

# Y/N and OOMFs: Development, Maintenance, and Consequences of Parasocial Relationships on Stan Twitter

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**Abstract** The study examines Stan Twitter users' sense of belonging and their likelihood of creating PSRs as a substitute for real-life connections lost due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A convergent mixed-method design: specifically, the parallel databases variant was used to test the hypothesis and explore research questions. Conducted in January 2022, the study involved online interviews via Zoom with participants from the Philippines. Participants included Stan Twitter users ( $N = 126$ ) and non-Stan Twitter users ( $N = 111$ ), all at least 18 years old. Additionally, qualitative interviews were conducted with Stan Twitter users ( $N = 12$ ) to explore PSRs in depth. Quantitative results ( $t = 0.548$ ;  $p = 0.584$ ) indicate no significant difference in the need to belong between the samples; Pandemic (i.e., period) and generational (i.e., Gen Z) effects are seen as contributors. Qualitative results show that PSRs develop due to fulfillment of belongingness needs and other factors, are maintained through parasocial interactions and fandom activities, and have both negative and positive implications for stans' relationships, fandom behavior, personal growth, and well-being. The findings suggest reinforcing cybersecurity measures and potentially redefining PSRs due to their perceived reciprocation.

**Keywords** Stan Twitter; Belongingness; Fan behavior;  
Parasocial relationships; Parasocial interactions

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## Introduction

Humans have a universal need to form and maintain interpersonal relationships with other people (Baumeister, 2012). Hwang et al. (2020) suggested that people maintain healthy social connections with their loved ones to alleviate loneliness through appropriate means. Such means include dedicating more time and quality interactions with family members as well as utilizing technology to reach out to others. However, the COVID-19 pandemic emerged and limited individuals from having social interactions as protocols, such as staying at home and observing social distancing are strictly implemented (See, 2020); this challenged the previously accepted social gatherings to maintain social interactions or relationships. In turn, they may use parasocial interactions (PSIs) to substitute for the lack of real-life social connections.

PSIs occur when individuals interact one-sidedly with personalities they see on media platforms (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Pornsakulvanich and Tongnok (2022) suggested that people who use social media out of peer influence, for relaxation, and for entertainment are more likely to participate in parasocial interactions. Continuous PSIs may then lead to parasocial relationships (PSRs), defined as one-sided connections that individuals form with people, most commonly with celebrities who are unaware of their existence (Jarzyna, 2021). Streaming platforms serve as an avenue for proliferating fanaticism by providing access to information concerning potential parasocial targets (Blight, 2016); social media may also serve a similar purpose. A famous platform for fans is Stan Twitter, a community within Twitter where people can follow celebrities, official accounts, receive real-time updates, and maintain their PSRs (Malik & Haidar, 2020).

Engaging on Stan Twitter means belonging to a fandom and participating in these fandom activities (Arasa, 2021). Similar to real-life communities and interpersonal relationships, fandoms often operate within a hierarchy (higher following = higher social status) and, thus, mimic the communities that were built through in-person means (Malik & Haidar, 2020). Blight and associates' (2017) study on Stan Twitter showed that expressive information sharing and social interaction were associated with the participants' sense of community. In addition, Smutradontri and Gadavanij (2020) stated that fans can communicate using a shared lexicon in which a certain context can be understood if one is a member of a fandom, further establishing the identity of a fandom. In turn, as the pandemic began, more opportunities for person-to-person interaction became limited, and more opportunities for social media engagement became more accessible. This is evidenced by studies on the pandemic's impact have revealed a dwindling trend on mental health, which, in turn, have inadvertently increased children and adolescents' screen time and social media usage (Choi et al., 2023; Hedderson et al., 2023; Kharel et al., 2022; Onyeaka et al., 2021).

Previous literature has covered belongingness, PSRs, and Stan Twitter, but there are limited studies integrating the three variables. With the Philippines as its locale, Bercero and Abadiano's (2020) grounded theory centered on the Stan Twitter community and how it may be used to connect with fellow stans, specifically fan artists; however, its scope did not include a discussion on the stans' PSRs. Additionally, the study was not in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, there may be a need to explore the topic during this period. As the pandemic increased social media usage, Kim and Song's (2016) findings on the role of celebrity media presence in the development and maintenance of PSRs may provide more opportunities for further research on the implications of media platforms on PSIs and PSRs. In relation, Jarzyna (2021) also suggested that as social media allows direct communication between the fans and the parasocial targets, researchers may need to attempt to redefine PSRs in line with these circumstances.

The study explored parasocial relationships (PSRs) on Stan Twitter, as well as the role of belongingness in affecting the phenomenon and vice versa. The quantitative part of the study sought to identify if there is a significant difference among the belongingness needs of Stan Twitter users and non-Stan Twitter users. On the other hand, the qualitative part of the study seeks to identify the: (1)

drivers of development of PSRs; (2) methods of development and maintenance of PSRs; and (3) the consequences of PSRs on Stan Twitter users' behavior.

With these aims in mind, assumptions based on related literature were made: (1) Stan Twitter users develop parasocial relationships due to a drive to fulfill their belonging needs, which may be significantly higher than that of non-Stan Twitter users. Based on Jarzyna's (2021) findings, individuals with unfulfilled belongingness are more likely to engage in parasocial relationships; (2) Stan Twitter users develop and maintain parasocial relationships by engaging in fandom activities and parasocial interactions with their parasocial targets on Twitter as Bond (2016) indicates that social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, are used to maintain connections and relationships despite the absence of physical interactions; and (3) individuals who engage in parasocial relationships and are also on Stan Twitter may socialize with fellow fans to increase their sense of belonging. By interacting with other fans, people on Stan Twitter feel they belong in a community where they share the same interests. This may lead to more active participation of fans on Stan Twitter to maintain this sense of belongingness.

A descriptive-interpretive approach was utilized to explore the PSRs of individuals in Stan Twitter to determine why and how it is developed and maintained, as well as its influence on the stans' behavior. The qualitative portion of the study may determine whether belongingness is the primary reason for engaging in PSRs, whether constant PSIs may ultimately lead to PSRs, and whether PSRs and Stan Twitter would lead to consequences in the behavior of its constituents.

To confirm whether striving to fulfill belongingness needs contributes to the formation of PSRs, a comparative design was utilized to compare stans and non-stans. The Need To Belong (NTB) theory (1995) suggests that individuals with a high need to belong (high-NTB) might actively seek connections to compensate for a lack of belonging, potentially through PSRs. Horton and Wohl's (1956) Parasocial Interaction Theory describes how such relationships can evolve from repeated PSIs into deeper parasocial attachments. This is supported by recent research, including Degen's (2023) study, indicating that PSRs may serve as a psychological mechanism to fulfill needs for security, validation, and belonging. As supported by Bercero and Abadiano's (2020) study that shows that joining Stan Twitter contributes to an increased sense of belongingness. This suggests that individuals, particularly those involved in communities like Stan Twitter who exhibit higher belonging needs, might form PSRs as a way to cope with these unmet needs. The comparative analysis between stans and non-stans could therefore provide insights into the role of belongingness in the development of PSRs.

The quantitative and qualitative findings converged after the individual collection to provide an in-depth analysis of the PSR phenomenon in Stan Twitter. With this, the study aimed to determine whether an increased urge to fulfill belongingness among Stan Twitter users will lead individuals to engage in PSRs. Their participation in fandom activities on Stan Twitter was then detailed to identify how engagement in the community contributed to the development and maintenance of PSRs, and whether it influenced their belongingness and other aspects of their lives.

## Methods

### Research design

The study utilized a convergent mixed-method design: parallel-databases variant (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017) — a mixed-method design wherein the data are converged after independent durations of gathering. This approach allowed the study to leverage the confinement of the data interpretation of the quantitative design and the flexibility of the qualitative design (Palinkas et al., 2011). A comparative quantitative design was utilized to determine whether Stan Twitter users and non-Stan Twitter users significantly differ in belongingness, and a phenomenological qualitative design to explore PSRs through interviews. Using a single research design alone would not suffice to

explain how belongingness plays a role in PSR development, which warrants using a mixed-method design. The lack of literature regarding PSRs and Stan Twitter, especially in the context of the Philippine fan behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic, asserts the need for a more in-depth investigation through interviews of informants experiencing the phenomenon.

### Participants

In both quantitative and qualitative aspects, the study participants were Filipino citizens, 18-32 years old, and possessing an active Twitter account: either dedicated to specific parasocial targets (Stan Twitter users) or otherwise (non-Stan Twitter users). The inclusion criteria for the qualitative portion included being a Filipino possessing a stan account for at least a year and using said accounts for most (i.e., at least four) days of the week). Those otherwise stated were excluded from the study. Using a personal data sheet, the participants' demographics (i.e., age, gender) in both parts were gathered. The Stan Twitter group was also asked about the number of stan accounts they have, their year(s) of creation, their frequency in checking the said accounts, and their first and current fandom; all variables except the year of creation were omitted from the report. The reported variables are indicated in Tables 1 and 2.

**Table 1** Demographic profile of respondents for quantitative study

Variable	Non-Stan Twitter users (N=111)		Stan Twitter users (N=126)	
	f	pc (%)	f	pc (%)
Age				
18	7	6.31	15	11.90
19	7	6.31	17	13.50
20	9	8.11	15	11.90
21	32	28.83	31	24.60
22	39	35.14	33	26.20
23	10	9.01	7	5.60
24	2	1.80	2	1.60
25	1	0.90	5	4.00
26	2	1.80	1	0.80
28	1	0.90	0	0.00
34	1	0.90	0	0.00
Gender				
Male	28	25.20	5	4.00
Female	75	67.60	106	84.10
Non-binary	4	3.60	8	6.30
Prefer not to say	4	3.60	7	5.60

### Participant recruitment

Through purposive sampling, the criteria stated above were met accordingly. Due to the lack of information on the current population of Stan Twitter, a baseline of 100 samples from each group of interest (Stan Twitter and non-Stan Twitter users) served as the target sample for the quantitative part. Subsequently, interviewees for the qualitative portion of the study were gathered from the pool of respondents who are Stan Twitter users. The sample size for the in-depth interview was 12, complying with Fugard & Potts' (2014) statement that 12 is an efficient sample size for qualitative studies; furthermore, the sample size was utilized to obtain rich data while avoiding redundancy of

information gathered. The recruitment process for the participants was conducted online through Microsoft Forms, posted, and shared on Facebook and Twitter. Overall, the respondents for the quantitative portion (N = 237: stans, N = 126; non-stans, N = 111) and qualitative portion (stans, N = 12). Purposive sampling was done to ensure that the criteria for each population were met.

**Table 2** Demographic profile of the participants for the qualitative portion of the study

	Name	Age	Gender	Stan Twitter account creation
1	BQ	23	Male	2013
2	AM	22	Female	2013 (1 <sup>st</sup> account); 2020 (2 <sup>nd</sup> account)
3	VI	21	Female	2013 (1 <sup>st</sup> account); 2018 (2 <sup>nd</sup> account)
4	FT	22	Female	2009
5	AL	18	Female	2017
6	JC	21	Female	2020
7	MK	19	Female	2020
8	AR	19	Male	2020
9	SS	22	Female	2012 (1 <sup>st</sup> account); 2019 (2 <sup>nd</sup> account)
10	AD	22	Female	2012
11	AV	25	Female	2020
12	SJ	21	Female	2014

### Instruments

*Need to Belong Scale (NTBS).* The NTBS by Leary et al. (2013) is a valid 10-item, open-access scale, with a median alpha of .81 and Cronbach alpha ranging from .78 to .87 across studies (Pickett et al., 2004; Mellor et al., 2008; Leary et al., 2013). Scores may be interpreted as low need-to-belong (low-NTB) or high need-to-belong (high-NTB), depending on the score relative to the median.

*Interview Guide.* Researchers developed an interview guide anchored on the study's objectives and guided by the NTB theory of Baumeister and Leary (1995) and the PSI theory of Horton and Wohl (1956). The semi-structured interview was validated by registered psychometricians, and conducted via Zoom to gather open-ended data on PSRs and belongingness. The questions were made to uncover the reasons why Stan Twitter users develop PSRs, they develop and maintain these PSRs, and the consequences of engaging in PSRs and Stan Twitter, especially in terms of belongingness.

### Researcher description

Only two researchers have a Stan Twitter account and are familiar with its overall dynamics. Since qualitative research is more prone to bias, the researchers laid out all assumptions from previous literature, so as not to influence the data collection procedure. Triangulation, or the qualitative exploration of belongingness, verified and expounded the quantitative data on Stan Twitter users' belongingness needs. Respondent validation or member checking, which reconfirms the participants' statements during the interviews, was also conducted to ensure that only accurate data were analyzed for this study's conclusions (Mabuza et al., 2014).

In terms of the data analysis, the said familiarity with Stan Twitter was beneficial in unearthing the dynamics of Stan Twitter by finding codes and themes that surfaced during the interviews. To ensure that no data contamination was done, the participants gathered were ensured not to be related to the researchers.

### **Data collection**

The quantitative data for the study was gathered by answering an online form with a personal data sheet and the Need to Belong Scale (NTBS) by Leary et al. (2013). The qualitative data, in turn, was gathered through semi-structured interviews, with guides validated by registered psychometricians, conducted via Zoom regarding PSRs and belongingness. Questions such as “Why did you choose to stan your idols?” and “How do you use Stan Twitter to show your support for your idols?” were made to uncover the reasons why Stan Twitter users develop PSRs, how they develop and maintain these PSRs, and the consequences of engaging in PSRs and Stan Twitter, especially in terms of belongingness. After the stated data collection procedures and their interpretation, they were merged in a convergent design to identify how the belongingness of individuals may have affected their PSR development. Subsequently, these interviews were transcribed and stored in their document file to avoid confusion; the participants were assigned code names for de-identification.

After the form, and interview were administered, an informed consent form (oral and written) was administered to the respondents, containing all the necessary terms and conditions that they needed to review and agree to prior to data collection, such as the nature of the study, the risks, benefits, and other implications of their participation. The qualitative portion of the study was conducted through password-encrypted meeting links to ensure the participants’ privacy. Identifying information was also excluded upon transcription.

### **Data analysis**

The qualitative data was analyzed through coding and thematic analysis of the interview transcripts to identify recurring patterns and concepts within the information collected (Clarke & Braun, 2016). The process started with the researchers transcribing the interviewee’s recorded audio on Microsoft Word. Afterward, the data were manually coded so the researchers could break them down into categories representing their general ideas. The repeating themes were also identified to cover significant points highlighting patterns and contradictions within the statements that meet the study objectives.

For the quantitative data, an independent samples t-test was utilized through SPSS Statistics Package 20 to identify whether the respondents’ need to belong significantly differed.

### **Validity, reliability, and methodological integrity**

The NTBS is a valid 10-item, open-access scale, with a median alpha of .81 and Cronbach alpha ranging from .78 to .87 across studies (Pickett et al., 2004; Mellor et al., 2008; Leary et al., 2013) and exhibits correlations with extraversion, agreeableness, neuroticism, emotional reactions to rejection, interpersonal behaviors, and subclinical manifestations of specific personality disorders (Leary et al., 2013). Scores may be interpreted as low need-to-belong (low-NTB) or high need-to-belong (high-NTB), depending on the score relative to the median.

Regarding the qualitative research design, methodological integrity is identified in the data collection and analysis. Before the data collection, literature-based assumptions were laid down for the former to avoid biases. Regarding the sample, 12 participants were interviewed to represent the Stan Twitter community. The interview guide was constructed collectively by the researchers, and was subsequently checked by experts for face and content validity. Face validity describes how a test appears to measure what it intends to measure while content validity refers to the extent to which test measures all facets of a construct (Cohen & Swerdik, 2017). After the data collection, member checking was done by sending the transcripts to the participants; all participants were also met to explain the recurring themes in their respective interviews.

Regarding data analysis, coders were consistently present throughout the process of analysis. Individual coding was done and converged to ensure data triangulation and interrater reliability. The

findings were then presented based on excerpts from the participants' statements and were related to the existing literature for confirmation or disconfirmation.

## Results and discussion

### Qualitative results

Three main themes emerged from the qualitative data: reasons for PSR development, development and maintenance of PSRs, and consequences of PSRs on Stan Twitter users. Five sub-themes were identified from the first main theme: belongingness, idol image, artistry, storytelling, and social influence. Meanwhile, four sub-themes emerged in connection with the development and maintenance of PSR: idol interaction, idol promotion, buy and sell, content creation, and consumption. Finally, four sub-themes were identified in connection to the consequences of PSRs on Stan Twitter users: belongingness, fan behavior, personal growth, and effects on health.

### Reasons for developing PSRs

*Belongingness.* Stan Twitter users engage in PSRs due to discrepancies in real-life relationships. When social interactions are scarce or if real-life relationships are not enough to fulfill fans' need to belong, they may further engage in attempts to communicate with idols. This eventually leads to idealized yet unrequited relationships with the PSR target/s. Fans may be more willing to be disappointed by the lack of reciprocity with their idols than to continue having unsatisfactory face-to-face interactions, as implied by BQ:

It is just that I badly want to communicate with [my idols]... Even if they do not reply, you would still push through because you want a pure and genuine interaction, and that is what I was chasing back then.

*Idol's image.* Physical attractiveness is also a factor found to increase the likelihood of the participants interacting with celebrities in a parasocial manner. SJ even stated that one of her parasocial attachments started with a photo of an idol they found beautiful. Stan Twitter users also find themselves attracted to celebrities' personalities as they are seen in the media. Specifically, good attributes such as good work ethic and sincerity are essential to fans. According to AM, if the idols are approachable, relatable, and show vulnerability through their craft, they are also more likely to attract fans. The perceived genuineness of idols is seen as a reason for fans to persistently try to communicate with their idols despite a lack of response, as seen in BQ's statement. This dedication stems from the hope that their efforts will eventually lead to a genuine connection, reflecting fans' deep emotional investment in their perceived relationships with their idols. This implies that if idols wish to gain more fans, they have to mold their image in a certain way that would attract loyal supporters. This implication is reflected in this statement by MK:

I also ended up discovering more about their personalities. I kind of grew attached to the members, and I look forward to more music from them.

*Artistry.* Celebrities who exhibit skill and knowledge in their craft are also subject to becoming parasocial targets. Although idols have other attractive traits, their music, lyrics, and discography seem to be the primary reason why stans develop parasocial relationships with them. This is evident with SS, who stated that she became an avid supporter because she identifies and finds comfort with most of her idol's songs. K-Pop stans are also attracted to the aesthetics of their music videos and performances, i.e., cinematography, visual effects, and choreography – all of which are perceived by stans to be different from other performers. In this case, Stan Twitter users are attracted to how their idols go beyond what is usually seen from celebrities. AR expresses this attraction toward the artists' work:

[My idols] created great performances and seeing them perform was cool.

...[LOONA's] music was cool, so I found their discography impeccable, and I stanned them. As explained by MK, participants opt for storylines with exciting plots, shows that romanticize regular life events explicitly.

*Social influence.* Some Stan Twitter users have stated that the people around them are the reason why they started engaging in PSRs with their current targets, as experienced by MK, whom her friends influenced to stan K-POP idols through showing her K-POP songs and other idol content in their group chat. In an attempt to seek further belongingness with real-life acquaintances, stans may also start developing PSRs as they try to relate to their friends' or family's interests. This statement by AV highly illustrates how friendship influenced their immediate decision to watch a K-pop group's music video, which led to her pursuing a parasocial relationship with them:

And then this friend, told me, "Oh my god, I saw a K-pop group", then he mentioned n Stray Kids. I said, "Oh! I know Stray Kids. I watched Hyunjin's Psycho Cover ng Red Velvet" – I said I was familiar with him-but not with other members. He said, "Watch their 'God's Menu [music video]', I feel like you will like it". I said, "All right".

### **Development and Maintenance of PSRs**

*Idol interaction.* Stan Twitter users develop PSR with their idols through a continuous exposure to them as it sustains their fondness towards their idols. This is evident with the findings of the current study as Stan Twitter users usually interact with their idols by liking, replying, retweeting, or quote retweeting their tweets. Some Stan Twitter users even make an effort to translate their messages using web translators for foreign idols to understand them. Fans would also engage in solo DMs (Direct Messages), special arrangements for fans to message their idols directly, and other fans set these up. It is common for fans to join in what they call a mention party or *menpa*, in which idols actively "reply to fans if they have a comeback" (AD). With the possibility of getting noticed by their idol, Stan Twitter users become more encouraged to be active on Twitter. Participant JC shared how consistent tweeting to idols may increase the chance of them following you back:

...Each member replies to tweets if there is a mention party for BTS. So, to get noticed, you must keep tweeting them, "Please follow me".

SJ confirms this by sharing this experience:

...I spam-tweeted [Justin Bieber] back then to have him follow me back; after his concert, he started following fans, he followed my cousin but not me.

It is also common for Stan Twitter users to extend their PSI beyond the platform. One way to do this is through fan signing, which is defined as an event where idols meet with fans and sign their purchased albums, whereas fan call is its online counterpart. A fan call is where fans can interact with their idol and ask questions through a one-minute video call. Through this real-time interaction, fans would become more invested in their idols. In addition, Stan Twitter users also fulfill PSRs with their idols by telling them about their problems through DMs on the idols' accounts, even those beyond Twitter. AM further illustrates this experience:

...sometimes on IG (Instagram) and DMs (Direct Messages), I rant about whatever, I want to say. If they [my idols] get hacked other people will know about all the problems in my life.

Based on the respondents' input on idol interactions, idols are aware that they are common targets of PSRs, and are likely to strengthen their position further through PSIs to gain more support. This support is reflected through fans engaging in activities that will help promote their idols.



*Idol promotion.* To sustain their PSRs, Stan Twitter users participate in promotional activities to help their idol's careers to flourish. A common way to do this is tweeting about their idols, specifically by participating in hashtag events, where fans use specific hashtags to help idols increase their reach on social media, and mass tweeting international brands or artists for endorsements or collaborations. Stans can also "clear" search terms on Twitter by filling their timelines and search bars with positive keywords concerning the idol to outnumber negative trends with positive ones. Some users would share these clips with non-fans and other fandoms, to make idols trend or go viral. BQ explains this activity:

Fancams can be considered a way to support and promote idols. There's the rise of the fancam culture, where the fans take individual footage of their idol performing on stage, and upload it [online]. Thus, the fancam was born. They use it to promote their idols, like posting it under replies. Because fancams will garner views, and views will garner attention—that's one way of promoting.

Another way of promoting idols through tweeting is voting, as participants mentioned using hashtags on tweets to vote for idols on certain award shows. Outside Stan Twitter, fans may vote through official voting sites or other platforms (e.g., *Mubeat*). Moreover, increasing the streams of their idol's song or views of their music video is also ways for Stan Twitter users to promote their idol. The dedication given by Stan's Twitter users as well as the frequent time spent on these promotional activities is seen to increase their level of attachment to their idols. SJ provided insight on how voting on Stan Twitter also promotes them outside of it:

...usually, the votings on Twitter – the hashtags; at the same time, they encourage [the increase of] YouTube views, especially when it's easy to break 24 hour records.

Stan Twitter users also showed a tendency to put an effort for their idols as if they are someone whom they have a close connection. This is evident in how they promote idols face-to-face by participating in fan events that the general public can witness. Fans even generate *fandom funds* for events, such as *birthday projects* (voting on sites that would provide advertisements to celebrate the winning idol's birthday), release date parties, or *cup sleeve/cutlery events* (fans would meet in a café or restaurant to celebrate an idol's birthday or debut anniversary). Sometimes, these funds are used for charity, such as a community pantry.

Fans develop a sense of fandom pride by participating in various promotional activities. Stans do not "feel that what [they] give is unrequited... [but rather] mutual" (AV), as idols continuously produce content for fans due to their unwavering support. This is seen as a factor for further development of PSR as the more Stan Twitter users see their idol's career thrive, the more they become driven to show their support because it contributes to their sense of self-fulfillment with their perceived relationship with their idol. AV shared how providing support to the idols is worth it as they provide excitement to the mundanities of their life:

We are willing to give them support because, in return, for us, they're keeping us sane, and they're making us happy with their music. Our corporate life is very dull but they are making it exciting.

*Buy and Sell.* Buy and Sell (BNS) is a sub-community in Stan Twitter wherein commercial transactions (i.e., buying, selling, trading, and collecting merchandise) take place for their parasocial target. BNS accounts specialize in reselling these items or with the help of a person in charge of ordering from a direct supplier. Buying merchandise does not only serve as a way to support the parasocial targets but also as a source of happiness for the stans, giving them a feeling of "security" and "happiness" (BQ). Consequently, some stans may resolve to overconsumption to obtain a desired collectible that comes with an album:

It is obsessive behavior, collecting every MD (merchandise) [during their] release. When they [idols] have a comeback, you collect the photocards. I think there is a line between collecting – like if you are a sentimental person – but there are some people who are much worse when it comes to mass buying, then they just throw the albums away after they collect the inclusions. (AM)

The more users grow attached to their idols, the more likely they are to find joy in purchasing merchandise. Consequently, the idols can earn more as long as they ensure the maintenance of these PSRs.

*Content creation and consumption.* The idol's official accounts on Twitter and other platforms are a means to post their content, such as pictures, videos, and other updates. Fans can consume the idols' content by streaming their music, watching their videos, and looking at their updates on social media; as they do this, stans may experience *spazzing* wherein they express extreme elation towards their idol whom they scream about (BQ).

One update that fans opt to know is the idol's schedule for when they release music, have guestings or comebacks. To get updates, fans follow their idols' official accounts, fanbase accounts (i.e., translation accounts for foreign artists), and *fan sites* (accounts on Stan Twitter that release photos of idols, even on schedules not officially released by their company). Stans stay updated by turning on their notifications for these accounts. While fans can enjoy receiving updates regarding the idol, they also share it on Twitter for others' consumption. AV noted that just by "simply retweeting an idol's tweet or any content, one simple retweet can already reach hundreds of people."

There are other platforms that stans can utilize to know more about their idols' activities. Some platforms that are free for stans to get updates from our Instagram (for images), YouTube (for videos), VLive (for live streams), and a search engine called Naver, which AV described as "the Google of Korea". Some require payment for a subscription, such as music streaming platforms (e.g. Spotify, Genie, Bugs, Melon) and idol-focused platforms (e.g. Bubble, WeVerse, Fab, Universe).

Stan Twitter users also get updates from fanmade content. Through these creative art forms, stans can reimagine idols in Alternate Universes (AUs), wherein fans combine the idol's image face to face as well as their image as a character in the story. AV explained that fan fiction is created because "[fans] love the character so much that they put them in an [AU]". Some fan works may be labeled as *Not Safe for Work* (NSFW), which is not suitable for stans who are still minors. The Stan Twitter community also has its fair share of humorous content, such as inside jokes and memes related to their idol. SJ added that fanmade content encourages them to maintain in the fandom:

So, if there are more fan works that I can obtain or consume, the more I stay in that fandom. Stan Twit[ter] has a lot of artists and writers.

Circling back to one of the reasons why PSRs are developed, the contents above can further deepen the parasocial connections between fans and their idols and entice non-fans into engaging in PSRs by witnessing the idols' favorable image in these various forms of media.

### Consequences of engaging in PSRs and joining stan Twitter

*Belongingness.* In creating relationships, belongingness is essential in fulfilling one's needs. The participants stated their experiences regarding belongingness with their real-life relationships and co-stans after engaging in PSRs. Some of the participants mentioned that Stan Twitter strengthens their real-life relationships, where they described that being on Stan Twitter with real-life friends allowed them to be closer to them as they had more to talk about, particularly about their idols. Contrary to this, some regarded that their relationships built in real-life were compromised instead, since they became reliant on Stan Twitter to the point of spending more time on the platform over socializing in real life. AV noted that they cannot find a significant other, as they usually compare them to their idols. However, some other participants shared that it did not have any effect at all, or their relationships remained constant. Stans stated that they felt that their friends accepted them for who they were.

As the effects are varied among participants, it seems that individual differences may affect how PSRs can influence stans in terms of belongingness outside of Stan Twitter and their fan community. For example, AD felt that they are closer to fellow stans as compared to real-life friends. To connect with fellow stans, group direct messaging (GDMs) are created for them to talk about updates or feelings related to their idols collectively. These interactions may result in real-life friendships, in which stans would start meeting each other in person as well as maintain their friendship even after they are no longer in the same fandom.

On the contrary, some friendships made on Stan's Twitter were not as positive as they were for others, to the point where some stans would avoid interacting with other stans. Relationships with other co-stans were also described as shallow and forced since they only talk about their idols and do not make any effort to deepen the degree of their friendship.

If your friends – for example, lose their feelings for this one group, like with EXO (K-Pop group) – then your friendship dies with them because you no longer have the common denominator within the friendship – you will not have anything else to discuss. (AM)

Some fans also use other social media platforms outside of Twitter to communicate with each other. They exchange social media accounts and create group chats within these platforms to either contact each other when they are not online on Stan Twitter. However, stans only share their other social media accounts with co-stans they feel comfortable with. Besides being comfortable with their co-stans, fans feel a sense of community that contributes to their belongingness within the fandom. It was somehow easier, as described by stans, to freely share topics due to sharing similar interests.

Since fans have a sense of community, co-stans also support fellow fans who create fan art or fan fiction by giving them financial donations as these artists contribute to their community. As supportive as the fandom may be, there is a negative aspect within the community. This is *cancel culture*, which was defined as the withdrawal of support for individuals who seemed to express or did something that is considered problematic. This does not only happen to idols but to stans as well. Fandoms collectively send hate and demand an apology from other disagreeing fans. These include reporting one's account to get suspended and directly or indirectly tweeting a specific co-stan whose opinions do not align with theirs; thus, some stans mentioned that they try not to be involved because they want to avoid receiving hate comments over trivial things, such as misinterpretations of their tweets:

More people will disagree when you state your opinion and then someone will disagree with you. If you express your opinion, you could be canceled; you can be attacked, because if you do a certain thing, others may misinterpret it. (AL)

*Personal Growth.* Exposure to other people can lead to self-improvement, as an individual can learn by observing others. As fandom culture is synonymous to with an affinity space, stans can interact with people who have diverse personalities, opinions, and attitudes. Whether knowledge of economic, social, or political matters, social media can help shape one's perception of the world, teaching empathy and media literacy to an individual (Cardenas, 2019). In turn, this will enable people to develop their own opinions about social matters and their perception of right and wrong, especially when interacting with people from other cultures:

The truth is, I have learned a lot about social issues since I started joining Stan Twitter. It could have something to do with the diversity of people I interact with, such as nationalities, ethnicities, and even [different] histories. People share their cultures and practices since we are all from different countries. (SS)

When I joined Stan Twitter, I learned a lot about slurs that I did not know were offensive because, on the internet, people are from diverse cultures — what you say may be deemed as controversial because you are not aware that they are offensive. (AL)

Additionally, Stan Twitter can also help the participants develop their English communication skills by conversing with foreigners, which is in agreement with Malik and Haidar's (2021) study. This development is due to how they utilize search engines, interact with others, encounter mimetic discourse, and schematically internalize language patterns:

...and then my communication skills were enhanced since I had conversations with people from other countries. I should really improve my English skills. I think it was useful, especially now with my [academics]; I do not have a hard time forming coherent sentences right now. (SS)

*Fan behavior.* Since Stan Twitter is filled with different people with similar characteristics, some behaviors can be adapted from the community that can influence the act of supporting their idols. Some actions of stans were positive (i.e., idols served as motivation or stress relievers), while some were destructive due to the development of intense PSRs with their idols. Participants stated that they had witnessed different kinds of obsessive behaviors: one is sasaeng behavior—being an obsessed fan with stalker-like behavior—as described by AV.

Another obsessive behavior is the fans' entitlement to their idols, assuming that idols owe them because they made efforts to promote or stream them. Stans tend to dictate how their idols should behave, consequently, failing to recognize their boundaries with their idols.

It is like fans do not even know what boundaries mean; they are entitled, especially in the K-Pop fandom – since they spend much money on buying merchandise, photocards, albums, and fan meets, [they feel] like there is something an idol needs to do to meet their expectations. (SJ)

This entitlement does not only apply to idols, but to fellow fans as well: some force others to stream idols' content to improve the standing of idols in charts without consideration of whether their fellow stans are willing or able to do so.

Some fans also tend to mischaracterize their idols, in which they perceive the idols as they are portrayed in fictional fan works, overshadowing the idols' actual characteristics face to face. Since the idol's image is one of the reasons why stans develop PSRs with them, the fans may be fixating on the specific characteristics of the idols that they were initially drawn to, thus, furthering their PSR. Additionally, stans also tend to theorize idol's behaviors through observing their body language in videos, as stated by SS:

Lisa [of BLACKPINK] only pretends that she and Rosé are close, but deep down, they actually envy each other," I don't mind those types of comments because for me, "Who are they to give those kinds of judgments? Do you live with them in their dorm, or are you in the same company as them?" Unless otherwise, the two of them say something about their relationship.

Most Stan Twitter users also get involved in arguments when co-stans disagree on a certain topic—fan wars. These fights would not only occur among fandoms but within fandoms as well, due to the existence of *solo stans* who only like one member of the group and tend to hate the rest of the members. Stans shared their annoyance towards these fan wars as some co-stans who participate in these often give irrational arguments or only engage in fan wars to gain attention, while some are entertained to the point that they join fan wars for fun.

With the prevalence of fan wars, fans practice anonymity online as it keeps their identity safe from negative comments from others. However, anonymity on Stan Twitter condoned some stans from sending hate or becoming trolls as their identity is unknown. Still, several participants emphasized that their choice of being anonymous on Stan Twitter is to avoid embarrassment from people and to be able to freely express their love and support for their idols without being stereotyped as “chaotic” or “obsessed”.

Various risky behaviors are unfortunately seen within Stan Twitter, including being exposed to: explicit (violent/sexual) content, which is not appropriate for minors, and to predators who target underage Stan Twitter users. Since the majority of the fans joined Stan Twitter at a young age, they expressed that there were actions that they later learned were not age-appropriate, such as posting their personal information or pictures, as these may be weaponized against them or may be used to scam other people.

The primary consequence is the lack of filters on Stan Twitter; regardless if you are a minor or a consenting adult, nobody will be accountable for you. Many people post sensitive content – not only words but also graphic content that other people can retweet. Of course, it is a public space—no one limits it, and there are no age restrictions; many minors can pretend that they are not below 18. That is one of the risks I know because I experienced it as a minor back then when I joined Stan Twitter, then suddenly, I witnessed those kinds of content. (SS)

*Effects on Health.* With the frequent use of Stan Twitter, stans became too exposed to fandom-related content to the point of sacrificing their physical health.

I set this standard within myself like, this idol is skinny, I would tell myself, “Ah! I need to be that skinny.” In a way, I have become so unhealthy that I starved myself to be able to attain that body type. (BQ)

In terms of psychological health, PSRs influence fans to spend an unhealthy amount of time on Stan Twitter because of their fear of missing out on updates about their idols. They stated that seeing fan wars on social media became “mentally detrimental” for them. In contrast, other Stan Twitter users regarded PSRs as their “comfort” (SS).

Stan Twitter users’ financial health became affected as well since they reported an increase in spending money for buying merchandise. Contrary to this, other Stan Twitter users who experience a positive effect on their spending habits, as explained by AD, who stated that using Twitter at home instead of going out with friends is a way to avoid overspending.

## Quantitative results

The table above shows respondents’ the mean, standard deviation, and t-test results on the NTBS. Upon analysis, the difference between the respondents’ scores is insignificant; therefore, the  $H_0$  is accepted.

Most of the respondents (86.5%) are between 18-22 years old, all in Generation Z. The ages 18-22 years old are the years where the sample is likely college-level education. The homogeneity in the respondents’ demographics may incur cohort effects, due to similarities in the circumstances to which the cohort is exposed (Pew Research Center, 2015). In this sense, Generation Z shares the same experiences being in college after the implementation of the K+12 curriculum in the Philippines and being subject to online classes amidst the COVID-19 pandemic (The Manila Times, 2019), which may

account for the same amount of belongingness (due to online interactions with schoolmates and friends).

The COVID-19 pandemic also has period effects. The social isolation experienced during the pandemic led to a threat to belongingness (McCallum et al., 2021). This supports the current study's findings, in which both groups of Twitter users garnered a high-NTB (ST = 32.67; NST = 33.03). To fulfill their belongingness, these individuals may have turned to social media, a go-to means for entertainment during the pandemic (Tkáčová et al., 2021). Some Twitter users have also engaged in PSRs and joined Stan Twitter (Bercero & Abadiano, 2020), to cope with their high-NTB.

**Table 3** The mean, standard deviation, and significant difference of respondents' scores on the Need to Belong Scale.

Variable	Stan Twitter users (N=126)			Non-Stan Twitter users (N=111)		
	M	SD	Interpretation	M	SD	Interpretation
Need to Belong	32.67	5.126	High	33.03	4.988	High
Independent samples t-test result						
Variables	t	p-value	Inference		Decision on H <sub>0</sub>	
Need to Belong and Existence of Stan Twitter Account	0.548	0.584	Not significant		Failed to reject H <sub>0in</sub>	

### Integration of quantitative and qualitative results

In summary, the quantitative results show that there is a nonsignificant difference between the Stan Twitter users' and non-Stan Twitter users' NTB. Meanwhile, the qualitative results bring resolution to the objectives of the study and shed light on the behavior of Stan Twitter users concerning their PSRs with their idols.

Firstly, on Stan Twitter, PSRs with idols are developed due to thwarted belongingness. This is consistent with the study's assumption that Twitter users engage in parasocial relationships due to discrepancies in real-life relationships. When social interactions are scarce or if real-life relationships are not enough to fulfill fans' need to belong, they may try to communicate with idols, even if their actions are not reciprocated (Madison et al., 2016). This eventually leads to parasocial relationships. Parasocial relationships are prevalent during the pandemic since face-to-face interactions are limited. It drives people to social media even more (Baym, 2015), which includes the creation of a Stan Twitter account to cope with their high-NTB. Escalas and Bettman (2017) have stated that PSRs with celebrities can help compensate for high-NTB, and this parasocialization is best maintained using social media platforms (Jarzyna, 2021). The same qualitative insights emerged in this study.

Apart from coping with their need to belong, it was found that Stan Twitter users also develop PSR due to the level of their attraction to their idol's characteristics: namely, their image, artistry, storytelling, and social influence. This is consistent with previous studies, which stated that attractiveness to parasocial targets increases due to physical attractiveness and a celebrity's pleasing personality, particularly those who seem more approachable (Chung & Cho, 2017; Purnamaningsih & Rizkalla, 2020). The pandemic has thwarted people's belongingness and, consequently, altered relationships and how stans perceive the objects of their PSRs. In the case of artists' (K-Pop, P-Pop, etc.) stans, their image is molded by their agencies and management, which may not be aligned with their actual personalities, to make them more likable. This begs the question, will this redefine intimacy with the emergence of PSRs? Today, intimacy may no longer be a two-way street: recent studies (Lacap et al., 2023; Liu, 2023) confirm that trustworthiness is heightened when parasocial interactions occur. While these studies focused on marketing and brand credibility, they opened the doors of

opportunities for future studies regarding the perception of personal intimacy. Furthermore, as a response to the pandemic, more platforms for social interactions, whether personal or parasocial, have increased, and relationships are no longer nurtured only with face-to-face interactions, but with digital means as well.

Stan Twitter users are also found to value their idol's dedication to their craft. They get attracted to how their idols go beyond what is usually seen from celebrities; this is consistent with Kurtin et al. (2019), stating that task attraction is highly associated with developing PSRs. Due to these factors, Stan Twitter users gain interest in their potential parasocial target; thus, they try to know them better, which leads to an increased chance of them engaging in PSRs.

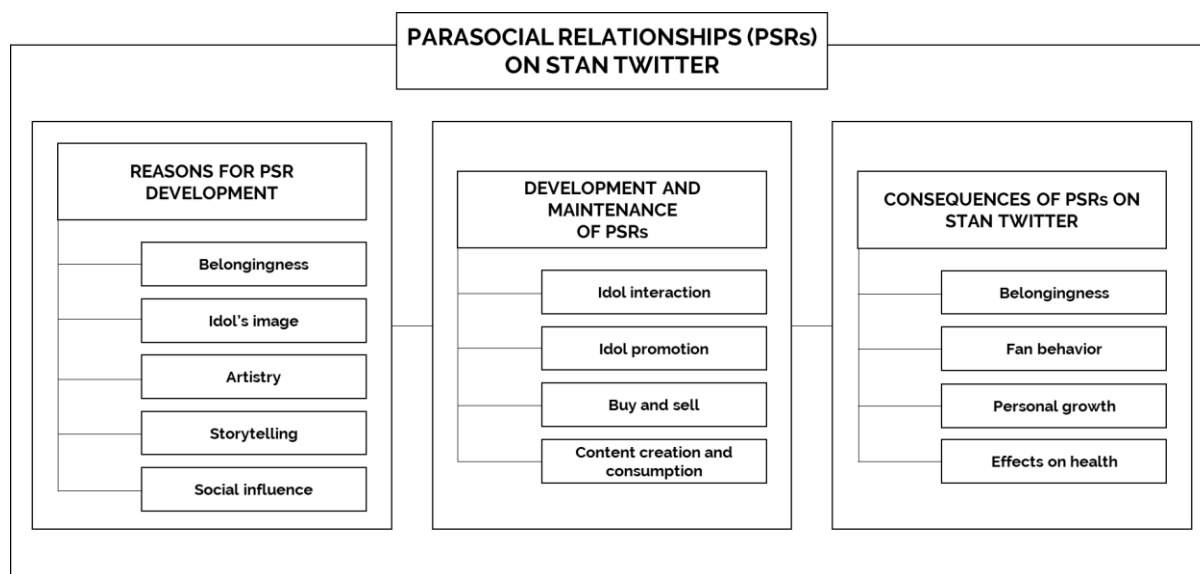
Stan Twitter users develop and maintain PSR with their idols through continuous exposure to them. Jarzyna (2021) purported that fans utilize social media to gain interaction with their idol; this is consistent with the findings of the current study as Stan Twitter users usually interact with their idols by liking, replying, retweeting, or quote retweeting their tweets. Some Stan Twitter users even try translating their messages using web translators for foreign idols to understand them.

To sustain their PSRs, Stan Twitter users are found to participate in promotional activities to help their idol's careers. This dedication can be explained by the fans' emotional attachment to their idols; they become urged to support them and help their careers flourish constantly (Meese, 2021). Such promotional activities identified in this study include voting for idols on award shows, buying and selling their merchandise, consuming idol-related content, and fundraising for celebrating events like their idol's birthday or debut anniversary. Fans develop a sense of fandom pride by participating in various promotional activities. It was found that stans do not feel that what they give is unrequited but somewhat mutual, as idols continuously produce content for fans due to their unwavering support. As explained by Yan and Yang (2020), the more fans see their idol's career thriving along with their constant contribution to this success, the more they benefit and get a sense of fulfillment from their perceived relationship with their idol; therefore, their PSR with their idol can grow stronger.

The qualitative insights that emerged in the study have also shown that PSRs affect the users positively and negatively. Being in their respective fandoms increases their sense of belonging and social awareness concerning globalization. However, by having PSRs with their idols, some users of Stan Twitter develop negative behavior, such as stalking idols and self-deprivation due to body image, thereby endangering themselves and the idols they admire.

Although PSR is just one of the ways that individuals can cope with thwarted belongingness, especially during the pandemic, the study aims to explore this phenomenon in Stan Twitter; therefore, the findings were not able to explain how non-Stan Twitter users with high-NTB can specifically fulfill their belongingness needs. With this, the qualitative exploration focused on the reasons for developing parasocial relationships, how these relationships are developed and maintained, and the consequences of engaging in PSRs, as seen in Figure 1.

The findings of the quantitative study supported the qualitative data, wherein the Stan Twitter users' high need to belong may be, in part, a reason for developing a PSR. Although there was a nonsignificant difference between the scores of the two groups ( $t = 0.548$ ;  $p = 0.584$ ), the respondents garnered a high need-to-belong (NTB) regardless of whether they were a Stan Twitter user or a regular Twitter user. This may be due to the COVID-19 pandemic, wherein individuals had limited face-to-face interactions that maintained their sense of belongingness (Fernandes et al., 2020; McCallum et al., 2021). These individuals may have turned to social media and PSRs to fulfill their lack of belongingness.



**Figure 1** Development, maintenance, and consequences of parasocial relationships on Stan Twitter.

## Conclusion

A phenomenological qualitative design was conducted to explore belongingness and PSRs in Stan Twitter culture. The qualitative results showed that: (1) belongingness plays a role in the development of PSRs; (2) PSR development and maintenance is done through PSI and participation in fan activities; and (3) being on Stan Twitter induces belongingness, which in turn, influences Stan Twitter usage as well.

Through an independent samples t-test, the NTBS scores of the respondents have shown that both groups have high-NTB ( $ST = 32.67$ ;  $NST = 33.03$ ), and their scores have a nonsignificant difference ( $t = 0.548$ ;  $p = 0.584$ ); thus, failing to reject the null hypothesis. Despite a nonsignificant difference between the degree of belongingness of Stan Twitter users and non-Stan Twitter users, the assumption that Stan Twitter users have high belonging needs is still confirmed in the study.

Converging the results shows that both variables influence each other. The need to belong develops PSRs and PSRs are effective as a source of belonging. However, this relationship is not mutually exclusive as other factors contribute to each variable's development. For instance, the characteristics of the targets are also factors in PSR development. The findings also revealed that idol's image, artistry, storytelling, and social influence can also lead to the development of PSRs. Moreover, stans develop and maintain PSR by participating in fandom activities such as idol interaction, idol promotion, buy and sell, and content creation and consumption, which can lead to a sense of fandom pride. Through Stan Twitter and other platforms used by stans to engage with their parasocial targets, results demonstrate that social media and technology can now serve as an avenue for more direct communications with their nonfictional targets through direct messages, mention parties, and fan events (i.e., fansign and fancalls); resulting in the sense of reciprocity. With that, this study can also contribute to the redefinition of PSR. Results have shown that the relationship is somewhat one-sided since media figures also make time to interact with their fans.

## Recommendations

The findings can contribute to the studies of belongingness, idol worship, parasocial relationships, and the COVID-19 pandemic, thereby filling the gaps in the literature where the



relationships between these variables lack. The findings stated above also add to the reservoir of studies concerning parasocial relationships in the context of social media.

In the age of digitalization and the COVID-19 pandemic, the study adds to how social phenomena ultimately affect people's online behavior as much as their overt, offline behaviors. In terms of fandom dynamics, the study also adds to the literature describing Filipino fan behavior and Filipino K-Pop fandom dynamics. Furthermore, similar topics that may be explored include the fandom dynamics of other domains, especially those founded on the Philippines (e.g., P-Pop, Filipino loveteams, Philippine BL), as well as topics of the effects of thwarted belongingness on different degrees of relationships (e.g., familial, platonic, romantic), its effect on other aspects of social functioning (e.g., educational, occupational), and focus on other digital communities (e.g., gaming, non-fungible token (NFT), alter Twitter). The findings on the emergence of Buy and Sell Twitter (BNS) may also affect consumerism studies.

Since the study's contributions can only be generalized among the Filipino Stan Twitter population, future researchers are suggested to use a larger sample size which may be more representative of the Twitter population and may use a more effective sampling method for obtaining the data. The homogeneity of the samples can also be addressed for future studies as the participants gathered in this study are mostly Female Stan Twitter users from Generation Z (between ages 18-22) who primarily have K-Pop idols as their parasocial targets. These similarities in the characteristics of both populations may account for the result in the quantitative portion. As for the qualitative part of the study, most are also from the K-Pop Stan Twitter, which may leave other domains of Stan Twitter (i.e., American pop, Anime, P-Pop, Philippine love teams, BL, Manga) underrepresented. To address this shortcoming, a stratified or cluster sampling method may be used to ensure representation for all domains of the population. Similar populations may also be studied, such as comparing stans on Twitter vis-à-vis Facebook or other similar social media platforms. Lastly, analyzing samples with other demographics (i.e., age, sex, countries of origin, race, and culture) is also suggested to ensure a broader scope for future studies.

In terms of practical applications: engaging in PSRs also brought consequences that concerned not only the belongingness of the participants in the fandom but also in real-life relationships. Aside from this, stans are also affected on an individual level as their fan behaviors, personal growth, and health aspects are influenced positively and negatively. Covering the negative influences, the results revealed dangerous behaviors committed by fans both online and offline. With this, the findings help spread awareness so that people are wary of the digital space as much as they are face to face and to be careful not to disclose information that may endanger them or their loved ones. The study's findings revealed that PSRs could lead to destructive behaviors, such as sasaeng behavior, idol sexualization through NSFW content, and the exposure and weaponization of personal data and information, cybersecurity, and policies on the limits of fan behavior may be improved. Social media developers may adjust their terms and conditions (T&Cs) accordingly.

Furthermore, talent management companies may also gauge the fandom dynamics they facilitate among their clients' fans to avoid condoning obsessive and inappropriate behavior. The findings of this study may be used to plan how they can present the idols to their fans. For mental health practitioners, other forms of the fulfillment of belongingness needs may be defined and recommended for their clients to avoid overinvolvement with idols or fellow fans. Moreover, the consequences of PSRs concern not only belongingness in the fandom but also real-life relationships. Stans are also affected on an individual level. as their fan behavior, personal growth, and health are affected in positive and negative ways. Negative influences include dangerous behaviors committed by fans – both online and offline. These findings may help stans gauge whether they have become over-involved with their idols or the Stan Twitter community. Finally, the study's findings can also

guide policymaking about idol security and cybersecurity. It can also serve as a warning for individuals involved in, and unaware of, Stan Twitter.

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