Jurnal Ekonomi, Manajemen, dan Bisnis
2026, Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 73-87
E-ISSN: 3031-7150

Between Illusion and Loyalty: Deconstructing Parasocial Relationships in Celebrity Endorsement on Fan Loyalty Using a Grounded Theory Approach

Dewa Putu Yohanes Agata L. Sandopart [1]✉
(1) Faculty of Economics, Institut Bisnis dan Informatika Kosgoro 1957, Indonesia

Abstract: The phenomenon of fans transforming from passive consumers into "digital warriors" who willingly sacrifice personal resources to defend their idols has created a new paradox in contemporary consumer behavior. Although previous research has confirmed the influence of parasocial relationships on purchase intentions, a critical gap lies in the inability of mainstream quantitative approaches to capture the transformational mechanism through which this imaginary relationship gradually crystallizes into transcendent loyalty that surpasses economic rationality. This study aims to construct a theoretical model explaining the transformation process of parasocial relationships into fan loyalty within the context of product endorsement. Using a grounded theory approach, this research involved 24 participants from three fan bases, including K-pop, football, and Indonesian musicians, through in-depth semi-structured interviews and digital document analysis. The findings produced a Three-Stage Parasocial Loyalty Transformation Model consisting of the Awakening phase, characterized by initial contact triggered by algorithms and identity seeking, the Immersion phase, marked by emotional and financial investment through digital rituals, and the Transcendence phase, where loyalty becomes naturalized as habitus. This study identifies a new concept referred to as "sacred loyalty," a form of loyalty that adopts characteristics of devotion and actively rejects contradictory evidence. Theoretical implications include extending the parasocial relationship framework by incorporating dimensions of sacralization and digital collective engagement, while practical implications are directed toward marketers and media policymakers.

Article history:
Received: 10 February 2026
Revised: 15 March 2026
Accepted: 26 April 2026
Published: 30 April 2026

Keyword:
Parasocial Relationship, Fan Loyalty, Grounded Theory, Celebrity Endorsement, Sacred Loyalty

This is an open-access article under the CC-BY-SA License.

How to cite: Sandopart, D. P. Y. A. L. (2026). Between Illusion and Loyalty: Deconstructing Parasocial Relationships in Celebrity Endorsement on Fan Loyalty Using a Grounded Theory Approach. *Jurnal Ekonomi, Manajemen, dan Bisnis, 4*(2), 73–87. https://doi.org/10.70716/emis.v4i2.489

INTRODUCTION

On April 2, 2023, the Indonesian digital sphere was shaken by what media observers called a "digital civil war": more than 840,000 tweets within 48 hours flooded the X platform (formerly Twitter) when fans of two major K-pop groups engaged in mutual attacks using automated bots and mass reporting to bring down each other's trending topics. This was not merely an exchange of opinions—it was a coordinated mobilization with command centers, rapid response teams, and strategic narrative framing.

This phenomenon is not an anomaly. Data from We Are Social (2023) shows that 68% of social media users in Southeast Asia admit to having a "strong emotional bond" with celebrities they have never met in person. In Indonesia, a Jakpat survey (2022) found that the average K-pop fan spends IDR 2.7 million per month on official merchandise, paid streaming, and donation drives—an amount difficult to explain through classical rational choice theory frameworks.

Even more interesting is the paradox of negative information: when a beloved celebrity becomes involved in a scandal (from moral issues to criminal cases), rather than abandoning their

✉ *Corresponding author:* ***drdewaibik57@gmail.com***
Copyright © 2026, the author(s)

idol, fans intensify their support. This "I will love you no matter what" phenomenon poses a serious academic puzzle. When Seungri from BIGBANG was convicted in connection with the Burning Sun case, international fan communities actually raised $50,000 for "moral support." When a famous Indonesian footballer was involved in a domestic violence case, his official fanbase issued a statement calling him a "victim of media conspiracy."

What is happening here? Classical economic rationality fails to explain this. Cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) provides only a partial answer. The parasocial relationship argument (Horton & Wohl, 1956) requires further elaboration. This gap is the starting point of this research.

The concept of parasocial interaction (PSI) was introduced by Horton & Wohl (1956) in the television era—when audiences developed an illusion of intimacy with news anchors or sitcom characters. They called it "intimacy at a distance": a one-way relationship in which the media persona provides a "face-to-face" illusion through direct address and consistent performance.

Half a century later, this concept has undergone dramatic revitalization. Digitalization has transformed PSI from passive consumption into active co-construction. Fans no longer merely watch—they comment, share, live-tweet, write fan fiction, and interact with thousands of other fans who share the same obsession. Reinikainen et al. (2020) call this the "parasocial renaissance": an era in which the boundary between social and parasocial has become fundamentally blurred.

Empirical research on PSI in the context of endorsement has produced relatively consistent findings. Suprawan et al. (2025) found that social media use significantly influences celebrity worship, which in turn affects brand love and online brand advocacy. Centeno & Wang (2017) demonstrated how fans participate in co-creating celebrity identities as human brands. Other studies have shown that perceived homophily (perceived value similarity between fan and celebrity) is a strong predictor of PSI, which then influences attitudes toward brands.

Anindyasari (2019), in a quantitative study, found that parasocial interaction significantly influences parasocial relationships, which subsequently affect endorser credibility and purchase intention among Syahrini fans. A study in Taiwan by Liu & Huang (2019) confirmed that PSI positively influences six types of loyalty behavior among independent band fans.

However, beneath the consistency of these findings lies a critical gap that has escaped attention. 1). The dominance of quantitative approaches—with structured questionnaires and Likert scales—forces the complex reality of PSI into predetermined categories. Quantitative research measures PSI as a static variable, whereas fan experience is a dynamic and dialectical process that changes over time, intensity, and context. 2). Existing studies tend to focus on outcomes (purchase intention, loyalty) without capturing the transformational process “how” an initially loose relationship transforms into an unbreakable bond. As acknowledged by Chung & Cho (2017), linear cause-effect models cannot explain why some fans develop "extreme" loyalty while others remain at ordinary engagement levels.3). Previous research has overlooked the role of community in mediating and intensifying PSI. Horton & Wohl (1956) wrote in an era when media consumption was an individual activity. Today, PSI occurs within a digital ecosystem where fans not only relate to celebrities but also to thousands of other "parasocial friends"—fellow fans who mutually reinforce commitment through digital collective effervescence. 4), there remains an unresolved paradox: why does negative information about a celebrity—which should reduce endorser credibility—often strengthen loyalty instead? Centeno's (2021) study on xenocentric mindsets provides clues that cultural identity moderates responses to negative information, but the specific psychological mechanisms remain a black box.

Copyright © 2026, the author(s). This is an open access article under the CC-BY-SA License.

Parasocial relationships have become a central phenomenon in 21st-century consumer behavior. With the global celebrity economy valued at $50 billion (Forbes, 2023) and influencer marketing having grown 300% since 2019 (Business Insider, 2023), understanding the mechanisms of fan loyalty is no longer an academic luxury but a pressing necessity. Existing theories—rooted in 1950s media psychology—require revision and extension to remain relevant.

Indonesia's creative industry, contributing 7.2% to national GDP (Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy, 2022), heavily depends on fan monetization. From merchandise, concert tickets, fan meetings, to digital content, fan loyalty is the backbone of the creative economy. Misunderstanding the mechanisms of loyalty can produce counterproductive exploitation or detrimental missed opportunities.

The phenomenon of toxic fandom—from cyberbullying to financial exploitation—is increasingly alarming. Without an understanding of how "sacred" loyalty forms, interventions to protect fans (especially adolescents) from exploitation will remain trial and error.

Based on the identified gaps and urgency, this research aims to: 1) Construct a theoretical model of the transformation process from parasocial relationships to fan loyalty in the context of product endorsement, using a Grounded Theory approach. 2). Identify psychological and socio-digital mechanisms that mediate the relationship between PSI intensity and manifestations of extreme loyalty. 3). Explore the role of fan communities in strengthening, maintaining, and in some cases, correcting individual loyalty. 4).Explain the negative information paradox: why contradictory evidence about celebrities often does not reduce, and even strengthens, fan loyalty.

Specifically, this research seeks to answer the following questions: 1). How is the transformation process of parasocial relationships—from initial contact to deep loyalty—experienced and narrated by fans? 2). What factors distinguish fans with "ordinary" loyalty from those who develop "extreme/sacred" loyalty? 3). How do digital fan communities function as mediators and moderators in parasocial relationships with celebrities? 4). What psychological mechanisms explain the phenomenon of post-scandal loyalty intensification?

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs the Constructivist Grounded Theory approach as developed by Kathy Charmaz (2014). This choice is based on profound methodological considerations. 1). Grounded Theory (GT) is the most appropriate approach when the research objective is constructing theory from data—rather than testing existing theory. The phenomenon of parasocial relationship transformation into fan loyalty is an under-theorized domain. Existing quantitative models (e.g., PSI Process Scale, Celebrity Worship Scale) indeed measure intensity, but do not explain process and mechanisms. GT enables researchers to "learn from participants" and allow theoretical categories to emerge inductively. 2). Charmaz's constructivist approach explicitly acknowledges that knowledge is co-constructed between researcher and participant. This is crucial because parasocial relationships are highly subjective experiences embedded in socio-cultural contexts. Researchers cannot pretend to be "neutral observers" measuring variables from a safe distance; rather, they must reflexively engage in the process of mutual interpretation. 3). GT provides specific methodological tools—constant comparative method, theoretical sampling, staged coding—that enable rigor in qualitative research. This addresses criticisms that qualitative research is "merely descriptive" or "unsystematic."

Copyright © 2026, the author(s). This is an open access article under the CC-BY-SA License.

The researcher acknowledges that this phenomenon could be approached through various methodologies. Therefore, explicit justification is necessary. 1) Why not quantitative (surveys/experiments)? Surveys can measure relationships between variables (e.g., "the higher the PSI, the higher the loyalty"), but cannot answer why that relationship occurs. Experiments can test causality under controlled conditions, but laboratory artificiality cannot reproduce the complexity of fans' lived experience—including temporal dynamics, community interactions, and surrounding cultural contexts. 2). Why not phenomenology? Phenomenology excels at capturing the essence of lived experience, but pays less attention to process and change. Fan loyalty is not a static state to be "expressed," but a developing journey—from casual viewer to devoted fan to advocate—and sometimes to toxic fan. GT excels at capturing this temporal process.3). Why not ethnography? Ethnography (especially digital ethnography/netnography) is a valid and valuable approach. However, traditional ethnography requires a lengthy fieldwork period (6-24 months) that is not always feasible. More importantly, ethnography tends to focus on cultural description; GT focuses on theory building. Both are complementary, but for the purpose of constructing transferable theoretical models, GT is more appropriate.

Participants were recruited using initial purposive sampling, followed by theoretical sampling as theoretical categories emerged. Inclusion criteria: 1). Self-identifies as a "fan" of at least one celebrity within the past 12 months. 2). Has purchased at least 3 products endorsed by that celebrity (with digital/physical transaction evidence). 3). Active in at least one digital fan community (Discord, WhatsApp Group, Telegram, Twitter Community, or specific forum) for at least 6 months. 4). Aged 17-35 years (the dominant age range for active fans in Indonesia). 5). Willing to be interviewed at least twice for 60-90 minutes each session.

A total of 24 participants were included in this study, with the following composition: 1). 9 K-pop fans (groups: BTS, NCT, SEVENTEEN). 2). 8 football fans (clubs: Manchester United, Liverpool, Arsenal, Persija). 3). 7 Indonesian musician fans (Raisa, Tulus, Hindia, Mahalini).

Theoretical sampling ceased at participant 24 when theoretical saturation was achieved—when additional interviews no longer yielded new categories or insights.

Data were collected through three complementary methods: 1). In-Depth Semi-Structured Interviews: An interview protocol was developed from sensitizing concepts (PSI, loyalty, community identification) but remained flexible to follow directions emerging from participants. Interviews were conducted in a hybrid manner: 14 face-to-face interviews in cafes/neutral locations, 10 interviews via Zoom due to geographical constraints. All interviews were recorded (with consent) and transcribed verbatim. 2). Digital Document Analysis: With permission, researchers were allowed access to public posts and group discussions in fan communities. This included analysis of discussion threads about endorsements, scandals, and purchasing decisions. A total of 847 posts and 2,103 comments were systematically analyzed. 3). Visual Elicitation : Participants were asked to bring 3-5 artifacts representing their journey as fans (photos of merchandise, screenshots of group conversations, concert tickets, fan art, etc.). These artifacts served as prompts in interviews, eliciting richer and more specific narratives.

Analysis followed Charmaz's three stages of coding 1). Initial Coding (Open Coding): Each line of data was coded using action-based codes (using gerund verbs). Examples: "feeling recognized," "spending money without planning," "defending publicly," "feeling guilty if not buying." This stage generated 147 initial codes. 2). Focused Coding: Initial codes were grouped into more abstract categories based on frequency, significance, and relationships. For instance, codes such as "feeling recognized," "being responded to at fan sign events," "receiving likes from idol" were

Copyright © 2026, the author(s). This is an open access article under the CC-BY-SA License.

grouped into the category "Validation Seeking." This stage produced 28 focused categories. 3). Theoretical Coding: Focused categories were integrated into a coherent theoretical framework. Here, the core category was identified: 4)."Sacralization of Loyalty" —the process by which loyalty transforms from consumer preference into quasi-religious commitment that is self-justifying and self-reinforcing.

To ensure trustworthiness, the researcher applied: 1). Member checking: summary of findings returned to 12 participants for confirmation. 2). Peer debriefing: discussions with two senior researchers (one expert in media studies, one in consumer psychology). 3). Audit trai: complete documentation of methodological decisions. 4). Reflexive journaling: reflective notes on researcher's biases and personal assumptions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

Data analysis produced the Three-Stage Parasocial Loyalty Transformation Model. This model depicts the fan's journey from initial engagement to deep commitment and, in some cases, transformation. The three stages are:

The Awakening — Initial Contact and Parasocial Attraction

In this initial stage, individuals do not consciously "choose" to become fans. Rather, they find themselves attracted to certain celebrities through mechanisms often described as "unexpected coincidence."

- Trigger Mechanisms: Algorithms and Social Proof: Findings indicate that the "first encounter" with a celebrity is rarely purely accidental. Two main mechanisms operate:
- Algorithmic Curation: Eighteen out of 24 participants (75%) identified platform algorithms (especially TikTok, Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts) as the primary entry point.

“So I was scrolling through TikTok, and suddenly a video of Wonyoung (IVE) eating strawberries appeared. I don't know why, but I watched it repeatedly. The video was simple, just her eating, but I couldn't stop watching. After that, the algorithm kept showing me IVE content. Within a week, I already memorized all their names." Fani (22, K-pop fan, 18 months since debut as fan).

This phenomenon reflects what the researcher terms engineered serendipity —an encounter that feels organic but is actually conditioned by recommendation systems designed to maximize dwell time and engagement. 1) Social Endorsement: Fifteen participants (62.5%) mentioned the influence of their social circle. 2). Both offline friends and online connections—as an important factor.

"My office friends all like Tulus. At first, it was nothing special, but hearing his songs every day, seeing their stories about Tulus concerts made me curious. I tried listening to one album, and got hooked. It felt like 'I'm missing something important' if I didn't join in." Ratna (29, Tulus fan, 2 years).

Social proof serves as initial legitimization: individuals feel safe "falling in love" with a celebrity because others they respect are doing the same. 1) The Initial Hook: Physical Attractiveness and Perceived Homophily. 2) Once triggered, participants identified two qualities that captivated them: 3). Physical Attractiveness: As confirmed in the literature, physical attractiveness is a dominant entry point—especially in early stages. However, findings show that attractiveness is not merely about objective "beauty," but about distinctiveness—something unique that distinguishes the

Copyright © 2026, the author(s). This is an open access article under the CC-BY-SA License.

celebrity from others. 4). Nazril (Noah's guitarist) is different. Not just handsome, but there's a mysterious vibe. His eyes seem to hold many stories. I wanted to know more about him."

Dewi (31, Noah fan, 10+ years). Perceived Homophily: More important than physical attractiveness is perceived value similarity. Fans connect with celebrities they believe are similar to themselves in terms of values, experiences, or personality.

“Raisa is... calm, not loud, focused on her work. I'm that kind of person too. It's like... she's a more successful version of me. If she can do it, maybe I can too."

Sari (26, Raisa fan, 4 years). This quotation illustrates what the researcher terms "aspirational homophily" : fans connect not only with who the celebrity is now, but with who they could become in the future.

The Immersion — From Spectator to Participant

This stage is a critical point where casual engagement transforms into commitment that consumes time, energy, and financial resources.

Digital Rituals: Structuring Daily Life

Fans at this stage develop a series of rituals that organize their interactions with idols. These rituals are not mere habits—they have quasi-religious qualities: performed at specific times, with specific procedures, accompanied by specific affects. The Morning Check: Twenty-one participants (87.5%) reported the ritual of checking the idol's social media immediately upon waking "As soon as I wake up, before brushing my teeth, I open Instagram. I check whether BTS has updated overnight. The day feels incomplete if I don't see their photos in the morning."

Tari (24, ARMY, 3 years) : Content Consumption Scheduling: Specific times are allocated for content consumption—not merely "during free time," but deliberately carved out. "Every Thursday night is a ritual. I prepare snacks, turn off the lights, put on headphones, and watch Run BTS from start to finish. No interruptions allowed. That's my me-time."

Dinda (21, ARMY, 2 years) : Streaming Parties: A phenomenon of collective viewing where tens, hundreds, or thousands of fans watch the same content simultaneously while interacting on separate platforms (usually Discord or Twitter Spaces). "A streaming party feels different from watching alone. There's a sense of togetherness. We all cry together during sad parts, laugh together during funny parts. It's like watching football in a stadium, except we're in our own rooms."

Rizky (23, football & K-pop fan, 5 years) : This phenomenon reflects what the researcher terms "synchronous parasociality" : a collective experience that, although physically separate, creates emotional contagion and collective effervescence that strengthens individual bonds with the celebrity.

Investment: When Love Has a Price

The immersion stage is characterized by escalating investment—not only of time, but also significant financial resources.

Financial Investment: Average monthly expenditure for "fandom activities" varied, but findings show a pattern of progressive commitment:

Table 1. Financial Investment Patterns in Fandom Activities

Expenditure Type	Range (IDR/month	Frequency
Digital content (paid streaming, fan club)	50,000 - 150,000	Monthly
Official merchandise (album, lightstick, apparel)	200,000 - 800,000	Per event/release

Copyright © 2026, the author(s). This is an open access article under the CC-BY-SA License.

Concerts/fan meetings (ticket + accommodation)	1,000,000 - 5,000,000	Per event
Donation drives (fan site projects)	100,000 - 500,000	Per project

"I once paid 3 million to watch NCT in Jakarta. Even though my salary is only 6 million. But it felt... not wasteful. That was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. I still remember the details until now."

Mega (27, NCTzen, 4 years) : Interestingly, participants did not consider these expenditures as "waste" (outsider framing), but as emotional investments with returns of happiness, identity, and status within the community. Emotional Investment: More than money, what distinguishes immersed fans is the willingness to experience negative emotions for the idol's sake. "When Hobi (BTS's J-Hope) enlisted in the military, I cried for 3 days. Like losing a close friend. I know this sounds cringe if I tell others, but that's how it felt."

Lina (25, ARMY, 4 years). Labor of Love: This term, used by Zhao & Wu (2021), aptly describes the productive labor performed by fans: subtitle translation, fan art creation, video editing, event organizing—all done for free, driven by love. "I made a Wonyoung video edit and got 50 thousand views. I felt so proud. Like... I'm contributing to spreading IVE's content. I'm part of their success story."

Community: Sanctuary and Escalation

The immersion stage almost always involves integration into the fan community. Communities have dual functions: as a safe space to express affections that might be considered "excessive" by outsiders, and as an escalation mechanism that subtly encourages deeper commitment.

Safe Space Validation: "In the LINE group, I can vent about how sad I am when Taeil got injured. My friends understand. They don't say 'overreacting' like my office colleagues. They even send Taeil photos to cheer me up." Sarah (26, NCTzen, 3 years)

Social Comparison and Escalation: On the other hand, communities create participation norms that encourage greater spending and engagement. "Seeing friends in the group buying limited edition albums, I felt like I had to buy too. Otherwise, it felt like... I'm less of a fan. There's subtle pressure." Anonymous (23, K-pop fan, 2 years)

Collective Action and Empowerment: Communities also provide a sense of efficacy—the feeling that collective action can make a real difference. "We once trended #1 on Twitter Indonesia for Jisoo's birthday. It felt powerful. Like... we could beat political news and scams. That's an indescribable togetherness." Putri (24, BLINK, 3 years)

The Transcendence — Loyalty as Habitus

The third stage is where loyalty transforms from what you do into who you are. This is no longer about having an idol, but about being a fan.

Naturalization of Loyalty: When Choice Becomes Reflex

At this stage, purchasing endorsed products no longer involves deliberation. It is automatic, pre-reflective, habitual. "If Tulus endorses something, I never think. I just buy. Not because of the product, but because of Tulus. I trust he wouldn't endorse bad products. And even if they are bad... well, that's just part of supporting him." Ratna (29, Tulus fan)

This quotation illustrates "trust transfer without evaluation" —a phenomenon where celebrity source credibility completely replaces product evaluation.

The Reflexive Purchase

Copyright © 2026, the author(s). This is an open access article under the CC-BY-SA License.

"When I saw Shinchan's beverage advertisement, my hand automatically moved to scan the barcode. I only realized after checkout. Like... it was reflex. No thinking 'do I need this or not?'. Anonymous (24, K-pop fan)

The researcher terms this phenomenon "loyalty as embodied disposition" (or in Bourdieu's terms: habitus). Loyalty has been internalized so that it operates below the threshold of consciousness.

Sacred Loyalty: When the Idol Cannot Be Wrong

The most significant finding of this research is the identification of what the researcher calls "sacred loyalty" —a form of loyalty that adopts characteristics of religious devotion: unquestioning, self-sacrificial, defensive, and resistant to contradictory evidence.

The Inoculation Effect: When scandal or negative information emerges, fans with sacred loyalty do not abandon the idol—they change their interpretation of reality. "When there were issues about an NCT member, I didn't believe it. It must be a setup. People are jealous of their success. Media loves making bad news to bring down those who are rising." Mega (27, NCTzen)

Cognitive Reframing Strategies: Data analysis identified five reframing strategies used by fans to protect the idol's image: 1). Denial ("That's not true, the evidence is weak") 2). Attribution to enemies ("Media/competitors created the issue"). 3). Minimization ("That's just a small mistake, everyone can err") 4). Moral licensing ("They've done so much good, this is not comparable") 5). Victim blaming reversal ("The victim is wrong; they shouldn't have provoked")'

The Martyrdom Complex: In extreme cases, fans intensify support precisely because of the scandal—as a form of solidarity with the "persecuted" idol. "The more people hate BTS, the more I love them. They don't deserve to be bullied like that. I need to stand by them even stronger."Tari (24, ARMY)

This phenomenon explains the negative information paradox identified in the introduction: external attacks on the idol function as a loyalty intensifier because they activate identity defense mechanisms.

Identity Fusion: When the Boundary Between "Self" and "Other" Dissolves

The peak stage of this transformation is identity fusion—a psychological state where self-concept and idol-concept become integrated such that criticism of the idol is felt as a personal attack. "If someone hates on BTS, it feels like being hated myself. My body heats up, heart races, I want to fight back. I can't separate myself from them. They are part of my identity." Lina (25, ARMY)

Identity fusion explains the intensity of defensive responses: this is not altruism (defending someone else), but self-defense (defending oneself).

At this stage, emotional attachment moves beyond admiration and becomes embedded in personal identity. Fans no longer view support as an optional preference, but as a reflection of who they are. As a result, negative comments, scandals, or public criticism directed at the idol may trigger reactions similar to threats against the self, including anger, anxiety, or aggressive defense. This helps explain why highly fused fans often remain loyal even when contradictory evidence emerges.

Copyright © 2026, the author(s). This is an open access article under the CC-BY-SA License.

Typology of Fan Loyalty

Based on the data, the researcher identified three qualitatively distinct types of fan loyalty:

Table 2. Characteristics and Distribution of Fan Loyalty Types

Type	Characteristics	Proportion in Sample
Casual Loyalty	· Product-driven purchases (because product is needed) · No identity investment · Leaves idol if scandal is proven	4/24 (16.7%)
Committed Loyalty	· Endorser-driven purchases (because of trust) · Moderate identity investment · Deliberation before purchasing · Re-evaluation after scandal	12/24 (50%)
Sacred Loyalty	· Reflexive purchases (without evaluation) · Identity fusion · Resistant to negative information · Defensive aggression when idol is criticized	8/24 (33.3%)

This is typology is dynamic: fans can move from left to right over time, with interaction intensity, and community integration. Conversely, movement from sacred to casual is rare and usually triggered by very personal betrayal (not public scandal, but violation of the values underlying identification).

Discussion

Interpretation of Findings: The Three-Stage Process

The Three-Stage Parasocial Loyalty Transformation Model generated from this research offers a richer explanatory framework than the linear models dominating previous literature.

The Awakening: Extending the Concept of Homophily

Findings about algorithmic curation as the primary trigger extend understanding of the initial hook in PSI. Previous research (Conway & Rubin, 1991; Schiappa et al., 2007) emphasized perceived attractiveness and homophily as drivers. Our findings confirm this, but add an important nuance: in the digital era, homophily is not only perceived but also orchestrated by algorithms.

Social media platforms actively match users with content that fits their profiles, preferences, and behavioral data. The encounter with a celebrity who "feels like a friend" is not pure coincidence, but the result of continuously optimized machine learning. This has theoretical implications: agency in PSI formation is no longer fully on the fan's or celebrity's side, but distributed across algorithmic infrastructure.

Furthermore, the concept of "aspirational homophily" we identified extends the traditional homophily framework (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954). Homophily is not only about the status quo (current similarity), but also about trajectory (desired path similarity). Celebrities are chosen not only because they resemble fans, but because they represent an idealized version of the fan's self.

The Immersion: Community as Escalation Engine

Copyright © 2026, the author(s). This is an open access article under the CC-BY-SA License.

Findings about digital rituals and synchronous parasociality make a significant contribution to understanding the mediating role of community. Previous research (including Anindyasari, 2019; Liu & Huang, 2019) measured PSI as an individual-level construct, ignoring the fact that in the digital era, PSI is almost always mediated and amplified by interactions among fans.

We propose that fan communities function as accelerators in three ways: 1). Validation: Communities legitimize affections that might be considered "excessive" outside the community, reducing the social cost of loyalty intensification. 2). Norm Setting: Communities create participation norms (how much to spend, how often to update, how to respond to criticism) that subtly encourage escalating commitment.30. Collective Efficacy: The experience of collective action (trending topics, donation drives, streaming parties) provides a sense of power that makes individuals feel more connected to the idol—not merely as fans, but as co-creators of success.

The streaming party phenomenon is particularly interesting because it creates what Durkheim (1912) called collective effervescence—a collective intensification of affect that exceeds what could be achieved individually. In a Durkheimian framework, the idol functions as a totem uniting the community; loyalty is not only to the idol but to the community organized around the idol.

The Transcendence: Explaining the Negative Information Paradox

The most significant explanation offered by this research concerns the mechanism behind the negative information paradox. Why do scandals not always reduce loyalty, and sometimes even strengthen it? Existing literature offers two main explanations. Cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) argues that fans change beliefs to reduce dissonance between "my idol is good" and "my idol did something bad." Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) argues that fans defend group identity by deflecting threats to out-groups ("evil media," "haters").

Our findings support both explanations, but add a third, more fundamental dimension: sacralization. Sacred loyalty differs from ordinary loyalty because it is not open to negotiation. In sacred loyalty, evidence is irrelevant because commitment is not based on rational evaluation but on internalized identity.

We identified three sacralization mechanisms:

1. Moral Disengagement: Fans actively disable moral mechanisms that would normally prevent them from supporting behavior considered wrong. This is not ignorance, but a cognitive strategy. "Maybe he was wrong, but everyone can be wrong. What matters is that he has apologized and is trying to do better." (Participant, responding to idol's moral scandal)
2. Martyrdom Frame: Attacks on the idol are reframed as unfair persecution, transforming the idol from perpetrator to victim. This victim position actually mobilizes solidarity.
3. Identity Inoculation: Because the idol has fused with self-concept, conceding to criticism would mean self-betrayal. So, rather than changing beliefs about the idol, fans change beliefs about critics (they are evil, biased, self-interested).

Comparison with Previous Research

This research confirms key findings from previous studies: PSI-Loyalty Relationship: Aligned with the Taiwan study by Liu & Huang (2019) finding PSI's positive influence on six types of loyalty, and Anindyasari's (2019) study on parasocial interaction's influence on parasocial relationships and endorser credibility, our research qualitatively confirms that PSI is a strong predictor of loyalty.

Copyright © 2026, the author(s). This is an open access article under the CC-BY-SA License.

Role of Homophily: Aligned with findings by Chung & Cho (2017) and Centeno (2016) on the importance of perceived similarity, our research shows that aspirational homophily is a key mechanism in the early stage.

Role of Community: Supporting research on fan co-creation (Centeno & Wang, 2017) and collective psychological ownership (Kumar, 2019), our research shows that communities are not merely context but active agents in shaping loyalty.

Extending Existing Literature

This research goes beyond existing literature in several key aspects: 1). From Correlation to Process: Quantitative studies measure PSI and loyalty at a single time point, implying that PSI causes loyalty. However, they cannot explain how this occurs. Our three-stage model provides a processual explanation that fills this gap.2) From Individual to Relational: Existing literature treats PSI as an individual-level construct. Our research shows that modern PSI cannot be understood without considering community as mediator and amplifier. Methodologically, the unit of analysis needs to expand from individual to fan-community complex. 3) From Rational to Sacred: Previous research (e.g., Suprawan et al., 2025) treated loyalty as an extension of brand love—something rational and explicable. The identification of "sacred loyalty" as a qualitatively distinct type disrupts this assumption. Sacred loyalty operates under a different logic—not cost-benefit, but devotion-sacrifice.

Rejecting or Modifying Previous Assumptions

Rejecting the Rational Consumer Assumption: Most endorsement literature assumes that consumers (even fans) are ultimately rational actors evaluating products based on utility. Findings on reflexive purchase in sacred loyalty explicitly reject this assumption. In extreme cases, product quality becomes irrelevant.

Modifying Horton & Wohl's Parasocial Hypothesis: The original PSI theory assumed that media personas are passive objects responded to by audiences. Our findings show that in the digital era, this relationship is dialectical and co-constructed. Fans not only respond, but shape celebrities through collective action and feedback loops.

Addressing Research Objectives

Objective 1 (Theoretical Model): This research has produced the Three-Stage Parasocial Loyalty Transformation Model explaining how casual engagement develops into sacred commitment through the process of awakening → immersion → transcendence.

Objective 2 (Psychological Mechanisms): Two main mechanisms were identified: (a) aspirational homophily as the initial hook, and (b) sacralization as the transformation mechanism converting ordinary loyalty into sacred loyalty.

Objective 3 (Role of Community): Communities function as mediators (providing context for shared interpretation) and moderators (strengthening or, in rare cases, correcting individual loyalty). Communities create collective effervescence that intensifies individual affect.

Objective 4 (Negative Information Paradox): The paradox is explained through the sacralization mechanism: once loyalty becomes sacred, evidence is no longer processed epistemically (is this true?) but identity-protectively (does this threaten my identity?). External attacks activate defensive intensification.

Copyright © 2026, the author(s). This is an open access article under the CC-BY-SA License.

Anomalous and Contradictory Findings

Loyalty Without Consumption: The Non-Buying Fan

One anomaly emerging from the data is the existence of fans with high emotional investment but low financial consumption. Two participants (8.3%) fell into this category. They were highly identified with their idol, active in the community, but rarely or never purchased endorsed products. "I really love BTS, but I never buy products they endorse. Not because I don't want to, but because I can't afford it. I feel guilty, but what can I do." Anonymous (20, ARMY)

This anomaly is interesting because it violates the assumption that loyalty equals purchasing. If loyalty is an emotional relationship, consumption is one expression, not the sole or essential one. This implies that economic models of fan monetization may overestimate the relationship between affection and transaction.

The Exiters: When Loyalty Ends

Although not the focus of this research (due to inclusion criteria requiring active loyalty), three former fans were informally interviewed to understand why loyalty ends. Preliminary findings (requiring further research) indicate that exit is rarely triggered by public scandal (ironically), but by personal changes (e.g., entering a new life phase, encountering new communities that challenge assumptions). "I stopped being a fan when I realized that the money I spent on merchandise could be a down payment for a house. Suddenly I saw from the outside and thought 'this is ridiculous'." Anonymous (former fan).

This implies that internal contradiction (misalignment between fandom behavior and developing self-concept) may be more determinant in exit than external shock (scandal).

Research Limitations

The researcher acknowledges several limitations affecting generalizability and interpretability of findings: 1). Demographic Homogeneity: Participants were predominantly female (19 out of 24, 79%) and from the urban middle class (Jakarta, Surabaya, Bandung). The experiences of male, lower-class, or rural fans may differ significantly. 2). Limited Age Range: Focus on emerging adulthood (17-35 years) misses the experiences of older fans—for example, K-pop fans aged 40+ or classical music fans. Loyalty may operate differently at different life stages.3). Temporality: This research is cross-sectional in data collection (although retrospective analysis was used). A longitudinal study following fans for 2-3 years would be stronger in capturing process and change.

CONCLUSION

This research has successfully constructed a Three-Stage Parasocial Loyalty Transformation Model that explains how parasocial relationships in product endorsement contexts transform into fan loyalty, moving from awakening, which reflects initial contact triggered by algorithms and homophily, to immersion, where digital rituals and community-driven investment intensify engagement, and ultimately to transcendence, where loyalty becomes naturalized as habitus and, in extreme cases, reaches the level of sacralization.

The study offers several key theoretical contributions. It identifies “sacred loyalty” as a qualitatively distinct form of loyalty, characterized not simply by high intensity but by a different logic that resists contradictory information and operates through identity defense. It also emphasizes the role of community as a mediator and amplifier of parasocial interaction, thereby challenging the dominant individualistic perspective in existing literature. Furthermore, it explains the negative

Copyright © 2026, the author(s). This is an open access article under the CC-BY-SA License.

information paradox through mechanisms of sacralization and identity fusion, addressing a persistent gap in celebrity endorsement research. The concept of homophily is extended through the introduction of aspirational homophily, highlighting that fans connect not only with who celebrities are, but also with who they aspire to become. From a methodological perspective, this research demonstrates the strength of Grounded Theory in capturing dynamic and transformative processes that are difficult to access through quantitative approaches, supported by the effective integration of in-depth interviews, digital document analysis, and visual elicitation.

This study also provides practical implications. For marketers and brand strategists, segmentation based on loyalty type becomes essential, as casual, committed, and sacred loyalty require different strategic approaches. In cases of sacred loyalty, product functionality is less critical as long as the product does not threaten the consumer's identity, whereas for casual loyalty, product quality remains a key factor. The findings also indicate that managing communities is often more impactful than focusing solely on celebrities, as communities act as accelerators of loyalty, making investments in community management more efficient. In addition, marketers need to anticipate the scandal paradox, where transparent communication and value reaffirmation are more effective than denial in maintaining trust among highly loyal fans.

For policymakers and digital welfare practitioners, the study highlights the need to strengthen critical media literacy by incorporating metacognitive awareness of parasocial relationships, including how algorithms influence preferences and how communities intensify commitment. It also underscores the importance of protecting young consumers, particularly in relation to targeted advertising for high-priced or limited products, given the tendency of sacred loyalty to drive excessive spending. Finally, the research points to the need for psychological support systems that are sensitive to fandom dynamics, as extreme identity fusion may increase vulnerability to exploitation and mental health risks, especially in the aftermath of public controversies.

REFERENCES

Anindyasari, Y. (2019). *Pengaruh interaksi parasosial terhadap hubungan parasosial, kredibilitas endorser dan niat beli penggemar Syahrini terhadap produk kosmetik di media Instagram* [Master's thesis, Universitas Airlangga]. Repository UNAIR. https://repository.unair.ac.id/80454/

Centeno, D. D. G. (2016). Parasociality and habitus in celebrity consumption and political culture: A Philippine case study. *Asian Journal of Social Science, 44*(4-5), 441-484. https://doi.org/10.1163/15685314-04404005

Centeno, D. D. G. (2018). Social distance, connectedness, and product familiarity on endorsement evaluations: An experimental approach. *Philippine Management Review, 25*.

Centeno, D. D. G. (2021). How the brand–endorser origin shapes brand attitudes and purchase intentions: Assessing ethnocentric versus xenocentric mindsets and their impact on messaging persuasion. *Journal of Advertising Research, 61*(4), 414-435. https://doi.org/10.2501/JAR-2021-015

Centeno, D., & Wang, J. J. (2017). Celebrities as human brands: An inquiry on stakeholder-actor co-creation of brand identities. *Journal of Business Research, 74*, 133-138. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2016.10.024

Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Copyright © 2026, the author(s). This is an open access article under the CC-BY-SA License.

Chung, S., & Cho, H. (2017). Fostering parasocial relationships with celebrities on social media: Implications for celebrity endorsement. *Psychology & Marketing, 34*(4), 481-495. https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21001

Conway, J. C., & Rubin, A. M. (1991). Psychological predictors of television viewing motivation. *Communication Research, 18*(4), 443-463. https://doi.org/10.1177/009365091018004001

Durkheim, É. (1912). *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*. Félix Alcan.

Escalas, J. E., & Bettman, J. R. (2017). Connecting with celebrities: How consumers appropriate celebrity meanings for a sense of belonging. *Journal of Advertising, 46*(2), 297-308. https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2017.1294504

Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford University Press.

Gavrilescu, M.-C., & Lungu, S.-M. (2025). Between screens and dreams: Emotional attachments, identity, and parasocial bonds in Romanian K-pop fan culture. *Romanian Journal of Communication and Public Relations, 20*(2), 4-25. https://doi.org/10.62229/rjjc20/2_25/4

Hartmann, T., & Goldhoorn, C. (2011). Horton and Wohl revisited: Exploring viewers' experience of parasocial interaction. *Journal of Communication, 61*(6), 1104-1121. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2011.01595.x

Horton, D., & Wohl, R. R. (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction: Observations on intimacy at a distance. *Psychiatry, 19*(3), 215-229. https://doi.org/10.1080/00332747.1956.11023049

Kumar, J. (2019). How psychological ownership stimulates participation in online brand communities? A study of Indian Facebook users. *Journal of Indian Business Research, 11*(1), 57-76. https://doi.org/10.1108/JIBR-01-2018-0022

Lazarsfeld, P. F., & Merton, R. K. (1954). Friendship as a social process: A substantive and methodological analysis. In M. Berger, T. Abel, & C. H. Page (Eds.), *Freedom and control in modern society* (pp. 18-66). Van Nostrand.

Liu, T.-Y., & Huang, H.-P. (2019). *Parasocial interaction, loyalty behavior and self-identity of band fans on Taiwan independent bands' Facebook fan pages* [Paper presentation]. Taiwan Communication Association Annual Conference, Taipei, Taiwan. http://tcataiwan.org/paperdetail.asp?HP_ID=2025

Mandagi, D. W., & Centeno, D. (2021). Brand gestalt scale development and validation: A takeoff from tourism destination branding. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management, 19*, 100539. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2020.100539

Pierce, J. L., Kostova, T., & Dirks, K. T. (2003). The state of psychological ownership: Integrating and extending a century of research. *Review of General Psychology, 7*(1), 84-107. https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.7.1.84

Reinikainen, H., Munnukka, J., Maity, D., & Luoma-aho, V. (2020). 'You really are a great big sister'—Parasocial relationships, credibility, and the moderating role of audience comments in influencer marketing. *Journal of Marketing Management, 36*(3-4), 279-298. https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2019.1708781

Rubin, A. M., Perse, E. M., & Powell, R. A. (1985). Loneliness, parasocial interaction, and local television news viewing. *Human Communication Research, 12*(2), 155-180. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.1985.tb00071.x

Schiappa, E., Allen, M., & Gregg, P. B. (2007). Parasocial relationships and television: A meta-analysis of the effects. In R. W. Preiss, B. M. Gayle, N. Burrell, M. Allen, & J. Bryant (Eds.),

Copyright © 2026, the author(s). This is an open access article under the CC-BY-SA License.

Mass media effects research: Advances through meta-analysis (pp. 301-314). Lawrence Erlbaum.

Suprawan, L., Oentoro, W., & Suttharattanagul, S. L. (2025). Love me, love my endorsed brand: Unveiling the impact of Generation Z fans' celebrity worship on online brand advocacy. *Journal of Product and Brand Management, 34*(5), 618-633. https://doi.org/10.1108/JPBM-03-2024-5020

Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33-47). Brooks/Cole.

Xiao, J., Li, Y., & Zhao, M. (2025). Formation of fan psychological ownership and its influence on fan enthusiasm: A hybrid approach using PLS-SEM and fsQCA. *Frontiers in Psychology, 16*, 1721382. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1721382

Zhao, L., & Wu, X. (2021). The labor of love: The collective action logic of Chinese fandom. *International Journal of Communication, 15*, 4221-4241.

Copyright © 2026, the author(s). This is an open access article under the CC-BY-SA License.