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## You and I: Parasocial Relationships, Social Media, and Fan Labor in the One Direction Fandom

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**You and I: Parasocial Relationships, Social Media, and Fan Labor in the One Direction**

**Fandom**

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## Abstract

This study aims to analyze the ways in which fans of the band One Direction developed *parasocial relationships*, or one-sided, non-reciprocal relationships with media personae, through social media marketing, and to explore the economic implications of these relationships in terms of fans' free promotional labor. At the heart of social media marketing is *relationship marketing*, or attracting and maintaining customer relationships, a strategy we explore here within the context of the music industry. Previous studies have explored the dynamics of online fan communities, or *fandoms*, and the free labor they carry out on the part of an artist, such as creating original content and organizing marketing campaigns—work that is typically done by salaried industry professionals. This study aims to understand how parasocial relationships motivate fans to do such work, and whether or not they see free labor as an issue of exploitation. A content analysis of the One Direction Twitter account and a prominent fan account was conducted to better understand the band's marketing efforts, and interviews with fans of the band were carried out in order to explore their experiences with parasocial relationships and fan labor. This study found that the One Direction Twitter account seemed to encourage fans to perform promotional labor indirectly through relationship marketing tactics, and that the fan account worked to not only actively promote the band's products, but keep their thousands of followers emotionally and financially invested in the band. It was also found that fans' parasocial relationships were cultivated through social media, and these relationships were a motivating factor in fans' willingness to perform promotional labor. Regarding the issue of exploitation, however, the ambivalence of fans was clear: fans wanted to perform promotional labor to support the band, yet they also recognized, to a certain extent, that this labor was valuable and was potentially exploited.

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## Introduction

“The fans are doing something at the moment, they've got this own little project ... they want to do a fanbase single. And I think that is just a perfect example of just how unique and incredible and passionate that, you know, our fans are. And we say it all the time but we literally can't thank those people enough, you know, they're the reason we're here tonight and the reason we have a pretty great job” (Billboard, 2015).

Louis Tomlinson, singer-songwriter and member of the British boyband One Direction, is speaking here about “Project No Control,” a campaign created entirely by One Direction fans to self-release one of the band’s songs, *No Control*, as “the first One Direction DIY single” (Buscando, 2015). Fans started the project because they believed the band’s record label had neglected to sufficiently promote their album *Four*, and felt *No Control* in particular deserved more recognition. The project consisted of a multi-faceted promotional strategy organized via social media: fans planned different hashtags to trend on Twitter each day, created a Thunderclap<sup>1</sup> campaign for Twitter users to show their support, called and tweeted at local radio stations to request the song, designed promotional artwork and album covers, improved the song’s chart position, made music videos, and distributed flyers in their communities.

In the end, the song was placed into regular rotation at radio stations around the world (@R1Breakfast, 2015; @Smallzy, 2015; @Z100NewYork, 2015) and hit number one on Billboard’s Trending 140 chart (@billboard, 2015), the Thunderclap campaign had an estimated reach of 55 million Twitter users (Buenneke, 2015), one of the fanmade music videos garnered almost 52 million views (OneDirectionZic, 2015), and the song won a Teen Choice Award (Adejobi, 2015). The most meaningful of these accolades, however, was the repeated acknowledgement and appreciation the band members showed during concerts and interviews, as

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<sup>1</sup> Thunderclap was a platform that integrated with Twitter and Facebook, allowing users to support a cause by posting the same message and adding a graphic to each supporter’s profile photo.

Tomlinson demonstrated above. As one fan put it, “That thirty second clip of Louis talking about Project No Control literally redeemed the entire night for me. He’s so proud of us ... he really emphasized how incredible he thinks we are, and I really do think he’s completely floored by our support” (Stylestm, 2015).

Today’s popular artists depend on social media to not only promote their work but build and maintain fan relationships, and One Direction was no different. This study aims to analyze the economic implications of the relationship between One Direction and its fans, and how this relationship is fostered through social media marketing. At the heart of social media marketing is *relationship marketing*, or “attracting, maintaining and ... enhancing customer relationships” (Berry, 2002, p. 61). When it comes to celebrities, these relationships often develop into real emotional attachments and ultimately, “the illusion of a face-to-face relationship with the performer,” otherwise known as a *parasocial relationship* (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215).

Relationship marketing through social media has the ability to create loyal, dedicated fans who are willing to not only purchase their favorite artist’s music, merchandise, and concert tickets, but also perform free promotional labor—such as Project No Control—on the part of the artist, which suggests exploitation—broadly defined as one party unfairly taking advantage of another party for benefit or profit. More specifically in the context of this paper, fan exploitation is “the practice of employing fans as a source of free labor” (Galuska, 2015, p. 28). This study will explore the connection between social media marketing, parasocial relationships, and possibility of fan exploitation.

According to scholar Paul Théberge, current strategies for music marketing have roots in operas of the mid-19th century, specifically with the advertising of “Swedish nightingale” Jenny Lind by P.T. Barnum. After booking Lind for a concert tour in the United States, Barnum created

a marketing campaign that emphasized not just her singing abilities, but her personality and charity work, and was further supplemented by sales of merchandise, which included dolls, scarves, and other accessories. Through this campaign, Barnum created a widespread fanbase for Lind, and also “[gave] a commodity focus to the artist/fan relationship, allowing the experience of fandom to be prolonged and intensified through personal investment in a set of fetishized objects” (Théberge, 2005, p. 489) which remains an important facet of music marketing today.

This theme continued throughout the 20th century, bolstered by the growth of the advertising industry and star system of the entertainment industry. But the development of the internet transformed the fan-artist relationship in considerable ways. Music fans were some of the first to adopt the internet as early as the 1980s to create email lists and fan clubs: a computer scientist at Stanford University, who was a Grateful Dead fan, used technology he developed to create one of the first mailing lists for Dead fans (Baym, 2018, p. 96). By the mid-90s, it was common practice for artists to have official websites associated with official fan clubs. These websites gave fans direct access to their favorite artists through forums or chat rooms, while also selling music, merchandise, concert tickets, and other exclusive perks (Théberge, 2005, p. 494).

The launch of MySpace, followed by Facebook and Twitter, marked a turning point in which the current social media marketing of music began to take shape. In the years following, artists and labels began to recognize that social networks were “central to building and maintaining these relationships and to acquiring and displaying the status markers that make people marketable” (Baym, 2018, p. 9). Artists had to start balancing fan relationships with enhancing their own marketability through the content and information they shared. For example, Taylor Swift is one of the most successful pop artists in the world and is known for her commitment to connecting with fans directly through social media, yet she recognizes that there

is value in “curating the way people see your life” through social media (Suskind, 2019), demonstrating the tension between fan relationships and economic advancement.

At the same time, the rise of social media provided new opportunities for fans: they were not only able to communicate directly with their favorite artists but fellow fans all over the world and form new online fan communities, or *fandoms*. Whereas fans were once simply dedicated consumers of music, fandoms became intrinsically participatory. Fans now engage in a wide range of activities, such as tweeting, blogging, creating fanart, writing fanfiction, fundraising, producing original merchandise, and more.

Yet the issue of marketability remains: artists must create and maintain relationships with fans through these platforms in such a way that preserves fan loyalty, and thus guarantees economic success. As this study will explore, One Direction’s marketing team utilized Twitter and YouTube when both platforms were still relatively new, which built an international fanbase almost overnight. Because of these efforts, fans of One Direction developed strong parasocial relationships with the band that have persisted years after the band went on a hiatus.

For this study, I chose to carry out a content analysis of One Direction’s Twitter account, as this platform was the core of the band’s marketing. To compare this to the fan perspective, I analyzed the content of one of the most followed One Direction fan accounts to better understand the activities of the fans and the ways they engage with the official band account. Additionally, I chose to carry out interviews with current and former fans of One Direction who had first-hand experience with not only fan activities on social media, but also the emotional aspects of being fans.

To understand the fan-artist relationship through the lens of promotional labor, this study posed the following questions:



**RQ1.** What types of content did the band account and fan account tweet, and in what ways did these accounts promote the band and encourage fans to do the same?

**RQ2.** Why were fans willing to perform promotional labor on the part of the band, and did they ever feel exploited by the band or its management and record label?

## **Literature Review**

### **Parasocial Relationships and Social Media**

Donald Horton and Richard Wohl (1956) observed that radio, television, and film “give the illusion of a face-to-face relationship with the performer,” which they called a “parasocial relationship” (p. 215). Through ongoing, seeming face-to-face interactions with a media persona, audience members develop one-sided, non-reciprocal relationships wherein,

“devotees ‘live with [the media persona]’ and share the small episodes of his public life – and to some extent even of his private life away from the show ... In time, the devotee – the ‘fan’ – comes to believe that he ‘knows’ the persona more intimately and profoundly than others do; that he ‘understands’ his character and appreciates his values and motives” (p. 216).

In other words, the seeming face-to-face interactions that fans have with media personae create a false sense of intimacy and closeness which often develops into what the fan perceives to be a friendship, mentorship, or familial relationship.

The present-day social media environment provides the same opportunities for parasocial relationships but to a further extent. Chung and Cho (2017) note that the widespread use of social media by celebrities and other media personae has changed the reciprocity of parasocial relationships: “These new media environments have narrowed the distance between audiences and celebrities and have altered the role of audiences from that of mere spectators or admirers to

‘friends’ of celebrities” (p. 482). The nature of social media is such that media personae frequently engage in self-disclosure, revealing honest thoughts and opinions, sharing photos of themselves with friends, family, and significant others, and updating their fans on personal and career-related news. Social media has the added benefit of interactivity: whereas film and television fans were once limited in their parasocial relationships, today’s fans have the opportunity to engage in direct communication with media personae.

In fact, Chung and Cho emphasize that the hope of one day receiving this kind of recognition from the media personae fans follow only strengthens their loyalty and dedication. Bond (2016) found that adolescents who received a retweet or reply from a celebrity on Twitter formed stronger emotional connections and therefore parasocial relationships than those who had not experienced the same sort of interaction. He further predicted that “computer-mediated communication with media personae may even have a greater impact on perceived intimacy than more traditional public appearances where audiences might engage in face-to-face interactions with their favorite celebrities like autograph signings” (p. 659), which is a pertinent observation in the context of artists’ social media presence.

### **The Economic Value of Fandom**

The music industry recognized the economic potential of the internet as early as the 1990s and developments in communication technologies facilitated the rise of online fan communities throughout the next decade. For the first time, music fans from all over the world could gather online to talk and share information about their favorite artist through fan websites and chat rooms, engendering a stronger sense of unity and belonging among them. More importantly, in many cases, online fan clubs also offered fans a connection to their favorite artist, which ultimately “benefits not only the fans, but also the performer and the record company, in

that it provides a connection to a central focus of the performer and the producer, the marketplace” (Kibby, 2000, p. 91). Online fan clubs were often created by record labels to promote their artists directly to fans, “[acting] as a conduit through which the fans’ desire for contact with the artist is channelled, at the same time as they serve as a means for the promotion of tours and commercial releases” (Théberge, 2005, p. 486).

The late 2000s and 2010s saw the rise and expansion of social media like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr, which enabled fans to not only engage with artists more directly and regularly, but also form large subcommunities — fandoms — within each of these social networks. Thus, social media today houses the coexistence of both participatory fandom activity and corporate artist marketing. Galuszka (2015) argues that one of the most important byproducts of social media is “the empowerment of audiences,” in which fans have the ability to participate in a wider variety of activities as well as organize as a collective in order to “exert pressure on the producers” (p. 27). Galuszka also emphasizes that there are many situations in which fans actually perform free labor for artists and their record labels, citing fans of Chinese singer Li Yuchan who “engage in the practice of ‘chart beating’ (voting for favorite songs to improve the artist’s chart position), the production and distribution of publications dedicated to their favorite star ... Such activities benefit [the fans’] favorite artist, but at the same time they generate profits for the two companies which hold Li Yuchun’s contracts” (p. 28).

Baym and Burnett (2009) also investigated this idea, asserting that fans act as “publicists, promoters, archivists, and curators” by discussing their favorite artists on social media, creating original content, and organizing events (p. 434). Fans often engage in these promotional activities for free, whereas record labels otherwise pay professionals to do the same work. There are also a number of costs associated with the work fans do, including “time, website costs,

burnout, balancing their music-oriented fan activities with their other responsibilities” (p. 442).

In these ways, it appears as though record labels are exploiting fans for their labor; however, Baym and Burnett point out that fans enjoy doing promotional work because it helps them build relationships with artists and they have the ability to make valuable contributions:

“To argue this is exploitation, one must assume that the rewards that fans attain are less valuable than those they deserve, and that the fans’ perceptions of their practices are evidence that they have been seduced by the power dynamic that exploits them ... These fans value spreading the pleasures they have enjoyed and building relationships with others ... more than they value cash” (p. 446).

In other words, record labels and media corporations may benefit financially from the free labor of fans, but according to Baym and Burnett, fans do not find this to be exploitative because they instead benefit emotionally by doing work for artists they care about with other fans who share their passion.

### **Social Media Marketing**

Business leaders have long recognized the potential of social media to build relationships with customers and ultimately foster brand loyalty. Social media marketing is a cornerstone of today’s economic environment, with many businesses now focused on relationship marketing, or “attracting, maintaining and ... enhancing customer relationships” (Berry, 2002, p. 61). It has relevance across industries: Nobre and Silva (2014) found that a number of small business owners enjoyed using Facebook to build customer relationships because “this media allowed the company to interact with the client in a unique way of immediacy and interactivity that no another [sic] channel provided” (p. 148).

When it comes to the world of music and celebrity, authenticity and a commitment to fan engagement are important facets of effective social media marketing: Salo et al. (2013) found that music fans are motivated to use social media because it encourages a sense of affinity with

artists, interaction with other fans, and opportunity for co-creation and access to artist content. There are a number of ways that brands, artists, and celebrities perform authenticity to their social media followings; for example, social media influencers present their promotion of products as authentic by “expressing creativity, such as original pictures, text, and the occasional video. Content typically takes the form of a mini-story linking the influencer's life with the product or service promoted” (Audrezet et al., 2018, p. 6). Further, the disclosure of personal and professional information through social media was found to positively affect fans’ parasocial relationships with celebrities by creating a stronger sense of social presence (Kim & Song, 2016, p. 574).

My study aims to bridge the gaps between these three areas of research, exploring social media marketing and relationship marketing specifically in the music industry, and how fans’ parasocial relationships with artists inform their willingness to become marketers and promoters themselves. Many of today’s biggest pop artists have used social media to build loyal, expansive fan bases around the world. Not only do these fans feel compelled to purchase music, concert tickets, and merchandise; they actively work to promote their favorite artists as well. Whereas the literature only briefly notes the implications of these relationships for social media marketing, my research aims to study this concept further, exploring the ways in which the emotional connections and perceived relationships that fans have with musicians form the basis for marketing strategies. I plan to include more updated research on the free labor fans perform through the current social media landscape, looking specifically at one of the past decade’s most popular artists and its fandom.

## Methodology

To better understand the fan-artist relationship created through social media and how it relates to artist marketing, the following study sought to investigate the content of the One Direction Twitter account and a prominent fan account during the week of an album release. A content analysis was conducted in an effort to better understand the types of content each account tweeted, the ways the band account encouraged fans to participate in the promotional process, and the ways the fan account promoted the band or encouraged its followers to do so.

A content analysis was chosen as a method of study in order to explore common promotional messages sent by the band as well as how fans typically interact with not just these messages but create promotional messages of their own throughout their everyday fan activities. Content analyses have been conducted in studies of various entertainment media to investigate other trends like brand promotion on Twitter (Greer & Ferguson, 2011) and the relationships between professional athletes and their fans (Frederick et al., 2014). Because social media, specifically Twitter, was at the core of One Direction's marketing, it is critical to analyze the account in order to develop a clear picture of the promotional messages they sent and how they encouraged fans to promote them as well. Because One Direction maintained a consistent presence on Twitter for several years, this is also where much of their fanbase congregated; for this reason, a prominent fan account was analyzed in order to observe and understand the attitudes and everyday activities of fans.

Additionally, this study also sought to understand how fans of One Direction view the band's marketing on social media, as well as their relationships with the band and the economic implications of these relationships. Interviews with fans of One Direction were conducted in an

effort to explore the emotional connections and perceived relationships that fans experience, and why they are motivated to perform the labor they do.

Interviews were chosen as an additional method to explore the more intangible aspects of this study; that is, the emotions fans felt for the band and perceived intimacy that existed.

Whereas a content analysis illustrates exactly the marketing strategies carried out and promotional activities fans participated in, it falls short in giving a more detailed account of the emotional and psychological experiences of fans; thus, the interviews aim to fill this gap.

Interviews have been conducted to study various aspects of entertainment media; in fact, Baym and Burnett (2009) used interviews as their method of study when investigating fan labor within Swedish music to understand the perspectives of both musicians and fans.

### **Sample and Scope of Analysis**

The content analysis in this study examined the tweets of two Twitter accounts: @onedirection and @Radio1Direction. The @onedirection account was chosen because it represents the band as a brand and also as a whole, as opposed to each individual band member's account. Thus, this account sent the majority of promotional messages from the band regarding music, merchandise, music videos, concerts, and more. It also actively sought engagement from fans in an effort to maintain the fan-artist relationship.

The @Radio1Direction account was chosen because it was one of the most prominent fan accounts within the One Direction fandom: as of the writing of this paper, the account still has over 116,000 followers five years after the band went on hiatus. Because of its popularity, @Radio1Direction acted as an influential voice within the fandom by providing updates on the band, posting exclusive content, and encouraging their followers to purchase music, vote for awards, or promote the band in other ways. By analyzing the messages that this account sent, we

can understand the types of promotional activities fans engaged in and how they perceived their relationships with the band.

To limit the scope of this study, I chose to analyze the tweets sent by both accounts between November 13 and November 20, 2014. This timeframe was chosen because the band's fourth album, *Four*, was released during this week on November 17, 2014. The album became one of the best-selling records of the year, and it made One Direction the first band in history to debut at number one in the U.S. with their first four albums (Caulfield, 2014). During this particular week, the band also announced their next single and music video, released an exclusive new track, performed at the charity event *BBC Children in Need*, held a private concert and promotional event called *IDOrlando*, and this was also the final week of voting for both the American Music Awards and the ARIA Awards that year. This week was an important time for social media promotion by the band as well as an exciting time for fans to hear new music, watch new performances, and engage with the band in new ways.

The interview subjects in this study were chosen based on their experience as One Direction fans on social media. Some subjects were sought out because of their participation in or creation of promotional accounts or projects, while others were simply fans who were once active, or still active, in the One Direction fan communities on either Twitter or Tumblr. All subjects were above the age of 18, but no other demographic parameters were placed on the sample.

### **Period Analysis**

One Direction formed on *The X Factor UK* in 2010, the beginning of a decade in which social media marketing became a necessity for not only musicians but all industries. The growth of social media marketing in the early 2010s coincided with the growth of fan communities on



social media like Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram. Throughout its time on the show and immediately following, One Direction used YouTube and Twitter to grow an international, social media-based fandom seemingly overnight, even before the band released music. For these reasons, One Direction and its fandom were one of the early groups to set the standard for the marketing and fan culture seen on social media today. Social media is integral to any musician's success in 2021 and by looking back on the marketing tactics of One Direction and the origins of its social media fandom, we can further understand the relationship between these two entities in music today.

### **Analyzing the Material**

For the content analysis, I used Twitter's Advanced Search feature to collect and organize all of the tweets sent by each account between November 13, 2014 and November 20, 2014. Based on my preliminary analysis of the content, I developed three main questions which served as broad categories for the type of message that was sent by each tweet. Those categories were then broken down based on the actual content of the tweet and these subcategories were assigned codes. Each tweet was then coded based on the message and content it contained. Tweets were not limited to only one code; indeed, many of the tweets fell under more than one code. However, each code was tallied individually as part of its main category.

Tweets from the @onedirection account were coded based on the kind of messages they sent, which were categorized into three main questions:

1. Is it promoting any of their products, including music and music videos (MU), merchandise (ME), concerts (C), events or awards (E), and brand partners (BP)?

2. Is it engaging fans directly through reply tweets or follows (D) or indirectly through requests for fan art, replies, or involvement in challenges (I)?
3. Does it offer exclusive content like behind-the-scenes photos and video (BTS) or early access to tickets, events, or music (EA)?

These three categories stood out as the main types of messages sent by the band account and all contain an element of either product promotion or relationship marketing.

Tweets from the @Radio1Direction account were also coded based on the kind of messages they sent, which were similar but not exactly the same as those of the @onedirection account since the goals of each account are different. The messages for @Radio1Direction were categorized into three main questions:

1. Does it mention any of the band's products, including music and music videos (MU), merchandise (ME), concerts (C), event or award (E), and brand partners (BP)?
2. Is it directly engaging with other fans (F) or the band (B) via replies or requests for replies?
3. Does it offer exclusive content like updates about the band and its members (UP) or new photos and videos of the band members (PH)?

These three categories stood out as the main types of messages sent by the fan account but are worded differently to account for the fact that fan accounts engage in a more grassroots form of promotion: by simply tweeting opinions on music or voting for an award, the account is contributing to the band's overall exposure, as opposed to a strategic marketing plan. This

account also does the important work of keeping its thousands of followers interested in the band by engaging with them as peers but also offering exclusive updates and content, which ultimately works to the band's advantage.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-scripted style; that is, I used a general set of questions to form the basis for each interview, but also allowed myself and my interviewees some flexibility with questions and answers, depending on the subject's experience and where the conversation led. Questions were asked of interviewees in a funnel style, meaning more specific questions were asked first, then broader questions by the end. The first half of the interview was spent learning about each subject's experience as a fan; generally, they were asked how and why they became a fan, how they perceived their relationship with the band, how they viewed the band's marketing, what kind of activities they engaged in as a fan, and why they did so. The latter set of questions dealt with the heart of my study: the subjects were asked to share their thoughts on the motivations behind and the implications of promotional work performed by fans.

## **Findings**

***RQ1. What types of content did the band account and fan account tweet, and in what ways did these accounts promote the band and encourage fans to do the same?***

This analysis studied a total of 83 tweets from the @onedirection account. It was found that 90.4% of these tweets were promotional, meaning they included mention of any of the band's products. 69.3% of the promotional tweets were about events or awards while 40.0% were about music and 5.3% mentioned a brand partner. It was also found that 50.6% of these tweets offered exclusive content to fans, of which 92.9% included behind-the-scenes content and 9.5% offered early or exclusive access to a product or to content. Out of these 83 tweets, only

9.6% included an element of engagement with fans, which was split evenly between direct and indirect engagement. Finally, 6.0% of these tweets were deemed “Other.” These consisted of a tweet about the band’s involvement in a charity auction and four nonsensical tweets from one of the band members.

This analysis then studied a total of 513 tweets from the @Radio1Direction account. It was found that 39.8% of these tweets included mention of one of the band’s products, of which 61.8% mentioned an event or award while 47.6% mentioned music. It was also found that 32.0% of tweets offered exclusive content to followers, which was split almost evenly between updates about the band and new photos and videos of the band members. 31.2% of these tweets included direct engagement with other fans (88.6%) or the band (15.0%). Finally, 16.0% of the tweets were deemed “Other,” which consisted of tweets about the account owner’s personal life, jokes or memes about the band, or other topics not directly relating to the band.

The @onedirection account encouraged participation in promotion in both direct and indirect ways. During this particular week of tweets, the band had a number of events occurring, most notably a two-day album release event called *IDOrlando*. The band was also nominated for the American Music Awards and the ARIA Awards, for which voting took place during this week. The band’s Twitter presence reflected these events: 62.6% of the total tweets in this sample included mention of an event or award. Some of these tweets directly encouraged fans to vote for the band to win an award:

“Last week to vote for 1D as 'Artist of the Year' at @TheAMAs! Don’t miss their performance at the show on 11/23. <http://bit.ly/AMA1D>”  
(@onedirection, n.d.)

while many simply used a hashtag: 48.2% of the sample’s tweets included “#1DOrlando.”

The next most common type of tweet from this account was one that offered some sort of exclusive content. 47.0% of the total tweets in this sample included behind-the-scenes photos

and videos of the band, while only 4.8% offered early or exclusive access to content—though it is notable that one of the early access items was a brand new song from the album. Throughout the events that occurred during this week, the band consistently posted new photos and videos to Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. This content plays the important role of building and maintaining the fan-artist relationship, by offering fans a coveted look backstage thus enhancing the false sense of intimacy they feel with the band and indirectly encouraging promotional work.

Although fan engagement was limited in comparison to other categories, the account used it as a way to indirectly encourage promotional efforts from fans. For example:

“US Fans! Sony is looking for the biggest fans @ #1DOrlando! Tweet @Sony w/ #Sony1D for a chance to win! Rules <http://bit.ly/sony1drules>”

“How about a #1DOrlando follow spree to celebrate the guy's performances?”

A “follow spree” is when an account follows a large number of their followers back, as long as they perform a certain action—in this case, tweeting at the band using the event hashtag.

So-called “follow sprees” allow fans the chance to earn a coveted “follow back” while also giving the band and the band’s hashtag an increase in mentions and exposure.

The account also engaged with fans by asking questions like these regarding their new album and upcoming music video:

“The guys want your reviews of each track from FOUR. RTs for the best. Today #StealMyGirl”

“So, what's your favourite lyric from #FOUR?”

“Ever wondered what a date with each of the guys would be like? #NightChanges”

Tweets like these foster discussion, excitement, and engagement from fans in the form of tweets, retweets, views, and likes, which ultimately promote the band and its music.

The @Radio1Direction account played a much more dynamic role within the fandom when compared to the @onedirection account. This is demonstrated by the fact that this account's tweets were split almost evenly between the three categories of content: products (39.8%), engagement (31.2%), and exclusive content (32.0%). This account offers followers a wider range of content than the band account which plays a different role than the direct marketing we see on the band account.

In some ways, the fan account mirrored the messaging of the band account with tweets about awards:

“I'm voting for @onedirection for #AMAs #AOTY, vote again today via <http://AMAVote.com> <http://bit.ly/AMA1D>” (@Radio1Direction, n.d.)

“#MTVStars is back!!! Tweet or retweet to vote!!! #MTVStars One Direction”

Across this week of tweets, the account went on to tweet 80 more times with the hashtag “#MTVStars” and many of those tweets received reply tweets from other fans that also included the hashtag. All in all, 24.6% of the total tweets in this sample mentioned an event or award while 19.0% of the tweets mentioned the band's music. This account consistently kept the band's products and promotional efforts at the forefront of its content.

Where these accounts differed, however, was in their engagement with fans and in the exclusivity of their content. 27.7% of the fan account's tweets directly engaged with other fans, which consisted of sharing jokes or providing information:

“@MagiccMalikk YouTube! @onedirection tweeted a link -K”

“@julialovesharry they didn't perform a song! - A”

This account, along with a number of others across fandoms, is referred to as an “update account” because it provides just that: updates on the band. 17.7% of the account's tweets

included an update, whether it was attributed to another account or “via insiders.” The band were guests on *The Ellen Degeneres Show* and *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* on November 20, and it appeared @Radio1Direction had other fans—“insiders”—in attendance feeding them exclusive information about what happened at the tapings for these shows as well as what the band members were doing while in Los Angeles:

“[Niall and Harry] just left the 1975 concert via insider”

“THE BOYS ARE ON JIMMY KIMMEL NOW! (Via insider)”

“So Ellen asks how many years the boys have been together and Harry takes the FOUR album and shoves it in her face (via insider)”

“My insider (@angelajoyxcalum) and Liam tonight! [photo]”

Along with updates, this account also provides exclusive photos and videos taken by fans or even by friends and family members of the band. Where the band account may have been limited in its engagement with fans, the fan account more than made up for it. Through its engagement and provision of exclusive content, this account does the work of keeping fans truly invested in the band.

***RQ2. Why were fans willing to perform promotional labor on the part of the band, and did they ever feel exploited by the band or its management and record label?***

A total of five fans—Rachel, Allie, Heather, Nina, and Bella—were interviewed for this study. Their names have been changed in this paper for confidentiality purposes.

When interviewing my subjects, I first aimed to get a sense of how these fans perceived their relationship to the band in order to confirm that parasocial relationships did indeed exist for these fans and were perhaps a factor in their willingness to perform free labor. When asked what initially attracted them to One Direction, Rachel, Heather, and Nina all cited the band being funny and fun to watch, while Rachel, Allie, Bella, and Nina also made mention of the band’s

music being a factor. When asked specifically how they would describe their relationship to the band, Rachel and Allie, for example, articulated similar parasocial experiences:

“At one point, I felt like I knew them. Like we were besties, you know? Through Twitter and social media and through their videos and DVD stuff they would have, they really made you feel like you got to know them. And it was, I think, really the first time with the use of social media that you could feel so connected to a band.”

“Back when One Direction was together, the relationship felt very personal because you kind of feel like you know them through their video diaries and through their interviews and everything. It felt almost like they were friends with their fans.”

The subjects experienced the feeling of “knowing” the band members personally and being friends with them, as Horton and Wohl (1956) described in their initial observations of parasocial interactions. The subjects also attribute this experience to the band’s social media presence, promotional interviews, and documentaries, which follows the logic behind relationship marketing. Interestingly, Allie went on to add that looking back, she realizes that “it was just their personalities for interviews and stuff that [she] thought was so personal,” implying that she believes the band that she felt like she “knew” from promotional content and social media was not who they truly were. This remark demonstrates an acknowledgement on the part of fans of the reality of this relationship; that is, a “consumer-producer relationship,” as Nina put it. When looking back at her time as a fan while the band was still active, she describes the experience as “practically a full time job, but an enjoyable time.” Rachel later also remarked that being a fan “felt like a job,” but still found joy in it because of the friends and community she found through the band. Despite the emotional benefits, both subjects make it clear that memories of being a fan are associated with labor.



Similarly, the subjects were cognizant of the business side and profit motives of One Direction, particularly in regard to the band's social media marketing efforts:

“They were a business. Their marketing team just worked them, that's definitely how they became so popular. People felt like they knew them.”

“But the One Direction handle specifically for all of their social media I always thought was kind of manufactured, like it didn't seem like it was really them.”

“I still feel like even the most spontaneous post is still controlled and made under a marketing perspective. Each member has a specific personality that still wants to sell to the public. It's business after all.”

“The band's social media presence was ... the main thing that kept fans engaged, and without it I don't think they would've been as successful.”

While each subject made mention of the band's business goals, Bella made multiple mentions of the band's corporate team specifically. In fact, she cited it as a motivating factor for her to participate in Project No Control, the fan project previously discussed in the introduction of this paper: “His team wasn't interested in releasing this as a single, so I thought that sharing fans' excitement about the song using the fandom power was the best thing we could do.” She later went on to add that fans believed the band's team was too focused on publicity stunts at the time of the project, and that “fans were really frustrated by all of that and decided to take the matter in their hands in the best way they could think of, using social media.” Because they felt the band wasn't being promoted properly by its record label and management team, fans felt responsible for organizing marketing efforts themselves. Rachel echoed this sentiment, saying, “I think the fans definitely took a lot of promotional stuff into their own hands just because they were so passionate about it and because they could through the use of social media.”

My interview subjects participated in a range of fan activities on social media, including blogging, tweeting, talking with other fans, sharing photos, creating merchandise to sell on Etsy, making fan art, participating in fan projects, and running an update account. When asked, all five subjects agreed that at least some of these activities were promotional in nature, because they recognized that many of these activities had the goal of helping the band reach a wider audience or impacting music charts, which is similar to what Galuska (2015) observed in his study of Chinese pop music fans.

Not all subjects made mention of being motivated to participate in these activities by the lack of promotional work done by the band's team, however. For example, Heather has put "blood, sweat, and tears" into running a popular update account on Twitter, admitting that she initially "didn't realize how much work went into it" and that "it would be nice to receive a paycheck for all the hours we put in." Yet, when asked why she believes fans are so motivated to do promotional work, she said:

"I'd say the biggest motivator is giving back to the artists. As fans we feel like they give us so much just by sharing themselves with us, and the only thing we as fans can really give them is success, so we try to do that wherever possible."

Rachel and Bella later described similar motivations, such as wanting to see the band succeed and be recognized by others for their music, as well as wanting to express their love and support for the band. Nina and Allie made mentions of wanting to prove that they were "good fans" by doing what they could to help the band earn recognition. These answers suggest that parasociality played a part in the fans' willingness to perform promotional labor on the part of the band. Because these subjects felt connected to the band—like they were "friends," as Rachel and Allie put it earlier—they wanted to see the band succeed and even felt responsible for promoting the band when they felt that the band's team wasn't doing enough.

But this voluntary, yet free promotional labor has inherent economic implications to consider. When asked about their thoughts on fans not being compensated for the promotional work they do, Heather was the only subject to remark that a paycheck “would be nice,” implying that she believes, to some extent, that the work she does in helping run an update account is valuable and worthy of compensation. Yet, she also finds the emotional rewards worthwhile:

“Honestly, and this might sound cheesy, we do it out of love for these two boys and it’s a lot of work but it’s worth it for getting to be a part of their journeys and help them succeed.”

On the other hand, three of the subjects believed that compensation was not necessary because it is typically voluntary and done out of love and support for the artist:

“Even though [the work] ends up being promotional, it starts from a supportive standpoint. So even though it helps the band, I can see why they aren’t paid.”

“Nobody on the artist’s side demands fans to run any project for them ... if they started to pay fans, this very important element of passion and love for something would be lost in 10 seconds. Fans should be more appreciated and ‘loved’ for what they do and represent, sure, but not paid.”

“I don’t mind that it’s unpaid, because for the most part it’s entirely voluntary. I don’t think most fans would desire being paid, too. They’d probably want recognition from their favorite artist more than anything.”

Rachel agreed with these sentiments initially, but had a caveat:

“But when it comes to artists trying to use that to their own advantage, like if they tweet out ‘Let’s get this trending!’ or ‘Let’s vote for me!’ or something like that, then I’m kind of like, ‘No...’ Like do your own promotional work. Don’t try to involve the fans like that. I think it kind of uses them. And most of them are so young that they don’t really care.”

With this statement, she brings up the issue of agency: she believes promotional work done by fans of their own volition is not a problem, but becomes one when they are compelled by an

artist to do things like vote for awards or trend a hashtag. She also brings up the issue of age and consent: she later went on to explain that she finds it “a little twisted” when marketing efforts by artists and their teams target young fans on social media because it takes advantage of their impressionability, meaning “they’ll do or say whatever for what they feel like they have a passion for,” whereas “older fans are usually aware of that and won’t do something if they don’t want to do it.”

In the band’s 2013 documentary, Simon Cowell, the owner of their record label, described early fans of the band as “promoters” because of the work they did in spreading the band’s popularity through Twitter (Spurlock, 2013). When asked about this quote, Rachel had a similar response as she did to my previous question:

“I definitely don’t think they should be like, relying on the fans to do that ... I think that goes into a little bit of dangerous waters. Because it’s usually like 12, 13, 14 year old girls and to call them ‘promoters’ is a bit weird.”

She once again speaks to the issue of age, finding it problematic to rely on young fans to perform promotional labor—a point which perhaps implies questions of child labor. Yet, the other four subjects found no issues with this quote, and agreed that fans are essential to any artist’s success:

“I think that’s the smartest way to promote an artist is through fans. Like, I’m thinking of Taylor Swift. When Taylor Swift does no interviews or anything promotional, like for *Reputation*, it was kind of the fans own free will of just wanting everyone to know what she was doing that kind of promoted that album and tour.”

“Fans are everything. If you are an artist working in any field, you go nowhere without fans’ support ... [Fans] were the main promoter and marketer of [One Direction] throughout their whole career really, the support never ceased nor faltered, and this played a very big part in their success.”

“Fandoms are an amazing support system for the artist and will push something further than any professional team would.”

“Fans are vital in teams for these kinds of things because they have an idea of what fans actually want and enjoy engaging with.”

Thus far, my subjects have agreed that many fandom activities are promotional in nature and that some, such as running an update account, require hours of hard work reminiscent of a full time job. They agreed that utilizing fans in marketing efforts is smart and even vital to an artist’s success. They have also all agreed that being compensated for promotional work is unnecessary and likely undesirable on the part of fans because they do the work voluntarily to show their support and help the band succeed. Yet, when I asked my subjects about the issue of exploitation—that is, whether or not they believed fans were ever taken advantage of or exploited for their promotional labor—I received mixed responses.

Although Rachel was the only subject to bring up the “twisted” implications of young fans being used for marketing efforts, she refrained from calling it exploitation:

“I don’t know if I’d go so far as to say that because everything was so new, social media was so new when One Direction was formed, I don’t think people were kind of aware of what was going on and if it was wrong or right.”

Similarly, Heather believed that because fans “happily take it upon themselves to do promotional work for the artists and enjoy being a part of their success” that there is no exploitation involved, despite being the only subject to state that receiving compensation for her work “would be nice.” Allie, however, distinguished between the exploitation of physical labor, such as work done by Street Teams<sup>2</sup>, versus labor done on social media:

“I think physical labor, going out and promoting the band, is kind of exploitative if you’re making fans do that. But when it comes to just social media, if fans are reposting and starting campaigns on their own, I don’t think they’re being exploited in that way.”

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<sup>2</sup> “Street Teams” are groups of fans typically organized by record labels and artists to facilitate grassroots, “street” marketing efforts, such as distributing flyers and stickers, hanging up posters, or calling radio stations.

With this statement, she brings up a question of the inherent value of various forms of labor, implying that digital labor is not as valuable as physical labor. On the other hand, although Bella stated earlier that “being a music fan is not a job,” she “absolutely” believed that fans were exploited:

“For [One Direction] specifically, their team was very aware of the presence of fans on social media platforms and tried to use them and control them for whatever they needed ... It is also well known that fans were monitored on social media so they could check their thoughts and opinions before planning their next marketing move.”

Here, she seems to define exploitation as an issue of “using” and “controlling” fans via social media for marketing purposes, which again brings up the issue of agency that Rachel spoke to earlier. Bella did not believe that fans should be compensated for labor that is done voluntarily, yet still believes fans were taken advantage of through social media. Interestingly, Nina seemed to experience a similar contradiction in belief:

“I do think there are occasions where fans are taken advantage of for promotional labor. Although I said their partaking in the promo is voluntary because they feel like they have to or it makes them a good fan, there is some form of pre-existing mentality that causes them to feel this way in the first place which could possibly be influenced by the labels or artists.”

She brings up an interesting observation here, in that fans have a “pre-existing mentality” created by labels or artists which motivates them to perform promotional labor. Perhaps what we are seeing is not an outright coercion of fans, but something more indirect—such as strategic relationship marketing—that influences fans to believe the free labor they perform is necessary.

Needless to say, there is disagreement and ambivalence when it comes to the issue of the exploitation of fans. Although my subjects were generally in agreement as to the motivations of

fans to perform promotional labor—that is, wanting to show support, express their passion, and help the band succeed—it is difficult to conclude whether or not fans felt exploited for their work, or if exploitation took place at all.

### **Discussion**

The content analysis suggests that relationship marketing was at the forefront of One Direction's marketing tactics. Although an overwhelming number of the total tweets included an element of promotion, it was quite often tied to fan engagement or an offer of exclusive content. As was explained by Berry (2002), relationship marketing is about maintaining and enhancing customer relationships; fan engagement and exclusive content do just that. Fans are motivated to use social media because it encourages a sense of affinity with artists through the interaction it provides, and in fact, the disclosure of exclusive information and content strengthens parasocial relationships (Chung & Cho, 2017; Kim & Song, 2016; Salo et al. 2013). The One Direction Twitter account encouraged fans to perform promotional labor in some direct ways, but much of this encouragement seemed to come indirectly, through strategic relationship marketing.

This study also suggests that fans do actively play the roles of publicist and promoter, as Baym and Burnett (2009) described, because the fan account in question frequently promoted the band's music and events. But I would argue that the fan account also played another role, one of influence and authority in the fandom. Although it did directly promote the band's music and awards in some cases, much of this account's value seems to come from its engagement and offering of exclusive content, though in different ways than the band account. By engaging directly with its followers and fellow fans, @Radio1Direction maintained a sense of community in the fandom—one of the main reasons fans use social media (Salo et al., 2013)—and also maintained its reputation as a source of information. The account's offerings of insider

information and content help build the parasocial intimacy that Horton and Wohl (1956) described, while also proving the account's authority as an influential voice in the fandom that can motivate others to promote the band. In the end, this account's labor benefits the band by not only actively promoting their products but also keeping their thousands of followers invested in the band, emotionally and financially.

Further, this study suggests that parasocial relationships were indeed a factor in fans' willingness to perform free labor. My interview subjects described the experience of "knowing" the band as if they were good friends, as Horton and Wohl (1956) described in their observations of parasocial interactions. Because my interview subjects pointed to social media, YouTube videos, and other forms of promotional content as being the channels through which they got to "know" the band members, we can conclude that relationship marketing through social media played a role in cultivating the perceived intimacy and loyalty fans felt for the band. When it comes to promotional work, my interview subjects repeatedly described being motivated by wanting to see the band succeed and earn recognition for its music beyond the fandom, as well as wanting to express their love and support for the band. Without the relationship-building that was facilitated through the band's social media accounts, fans may not have been able to experience this same feeling of intimacy and friendship that motivated them to want to promote the band and help it succeed materially.

What is less clear, however, is the question of exploitation. In discussing their perspectives on whether or not exploitation took place, my subjects inadvertently brought up a number of important issues to consider: how does the agency of fans affect the existence of exploitation? Should we be concerned about the possibility of child labor when it is mostly



minors that are performing this free labor? Is labor performed via the internet and social media as valuable as physical labor?

With all of these issues, however, we still come back to my initial question: did the fans ever feel exploited by the band or its management and record label? My subjects were ambivalent. On the one hand, my interview findings could suggest the belief expressed by some of my subjects, as well as by Baym and Burnett (2009), that fans are not exploited because the labor they perform is done so happily and voluntarily, and that fans would likely not even desire being compensated because the emotional and social benefits they receive, such as the pleasure of being a fan and being part of a community, are more valuable than any financial compensation would be. But I cannot say definitively that these arguments necessarily exclude the possibility of exploitation. Can labor still be exploited even if workers are participating voluntarily, particularly when they are minors? In the context of labor, is emotional compensation truly the same as financial compensation?

On the other hand, my study's findings as a whole could suggest that the intimacy and loyalty fans felt for One Direction was strategically cultivated through social media, then exploited for promotional benefit. Through my content analysis, we can see that relationship marketing was at the forefront of the band's marketing tactics, and through my interviews we see that it was indeed successful at developing parasocial relationships. We also see that one of the motivating factors for fans in performing promotional labor was wanting to help the band succeed because of the perceived relationship they had.

Fans may have had the goal of supporting the band itself through their free labor, but at the end of the day, they were also helping to generate profits for One Direction's record label, management company, brand partners, and any other corporation that held contracts with the

band, just as Galuska (2015) concluded in his study of Chinese pop music fans. Yet, fans were happy to continue doing this work, even when it felt like a full time job, and they hesitate to say they were exploited. This, then, brings me to the idea that perhaps fans were in a state akin to Marx's false consciousness; in other words, did these corporations lead fans to believe that performing this work benefited them the same way it benefited the band when in fact, their passion and loyalty was ultimately being used for profit?

My paper can only begin to answer these questions, as the ambivalence of fans is clear: fans wanted to perform promotional labor to support the band, yet they also recognized, to a certain extent, that this labor was valuable and was potentially exploited. But whether it was definitively exploitation or not, the implications of these questions are important to consider. The social media marketing environment we experience today blurs the lines between production and consumption in revealing ways, and this study has provided just one example. Fans of One Direction speak of their time as fans as enjoyable yet labor-intensive because of an obligation they felt to promote the band and help it prosper, which is symptomatic of the capitalist digital environment we live within today. Not only that, but social media creates the opportunity for celebrities, elected officials, corporations and other powerful figures to cultivate parasocial relationships in ways that can be manipulated in the pursuit of greater power and success. More than anything, we must consider the ways in which social media and the marketing tactics used across platforms can create an economic environment in which consumers can be taken advantage of and even exploited, physically, emotionally, financially, and politically.

This study had notable limitations. While my goal was to limit the scope of the content analysis by analyzing only the @onedirection account as opposed to each band member's account, this also limited my view of the fan-artist relationship I sought to study. The five

members of One Direction had active Twitter accounts during the timeframe that was studied and these were other avenues through which they could promote their products and engage with fans, but also through which fans' parasocial relationships were strengthened. I also limited my scope of analysis by choosing to study only seven days of tweets, but this additionally limited my view as the band was active for a span of five years in total. Additionally, due to unforeseen delays in IRB approval, my research time was much shorter than expected. For this reason, my interview sample was extremely small, and cannot fully represent the experiences and perspectives of One Direction fans.

Based on this study, I would recommend that future research broaden this area of study to explore other artists and genres to discern whether these findings are common across the industry or possibly dependent on different factors. Research could also continue to investigate the state of the music industry with respect to digital and social media in general, particularly with some of today's most successful artists. Pop artists such as Shawn Mendes and Billie Eilish have risen to international fame within the past decade through their use of social media, without the traditional use of scouts or talent shows. On the other hand, as music fandoms continue to expand on social media, the free labor they provide to artists and record labels should continue to be critically analyzed, particularly when artists openly attempt to take advantage of their fan base; for example, when Justin Bieber posted instructions to his fans on Twitter and Instagram for how to get his single to number one on iTunes and Spotify (Deahl, 2020). Future research should also continue to explore the economic implications of social media marketing within other industries, and in particular, how an emphasis on relationship marketing enhances its benefits for producers, but also creates the opportunity for the exploitation of consumers.

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