have the same qualities as other members (.65)
- I have the same problems as other members (.75)
- I can identify with other members (.64)
- I enjoy trying to predict what other members will do (.66)

### Interest in Favorite Social Media Members

- I hope the other members accomplish their goals (.63)
- I care what happens to the members (.70)
- I like reading the opinions of the other members (.66)
- I can identify with the attitudes of members (.68)

### Problem Solving Ability of Favorite Social Media Members

- I wish I could handle problems as well as the members (.77)
- I like the way the members handle problems (.65)
- I would like to be more like the members (.69)

### Social Media Group Identification

- I am very attached to the group (.85)
- The friendships I have with the other members mean a lot to me (.76)
- If members planned something, I'd think of it as something "we" rather than something "they" would do (.75)

### Social Media Group Engagement

- I participate in the group because I feel better afterward (.87)
- I participate in the group because I am able to support other members (.89)
- I participate in the group because I am able to reach personal goals (.72)

### Social Media Behavioral Intentions

- I never miss an opportunity to recommend activities from the group to others (.85)
- If my friends and family were to look for a group of people, I would definitely recommend this group (.63)
- I intend to actively participate in activities of this group (.86)

### Social Media Group Loyalty

- I always follow this group online (.75)
- I follow the group in all of my activities (.70)
- I intend to be a member forever (.65)
- I am loyal to the group (.69)

Figure 1. Tsiotsou Factor Analysis (Tsiotsou 2015).

## Herrera Guide to Online Engagement

### 1) Be Predictable

- a) Postings should reinforce and reflect the core values of your audience.<sup>1</sup>
- b) Postings should reflect and reinforce your fans' personality constructs.<sup>2</sup>
- c) Postings should allow your fans to identify with you—you should mirror their values.<sup>3</sup>
- d) Postings should be predictable—unpredictability causes fans to feel unsafe—be consistent.<sup>4</sup>
- e) Remember that all comments have hidden or implied personality cues. Think about how any comment will be interpreted.<sup>5</sup>

### 2) Use Positive Affirming Comments

- a) Build up your fans/encourage their goals.<sup>6</sup>
- b) Be thoughtful and friendly to your fans' posts.
- c) Consistent affirmation of fans (over time) will build trust with your community—trust builds interactivity.<sup>7</sup>

### 3) Be Intimate<sup>8</sup>

- a) Comment as soon as possible to fan comments—speed reflects connection and attention.
- b) Try to be unfiltered—share good and bad—be authentic.
- c) Communicate as if speaking to a close friend—be open.
- d) Allow fans behind the curtain—break the “fourth wall.” Let fans become insiders.
- e) Frequently use specific names of fans—address the fan directly. This boosts connectedness and intimacy.
- f) Reference earlier posts—comment in the context of the conversation.
- g) Do not delegate commentary posts—fans do not like perceived middlemen posting.
- h) Remember that the longer fans stay engaged with your group, the stronger their sense of long-term loyalty becomes.

Figure 2. Guide to Online Engagement, by David Herrera, 2017. (Citations are minimized to enhance readability.)

## Conclusion

Replicating offline social interaction, active online engagement also creates the impression that one is interacting personally and intimately in real time. This aligns with the viewpoint that interactivity is personal, intimate, authentic, and timely. In traditional live or onscreen artist engagement, devices such as camera angles, establishment of eye contact with

the audience/viewers, and directly addressing the audience are tools used to establish contact with an audience. Instead, online engagement relies on social cues reflected by online commentary. In typical “real life” social encounters, repeated interaction increases mutual awareness through a combination of vocal, visual, and physical cues (how we stand, tone of voice, gestures, etc.) However, online engagement is contingent on an impression that a celebrity creates only within the online narrative or response to online users or fans.

### Further Research

The elements of direct online engagement can be considered more nuanced as they are expressed by a fan’s response to narrative or written/read message cues, which are vaguely defined. What are these cues and how can they be defined? This is an area for future research. What and how are informal message cues used to create an overall personality type? What are the best practices for message cues? One thought is that cues may simply include references to cultural institutions that are part of the genre or market segment—what may be called *institutional references*. A simplistic example for message cues for a country artist might include references to Nashville, the Ryman, fishing, NASCAR, rural living, etc. *Behavioral message cues* might include traditional work ethics, love for family, trust for friends, hobbies, types of food consumed, etc. But, assuming artists live and reflect the same values of their genre or market segment, these cues are generally maximized by:

- Affirmation of fans and an authenticity of communication that is predictable,
- Intimacy/Trust: revealing information that one would share to a close friend,
- Breaking the fourth wall: commentary that allows the online fan community to become an “insider” and peek behind the activities of the daily life of an artist, and
- Speed of communication: commenting quickly and linking comments to previous content. In general, treat online participants as you would a close friend.

## Thoughts on Music and Entertainment Usage of the Guide

While the time needed for this type of activity may seem daunting, the removal of “middlemen” (social media companies, managers, etc.) from direct engagement with fan interaction is sorely needed. Artists should receive training, if needed, in these engagement concepts and thus, managers and labels will need to trust that an artist is capable of directly connecting with fans. In the end, this long-term investment will build a fan base that is loyal, long lasting, and that will share with others online.

But, even with this personal interaction—and despite the main thrust of personal connectedness—there is also some room for a targeted content generator. This might be someone who has more technical prowess to create quick tour and studio videos (use a phone and a laptop for editing). This content should be embedded within the system—part of the content in the food chain of marketing. Imagine being on tour with an artist virtually: how engaging would it be to follow video clips from the bus, loading in, soundcheck, bus breakdowns, or even backstage banter? This is likely making managers’ heads explode—but with quick editing, and perhaps minimal approval, most artists would surely build fan relationships and derive career benefits by inserting their own personal commentary. This would go much farther than merely posting performance dates, venues, and “I am looking forward to...” type of postings.

Both artists and artist representatives should make this interactivity systemic—part of the general process. Try to leave online posts to the artist. Managers can have discussions on appropriate content of course, and then partner with a social media content creator (perhaps the road manager, personal assistant, or merchandise manager) who can generate smartphone videos, behind the scene shots, and short ten to thirty second tour or studio interviews that cumulatively create a behind-the-scenes exposure that allows the artist to engage with the fan base. With a systemic content creator in place, the artist will be able to concentrate on creating careful and personal postings that connect with fans. This will increase fan intimacy, reduce any feelings of uncertainty in the fan relationship, and enforce fan social constructs that affirm likeability and connection for online engagement. This will build a long-term relationship that can assist any career. Although there may be some vagaries and questions to be explored, a good foundation will serve as a great base to build long-term online engagement.

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