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Tionah Y. Lee

CUNY Graduate School of Journalism

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#SociallyConnected: The Now and Then Era of the Fangirl
By: Tionah Lee

“They’re back in LA. I know. I just looked at Harry’s last tweet.”

If you want to know where One Direction lead singer Harry Styles is, just ask Briana Picardi.

The 20-year old, Staten Islander, who decided not to go to college and currently works for a surgery center in Brooklyn knows as much about Styles, as she does about her immediate family, maybe more. For instance, on this particular day, Picardi informs me that Styles and his band, the boy band/super-group One Direction, have just made it back to Los Angeles. And why are they there? Once again Picardi has the answer: this is where they will play their final U.S concert at the Staples Center in front of over 20,000 fans before embarking on a hiatus in March, that has their fans anticipating withdrawal. But right now, the hunt is still on for current updates.

“See, it’s like I have tabs on them,” says Picardi of the group. “We know exactly where they are.”

Picardi can remember the exact moment she first became obsessed with One Direction, which in addition to 21-year-old Styles who is famous for his smoldering looks, and keen resemblance to a young Mick Jagger, features blonde Irishman Niall Horan, 22, the silly and outgoing Louis Tomlinson, 24, the bold and charming Liam Payne, 22, and up until March of 2015, 22-year-old “bad boy” Zayn Malik.

“I saw them on Tumblr,” Picardi says, and her voice goes up an octave with excitement as she reflects on the moment. “It was in 2011 and they [One Direction] were doing an interview, and it was really funny and I was like ‘Who are these people?’ “Then I spent the entire night, it was in the summer, googling them until literally six in the morning, and I literally fell in love with them overnight.”

Picardi doesn’t work for a record company. She’s not employed by anyone paid to promote One Direction. She isn’t part of the band’s team of handlers. She is simply a fan. A fan that scrolled down her

twitter timeline, looked at @harrystyles' last tweet and rattled off the location of one of the most adored pop stars the music industry has ever manufactured. And she's only one among over a hundred thousand plus girls who has learned that they could access their favorite male musician via social media in remarkably simple ways.

Picardi has a 16-year-old BFF and fellow "Directioner" (One Direction super fan) named Samantha Rubel. Like Picardi, she is obsessed with keeping tabs on her favorite idols and has learned to use social media to navigate the lives of her favorite pop stars.

"I don't know what I would do without it," says Rubel, who is a junior at Staten Island's Tottenville high school. "It lets us stay connected to them "I don't' know how I would do it without social media, because we can stay connected to them no matter where they are in the world and see like what they're doing. We can like check in and see what they're up to."

It's that simple. Picardi and Rubel are just two of over thousands of girls who have access to their favorite male celebrities via social media. Picardi has turned herself into an armature promoter whose fandom helps the people whom promote One Direction amplify their impact.

And while Picardi and Rubel are checking up on One Direction, thousands of followers are checking on the girls. Combined, the girls have close to 50,000 twitter followers. They are among the vanguard of girls who have changed the relationship between pop musicians and their fans, who literally have their favorite musician in the palms of their hands. The seemingly internal pull that male heartthrob singers have on teenage girls may not be new, but the intensity and complexity of the fan connection has greatly increased in the past decade.

It's no longer enough for a group to offer recordings, concerts and mail-away fan club literature. The connection has to be more direct and more urgent, and social media has become the breakthrough that has allowed that to happen. Sites such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and the web's latest obsession, Snapchat have created a person-to-person connection between fans and artist. With the help of

140 characters (sometimes more, sometimes less depending on the platform), female fans have been able to communicate personally with their favorite male/hunk artist, share their accounts of encounters with their idols, create social groups devoted to the artist's, and even log on to meet artist at various and often unusual locations, anything from a mall store, to a massage parlor, a bodega on a random New York City street, at tattoo parlor and restaurant. Anywhere other than a concert venue.

But who are the gatekeepers overseeing this vast machinery of artificial intimacy, and when fans get twitter follows, emails, and Instagram messages from their idols, can they really believe that their idols are writing the messages?

According to one of the most experienced managers of boy bands in the past two decades, the contact fans make is surprisingly genuine.

“A lot of artists do their own social media, says Melinda Bell, Sr. VP of Wright Entertainment Group, and a former manager of *Nsync and the Backstreet Boys. “I mean they do have help running the pages, but in a sense, when you want to talk one on one with somebody, a lot of times that’s them.”

For the last 20 years, Bell and her partner in business, Wright Entertainment Group founder Johnny Wright, have managed some of the biggest groups in music history, including Boys II Men and New Kids on the Block. As such, Bell has had a lot of interactions with the bands and their predominantly female fans and she knows the importance of creating a heightened sense of connection.

“It has become key for the artist to become engaged with the fans,” she says. “It makes the fans feel closer to the artist if they feel like they know everything that’s going on.”

And the illusion works, says Bell, even though “there are a million other girls out there who feel the same way.”

There have always been girls crying and screaming and looking for ways to get closer to the swoon-worthy male singer their heart desires. Well maybe not always, but certainly for the last 100 years.

Ground zero of the phenomenon came with the introduction of “Old Blue Eyes” Frank Sinatra in the 1940s. The crooner delivered a way to sing young girls to sleep as his voice played through their radios initiating the “bobbysoxers” effect, and they dreamed about the young fella who donned a suit and tie as part of his everyday wardrobe, like their fathers, and the radio and concert promoters soon realized their key marketing demographic.

While Sinatra played it safe in the 40s, at the end of the decade a hunka hunka burning love with sleek black hair, a guitar thrusting his hips on the television, creating a monster of a pop star, whom unlike Sinatra, didn't not have the mass approval from parents. As Elvis' popularity grew, so did the yearning for a desirable male musician from teenage girls. Elvis was ushered in with the era of television. Girls no longer had to close their eyes and dream about their favorite male musician, he was right there, in their homes were they could see him.

But Frank and Elvis were just one desirable guy. In the 60s, Ed Sullivan allowed four guys from the UK to perform on his show broadcasted to American teens, and the rest is Beatlemania history. It was that particular moment, when teenage girls realized that they could swoon over multiple men at one time.

In the 60s and into the 70s, Dick Clark helped Sullivan continue televising the talent of The Beatles, The Monkees and The Jackson 5 with “American Bandstand.” The clean-cut girls dancing and showing off the latest fashions and hairstyles on America's black and white television screens. In the 80s, the colors were amped up and girls in America were giving their hearts to the boys from Boston, New Kids on the Block and New Edition, and the introduction of the music video made it easier to look at the boys (and their dance moves) whenever you turned on the television. In the early 90s, it was more so about the sex appeal that came with R&B groups. If the girls weren't calling into the local radio stations to request Nirvana, Soundgarden or Pearl

Jam, they wanted to hear Boys II Men harmonize about making love to them.

In the year 2000, the screams got louder and the boy bands got bigger. Total Request Live “TRL” gave fans access to Florida music mogul Lou Pearlman’s creations: *Nsync and the Backstreet Boys. Girls from across the nation watched their every dance move and voted for their videos by phone day after day. In 2008, TRL ended, and talent was finding its way online. By 2009, Justin Bieber armed with his webcam and guitar made his way into the hearts and homes of girls across the world with the help of the site YouTube, creating a sense of fandom nostalgia by becoming that singular male performer, like Sinatra and Elvis before him, that could make the girls scream.

“I feel like I connect with him the most, like out of anyone in the whole world,” says Bridget Bresnahan, the 17-year-old New Jersey native and die hard “Belieber” explains with a mixture of teenage giggles and trepidation. Bresnahan is one of Justin Bieber’s 71 million twitter followers. She is also one of the lucky 246,000 people that the 21-year-old musical sensation follows on the social media site.

One of the most genuine aspects comes from the boys actively running their social media accounts, and personally tweeting out messages, snapping pictures or creating 10-second videos for their fans.

The longer Bresnahan talks about the pop star, the more she opens up. Her voice, like the other girls, goes up an octave when she says his name. She also refers to him as “Justin,” like he is one of her fellow classmates at Wall Township high school in New Jersey. Like they sit next to each other in Chemistry class. But her excitement is real. At a certain point, Bresnahan sounds like she is about to cry from all of the overwhelming excitement that comes with talking about her favorite person in the entire world.

“It’s just his music helps me connect with him, how he acts and how he carries himself, and his heart. And he’s just a really really relatable person.”

What was the world like before the digital age of social media, 20-year-old Picardi, who was only 5-years-old during the TRL era can’t even rap her mind around it.

“Could you image what it was like to be an *Nsync fan?” Picardi says, as she tries to figure out the trick to being devoted fan a mere 10 years ago. “Like how did they get their information? I don’t know how the fans got their information, I feel like all they had were the albums.”

Breonna Claude, a 34-year-old government employee knows how easy and possible it was to be a devoted fangirl during that decade, because she lived through it, as one of Justin Timberlake and *Nsync’s biggest fans.

“So rewind back to the TRL days, it was hard but we did it,” says Claude who as been a Justin Timberlake since day one. From the moment she saw him perform on Star Search (the original American Idol) she was drawn to him. In total, she has seen him in concert 36 times (that includes performances with *Nsync, and the 14 shows she attended across Europe for Justin’s 20/20 Experience world tour in 2014). Claude was part of the “foreign age” fangirls that lived life pre-social media.

“When *Nsync or Justin was coming out with a video, I had to drop everything I was doing. If I had work, I would take off, because it wasn’t the days of DVR where you could watch it when you wanted to,” she explains eagerly without a pause as though this memory sits in the front of her brain, and it happened yesterday. “I always stayed home, put in the VHS and pressed record and sat at the TV and starred at it until the video was over. Then the next day I would go to school and ask my friends “Did you see the video?”

“I couldn’t go online and tweet Justin and be like ‘Justin great video’ or *Nsync like ‘Great job guys,’ there was none of that. We lived in a very delayed system.”

Today, as soon as One Direction or Justin Bieber, or the older Justin, Timberlake, their fans are right there to talk about it with each other. All they have to do is look down on their smartphones, smart watches or other mobile devices, log into their social media and they're connected. The perfect example of living in the "now era" and sending and receiving information at scroll of a timeline came when Zayn Malik announced that he was leaving One Direction via Facebook on March 25, 2015.

"I was in Spanish class at school and I opened my phone and I was putting in my headphones and I go on Twitter, and I see everyone making a big deal out of something," Samantha Rubel says as she begins to detail the moment that changed the life of her and millions of other teen girls across the world.

"I had to leave class. My teacher asked me where I was going and I was just like "I can't" and I just left. My friend's mom picked me up from school and she has a video of me. It was on every news channel, of me crying in the car. It went viral. It blew up immediately."

It was an all too familiar move in pop culture. Zayn's departure was like that faithful April day in 1970 when Paul McCartney announced that The Beatles were no more. Or the "bittersweet" moment in 2002 when Justin Timberlake announced that he would be putting out his first solo record. In both Paul and Justin's case, the fans had to pick up the telephone and dial a number to call their fellow fangirls in order to cry about the news. There was no such thing as a text message. There was no such thing as going "viral."

According to Claude, her connection to the group allowed her to realize that the end was coming for the band. Unlike Zayn and One Direction, Justin's departure and the group hiatus was in the music.

"When they came out with their third album *Celebrity*, "Gone" was on that album. I knew that was going to be their final album," Claude explains. At this point the excitement from her voice slips away. "The way I knew was by listening to the songs and not just the songs, but the album in general. There was always a time limitation on how long they were going to be together, and just listening to celebrity, it was

like they were saying “Hey we really appreciate everything, but it’s time for us to move on and time for us to do other things.”

In social media scholar Danah Boyd’s book “It’s complicated: The social lives of networked teens, the New York University scholar states “social media plays a crucial role in the lives of networked teen. Although the specific technologies change, they collectively provide teens with a space to hang out and connect with friends. Teens’ mediated interactions sometimes complement or supplement their face-to-face encounters.”

“I can’t tell you how many times I’ve told girls ‘stop crying and breath, because you want to remember this moment,” Melinda Bell says, as she reflects on the fans that finally had the chance to meet one of her groups after standing in line at a record store all day. “ But they’re so worked up about meeting their idol that they’re hyperventilating. I’m like “stop an breath’ because you want to remember this moment.”

However, there would be no face-to-face connection for Picardi and Rubel if it weren’t for social media. In total, the girls have met, and had conversations with the boys of One Direction, countless times. They never purchased VIP tickets or waited in line for a meet and greet, the just simply show up and wait for the perfect moment to get a selfie with the heartthrob.

“The way we met him, anybody could have done it. You could have done it,” explains Picardi, whose accent illuminates her statement, while she reflects on the day in November when she and Rubel met Zayn at New York City’s lavish dinner spot Soho House.

“We were at his hotel and we ended up following him. He looked at us and said ‘I’ll be back later’ and then as he was walking out three hours later, he took us inside and took pictures with us. It’s not like we cried or begged, we stood there like normal people because he told us he would be right back.”

Gone are the days when you had to wait in line at a record store. Picardi’s, Rubel’s photos on their social media accounts features them posing side-by-side with one of the boys from One Direction.

None of the pictures feature the girls with all of the members at one time, nor is it ever in a formal setting. The girls always seem to catch one member at a time, and the background of the shot is never a concert venue. It's just the random side street of a restaurant, hotel, or location that one of the boys tweeted out.

Not only are the girls aware of their location, but also they are privy to the appropriate reaction to have when meeting the guys. Crying, in front of them, is weird and making them feel obligated to take a picture with them isn't the way to go as well.

"If he doesn't want to do it, he doesn't want to do it," explained Bresenhan, when asked about her encounters with Justin Bieber. "That's when we don't press or anything, we give him privacy. It's just that we know how to treat him. We wait until he comes up to us."

For Briana Picardi and Samantha Rubel, all of their social media training, various encounters with the band, and according to them, their life work leads to the moment in November when they embark on a cross-country journey to watch their boys perform their final show in Los Angeles. Picardi and Rubel couldn't sit, stop crying or shaking as they watched Harry Styles, Niall Horan, Louis Tomlinson and Liam Payne take the stage in the US for the final time before their hiatus begins in March 2016.

The girls, and over 20,000 other adoring fans belt out the words to their favorite songs from the group such as "History" off of their latest album "Made in the AM," that is dedicated to the fans, and when the moment comes for the boys to sing the words to their first single "What Makes You Beautiful," Picardi and Rubel know it is time to pull out their phones and capture this moment, for their followers to see.

@ohmyliry: we traveled the country to see these boys for the last time and the show was so amazing but so emotional wow im so happy we did this

"Now I feel there is so much time on the line now. It's more than just them. We formed friendships with them in other states, we get to see them when we travel for them," says Rubel, who agreed with her parents that she would maintain a 95 average in school in order for her to miss two days of school to fly across the country for this

moment. “It’s more than just them now, it’s other people too. So even when they’re done, we still have the friendships that we made with other people who love them just as much as we do.”

Rubel and Picardi press record, hit save, and press, “tweet” and just like that, over 50,000 other girls are living right in the moment with them and the boys of One Direction.