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**PARASOCIAL STRANGERS**

**Storytelling in Digital Music Comment Spaces**

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## Abstract

This thesis examines why listeners publicly share personal experiences within digital fan communities organised around music. Using the fan community of Hindia, the musical project of Indonesian artist Baskara Putra (Bas), as a case study, the research explores how storytelling unfolds in online comment sections among strangers connected through shared engagement with songs. The study asks how listeners narrate personal experiences in digital spaces, how these expressions are shaped by the presence of socially distant others, and how the artist becomes positioned within these interactions.

The study uses a qualitative case study approach based on comments collected from YouTube and Instagram under Hindia's song *Everything U Are*. Using qualitative text analysis and a hermeneutic approach, the analysis examines how listeners articulate emotions, memories, and experiences through storytelling practices within the comment environment. The comments reveal recurring forms of personal narration, where listeners relate music to experiences of heartbreak, loneliness, grief, emotional struggle, healing, and self-reflection.

Drawing on theories of music in everyday life (DeNora, 2000), wounded storytelling (Frank, 2013), symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1962), the stranger as a social type (Simmel, 1950), and parasocial relations (Giles & Stever, 2024), the thesis argues that listening extends beyond individual interpretation and becomes a social process of storytelling. The findings show that listeners use music to organise emotional experiences, manage feelings, seek recognition, and create belonging through shared narratives expressed publicly within the fan community. Storytelling emerges among strangers who remain socially distant yet emotionally meaningful within the mediated environment.

The thesis develops the concept of “parasocial strangers” to describe these mediated relations. This concept refers not only to the relationship between listeners and the artist, but also to relations among listeners themselves, where strangers become emotionally significant through shared storytelling despite the absence of direct reciprocal intimacy. The study argues that contemporary digital platforms make these stranger relations continuously accessible, allowing

personal experiences to become publicly communicable through music within online fan communities.

## Table of Contents

|                                                           |    |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Abstract                                                  | 1  |
| Introduction                                              | 4  |
| Empirical Case Selection                                  | 8  |
| Literature Review                                         | 11 |
| Methodology                                               | 25 |
| <i>Sampling Strategy</i>                                  | 27 |
| <i>Coding and Analytical Approach</i>                     | 28 |
| <i>Reflexivity and Limitations</i>                        | 31 |
| <i>Ethical Consideration</i>                              | 33 |
| The Social Life of Musical Experience                     | 35 |
| <i>From Listening to Storytelling</i>                     | 35 |
| <i>Storytelling in the Presence of Strangers</i>          | 41 |
| <i>Parasocial Dynamic of the Artist as “The Stranger”</i> | 47 |
| Conclusion                                                | 55 |
| Bibliography                                              | 60 |

## Introduction

*“Maybe before this song was released, I would have already hanged myself...”*

Statements like this appear not in private conversations, but in public comment sections under songs. Listeners write about grief, heartbreak, loneliness, family conflict, and personal struggle in front of people they do not know, while addressing an artist who may never respond to them. What makes these expressions interesting is not only the emotional intensity of the statement itself, but the setting in which it appears. These experiences are written openly in spaces where participants have no prior relationship, no obligation to one another, and often no interaction beyond the comment itself.

This reflects a broader phenomenon in contemporary digital culture. Online communities increasingly function as spaces where people express personal experiences in front of strangers. Across social media platforms, forums, and comment sections, individuals share emotions, reflections, and stories with others they may never meet. The presence of strangers still matters in these interactions, even without long-term relationships or direct reciprocity. Shared experiences, emotional recognition, and common interests become enough to sustain forms of participation and connection in these spaces. Digital communication has also blurred distinctions between what is considered private and public expression. Experiences that might previously have remained within intimate social settings are now frequently articulated within networked environments where audiences are unknown, shifting, and potentially limitless. Comment sections and online communities allow individuals to express emotions in ways that are simultaneously personal and public, creating environments where vulnerability becomes visible within everyday digital interaction.

This does not necessarily mean that intimacy disappears in digital environments. Instead, intimacy becomes reorganised through mediated forms of presence, where people may feel emotionally connected without direct familiarity or long-term social ties. Individuals can encounter others repeatedly through shared media environments, recognise themselves in similar experiences, and feel understood without needing to establish personal relationships. The significance of these spaces lies not only in what people communicate, but in the conditions that

allow communication itself to emerge among strangers gathered around shared interests, feelings, and media experiences.

Fan communities are one visible expression of this phenomenon. Organised around artists, films, music, or public figures, these communities are often understood as spaces of admiration and shared interest. Yet engagement within them frequently moves beyond discussion of the media itself. Audiences also use these spaces to talk about their own lives through the media they consume. Songs, lyrics, and public figures become reference points through which listeners express emotions and experiences that are difficult to communicate elsewhere. In this sense, fan communities are not only spaces of consumption, but also spaces where personal experiences are written publicly in front of strangers through a shared engagement with the media.

Shared media texts provide listeners with a common emotional and cultural reference point through which personal experiences become easier to communicate. Lyrics, scenes, and public figures create forms of recognition that listeners assume others within the community will understand. The media text functions as more than entertainment. It provides a shared language through which individuals translate personal experiences into forms that can be publicly recognised by others occupying the same mediated environment. Through this shared language, experiences that might otherwise remain private become easier to articulate in front of socially distant others.

Music becomes particularly significant within this process because listeners often experience songs as emotionally intimate and personally reflective. Lyrics can provide language for emotions that are otherwise difficult to articulate, while repeated listening allows songs to become embedded within memories, routines, relationships, and everyday emotional experiences. Music is not only heard, but connected to particular moments in listeners' lives. This makes songs especially suited to forms of personal narration, where listeners use music to reflect on themselves and communicate those reflections publicly through digital interaction.

This pattern shows in the audience of Hindia, the musical project of Indonesian artist Baskara Putra (Bas). His work has gained wide attention in Indonesia, especially among younger listeners who engage intensely with his lyrics across platforms such as YouTube and Instagram. His music is frequently discussed in terms of emotional honesty and personal relatability, with lyrics

addressing themes such as anxiety, exhaustion, self-worth, relationships, loneliness, and the pressures of growing adulthood. These themes resonate strongly within digital environments where younger audiences increasingly use online platforms to discuss emotional and personal experiences publicly.

Under many of Hindia's songs, comment sections contain long personal reflections connected to specific lyrics and themes. Listeners write about breakups, grief, mental health struggles, loneliness, family relationships, and moments of transition in their lives. These comments appear alongside hundreds of similar responses from other listeners, creating a shared environment where personal experiences are expressed collectively without requiring familiarity between participants. What becomes visible in these spaces is not only emotional engagement with music, but a recurring practice of storytelling, where listeners narrate experiences in front of strangers connected through the same song.

The issue, then, is not just about why music feels meaningful, but why these environments become spaces where personal experiences are expressed publicly in front of strangers. Digital platforms such as YouTube and Instagram are not designed as private settings, yet people continue to use them to communicate deeply personal emotions and experiences. Within fan communities, shared engagement with music appears to create conditions where listeners feel able to express aspects of their lives openly, even in the presence of socially distant others. The presence of strangers within these environments creates an important tension. Personal storytelling is often associated with familiarity, trust, or intimacy, yet these forms of disclosure increasingly take place among people who remain socially unknown to one another.

Understanding this phenomenon requires attention not only to music or fandom itself, but also to the social conditions that allow emotionally vulnerable forms of communication to emerge within mediated environments.

This thesis examines how listeners articulate personal experiences in digital comment sections, focusing on the fan community of Hindia's music. To address this, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- 1. How do listeners narrate personal experiences in digital comment sections?**
- 2. How are these expressions shaped by the presence of others who remain distant?**

### **3. How is the artist positioned within this space as an addressee of these narratives?**

The aim of this study is to understand how listeners express personal experiences within digital fan communities organised around music. It examines how songs become connected to listeners' everyday lives, how these experiences are articulated publicly in comment sections, and how interaction within fan communities shapes these forms of expression. Through this focus, the study explores the relationship between music, personal storytelling, and social interaction in shared digital spaces.



## Empirical Case Selection

This study examines the fan community of Hindia, the musical project of Indonesian artist Baskara Putra (Bas), as a case for understanding how personal experiences are communicated within digital fan environments. The case is analytically significant because audience engagement surrounding Hindia's music frequently develops into sustained forms of personal storytelling across social media platforms. Rather than limiting participation to reactions toward the music itself, listeners often use comment sections to narrate experiences connected to grief, loneliness, emotional exhaustion, relationships, and everyday struggles. These responses appear consistently across platforms such as YouTube and Instagram, making the fan community a particularly rich setting for examining how online audiences publicly articulate intimate experiences through shared engagement with music.

Within this fan community, the primary empirical material for the study is drawn from comments under the song *Everything U Are*. The song was selected because its comment sections contain a particularly dense concentration of narrative responses in which listeners relate the lyrics to their own lives in detailed and reflective ways. Many comments move beyond evaluation or appreciation of the song and instead develop into autobiographical accounts where listeners describe memories, emotional struggles, family relationships, or moments of personal transition. The comment environment surrounding the song provides unusually rich material for examining how storytelling emerges collectively within a digital fan space.

### Everything U Are lyrics:

*I always remember your face, forgetting the things that trouble me.*

*Because today our eyes met, we helped each other let our feelings go.*

*High into the sky, challenging the world, celebrating our youth, if only for an hour.*

*We almost died, and you saved me, and I saved you, and now I know.*

*Our stories are not so different. Got beat down by the world, sometimes I wanna fold. But your letter, I'll tell it to my children someday, that I was once loved with everything you are, fully as I am, with everything you are.*

*Your face, in all its many forms, assures me that I am not alone. As you live through suffering, you bring your story, I listen, oh, we take turns.*

*Exchanging sorrows, bargaining with trauma. Coming as we are, my porch is open. We almost died, and you saved me, and I saved you, and now I know.*

*Our stories are not so different. Got beat down by the world, sometimes I wanna fold. But your letter, I'll tell it to my children someday, that I was once loved.*

*Just as I am, with all my shortcomings. Though it's hard to express my heart beautifully. Though I rarely sing in a beautiful way. Not once have you ever denied my story.*

What makes this case especially valuable is the recurring tendency for listeners to treat the comment section as a communicative environment for sharing experiences with others gathered around the same music. The comments frequently position the artist and other listeners as part of the storytelling process itself, where experiences are expressed publicly in anticipation of recognition, understanding, or emotional resonance from socially distant others. This allows the study to examine not only why listeners connect music to personal experiences, but also how digital fan communities provide conditions in which these experiences become publicly expressible.

Hindia's prominence within contemporary Indonesian popular music further contributes to the visibility and density of the case. Baskara Putra received widespread public attention after winning five awards at the Anugerah Musik Indonesia (AMI Awards 2025), generating extensive media discussion and heightened audience participation across digital platforms (Tempo.co, 2025). This visibility intensified engagement surrounding his music and contributed to highly active comment environments populated by large numbers of listeners. While the significance of the case does not depend on popularity alone, this circulation creates a particularly visible setting in which recurring patterns of storytelling, emotional expression, and interaction can be observed across the fan community.

By focusing on this case, the study examines how digital fan communities can function as environments where personal experiences become publicly communicable through music. The case provides an opportunity to explore how storytelling unfolds among socially distant listeners,

how strangers become emotionally meaningful within mediated interaction, and how fan participation develops into broader forms of social and emotional expression within digital culture.

## **Literature Review**

This section reviews literature on music, fandom, and digital platforms to understand how listening is experienced and expressed. It first considers how music is used in everyday life and meaning-making. It then examines fandom and parasocial relations in shaping connections between audiences and artists. At last, it looks at platform-based research to explore how these engagements take form in shared digital spaces, before outlining the theoretical perspectives that guide the analysis.

### **Music and the Formation of Meaning**

Research across sociology, psychology, and media studies has consistently shown that music is deeply embedded in everyday life, not only as entertainment but as a resource through which individuals organise experience. Listeners use music for a range of purposes, including recalling memories, supporting spiritual reflection, experiencing sensory pleasure, shifting or enhancing mood, and accompanying routine activities such as working, exercising, relaxing, or socialising (DeNora, 2000, p. 47). Psychological research further supports this perspective. A recent meta-analysis reports small but consistent positive effects of music participation on social and emotional outcomes, describing that engagement with music is empirically associated with well-being across different populations (Cooper, 2025, p. 122).

Yet emotional benefit is only one dimension of how music operates in social life, therefore musical meaning is never purely individual. Cultural sociology demonstrates that taste unfolds within broader cultural frameworks. Studies of alternative music listeners in Istanbul, for example, show how genre preferences can signal distinction from the mainstream and become associated with educational and cultural positioning (Güven, 2016, pp. 500–503). Similarly, Jacke (2024) argues that figures such as “stars,” “anti-stars,” and “anti-star-stars” operate as indicators of shifting socio-cultural values within popular music cultures (Jacke, 2024, p. 56). Even when music feels personal, it is shaped by wider frameworks of identity, taste, and cultural meaning.

Autobiographical meaning further complicates this picture. Research on homesickness demonstrates that songs—especially in one’s native language—reactivate memories of relationships and places, intensifying feelings of belonging and cultural attachment (Gidwani et al., 2024, pp. 768–771). The same lyrics may carry different meanings depending on how listeners integrate them into their life narratives (Gidwani et al., 2024, pp. 773–774). Audience research also suggests that listeners actively “make meanings beyond what seems to be on offer,” often describing their attachments through memory and nostalgia (Baym, 2018, p. 81). Listening is then both affective and interpretive, as songs become tied to memory and identity over time (Baym, 2018, pp. 81–83).

Transnational research adds another layer. Studies of K-pop flows among Indonesian students show how music functions as a collaborative collective identity within diasporic and mobile contexts (Scott-Maxwell, 2020, p. 20). Here, music becomes a shared resource for constructing belonging across linguistic and national boundaries (Scott-Maxwell, 2020, pp. 20–22). Emotional attachment is intertwined with global circulation, and the figure of the artist becomes part of how music is experienced. Celebrity research argues that popular music is encountered not only as sound but through mediated personas that circulate across media platforms and formats (Jacke, 2024, pp. 56–59). In this sense, emotional identification with music is often shaped in relation to publicly constructed images that move between performance, interviews, social media, and press coverage.

In mediated environments, these processes extend beyond individual experience. O’Hagan’s (2023) account of the Rory Gallagher Instagram fan community shows how listening can shift from a private act into a shared practice. During a severe panic episode, repeated listening to “A Million Miles Away” functions as a form of emotional stabilisation and containment during acute anxiety (O’Hagan, 2023, pp. 634–635). She later carries this experience into Instagram interactions with other fans, where the music becomes tied to processes of recognition, connectedness, and identity reconstruction (O’Hagan, 2023, pp. 648–650). The importance of this account lies in how an intensely personal experience becomes publicly articulated through shared musical engagement. Listening is no longer only a private emotional practice, but part of a mediated social process through which experiences are communicated and recognised by others.

These studies collectively show that music becomes deeply entangled with memory, emotion, identity, and everyday self-organisation. I approach listening here not experienced solely as private interpretation, but as something increasingly unfolds within mediated environments where emotional experiences can be articulated publicly and recognised by others. At the same time, existing research primarily explains how music becomes meaningful to listeners themselves. However, less attention has been given to how these meanings become socially organised through ongoing relations with artists, audiences, and digitally connected strangers within fan communities.

### **Fandom and Parasocial Relations**

When music becomes part of how people understand themselves, the artists behind that music often take on significance as well. Early work on parasocial interaction conceptualised this as a “simulacrum of conversational give and take,” where audiences experience the illusion of reciprocal communication with media figures (Horton & Wohl, 1956, as cited in Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011, p. 1104). While Horton and Wohl emphasised the experiential quality of interaction during exposure, later scholarship increasingly treated parasocial interaction into the concept of parasocial relationships (PSR), describing as a more enduring one-sided attachments that persist over time (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011, pp. 1104–1105; Giles & Stever, 2024, pp. 8-9).

More recent scholarship shifts attention from parasocial attachment as an internal psychological state to fandom as a relational and communicative practice. Studies of music fandom show that relationships with artists are expressed through admiration, identification, or inspiration, and these attachments are often applied in everyday practices and personal meaning-making (Derbaix & Korchia, 2019, p. 109). In digital settings, these attachments become visible through language. Recent analyses of YouTube comments show that fans frequently display indicators of parasocial interaction, including social attraction, authenticity, and explicit expressions of fandom (Flinchum et al., 2024, pp. 77–79).

At the same time, intimacy in fandom is not only directed toward the artist. Research on anim  discussion boards demonstrates how community affiliation is sustained through shared language, humour, and collective pronouns such as “we” (Ranalan, 2020, pp. 110–113). At the same time, K-pop fandom research describes “corroborated authenticity,” in which emotional claims about idols are validated collectively (King-O’Riain, 2020, pp. 2820–2822). Closeness circulates among fans as much as between fan and media figure. Autobiographical identification extends beyond the fan–figure relationship and is affirmed and negotiated among fans themselves.

Platform-based fan research further argues that fandom is structured by algorithmic design. A recent “platform fandom” scholarship emphasises that recommendation systems, monetisation features, and interface affordances shape participation hierarchies and visibility patterns (Bollmer & Tillerson, 2025, pp. 4–7). On platforms such as YouTube, fans not only participate but may also become content creators, shaping interpretation and authority within the community (Moura et al., 2022, pp. 9–10). Audience–influencer relations range from casual followers to committed fans and anti-fans, each involving different degrees of intimacy and reciprocity (Ouvrein, 2024, pp. 5659–5660). Even in controversial fandoms, attachment is sustained through discursive strategies that negotiate moral tension rather than deny it (Cui & Wu, 2024, pp. 5180–5181). These dynamics show that fandom is not only relational but also mediated by platform logic.

Political dimensions have become increasingly visible in fandom research. In her study of K-pop fandom, Kang (2023, pp. 1019–1022) shows how fan identity intersects with civic positioning, where participation in fandom becomes entangled with political expression and ideological alignment. Similarly, Riddick (2022, pp. 193–195) demonstrates how fan communities can function as counterpublic spaces, producing alternative narratives and engaging in practices that resemble citizen journalism. In these cases, fandom extends beyond attachment and enters the domain of collective articulation and mobilisation. Jacke argues how contemporary stars circulate across media platforms and how their public images are formed within systems of attention, and his distinction between “star,” “anti-star,” and “anti-star-star” shows that resistance or norm violation does not necessarily sit outside the mainstream but can become part of how visibility works (Jacke, 2024, pp. 56–59; 63–66). In this context, fan discourse is not just

reactive, it contributes to shaping how a persona is understood and whether it is seen as authentic or credible.

Across these studies, fandom appears not only as attachment to media figures, but as a communicative environment where emotions, identities, and forms of belonging are publicly negotiated. Parasocial relations and fan participation increasingly unfold through visible acts of expression across digital platforms, where audiences articulate admiration, personal reflection, and collective identity in front of others. While existing scholarship explains how fandom sustains attachment and participation, I argue that these studies leave open attention to why fan spaces increasingly function as environments for narrating intimate experiences publicly among socially distant audiences.

### **Platform Expression and Affective Circulation**

If music research establishes how songs become emotionally meaningful, and fandom scholarship has examined how those meanings are relationally articulated, platform studies shift the focus to the conditions under which those exchanges are visible and subject to circulation. In “affective publics”, Papacharissi argues that publics may “actualise by feeling their way” into shared concerns through media (Papacharissi, 2014, p. 115). She also suggests that networked expression accumulates into patterned intensities rather than rational deliberation (Papacharissi, 2014, pp. 116–117). In this context, comment sections are not merely individual responses but part of a broader circulation of affect.

Comment threads, hashtags and viral exchanges can be understood not just as individual reactions, but as formations of shared tone and mood. Stuart Hall offers a complementary perspective by emphasising that meaning is not transmitted intact from producer to audience but reconstructed through processes of decoding and interpretation (Hall, 1973, as cited in Fornäs, 2024, pp. 151–152). In digital environments, this interpretive activity becomes materially visible when audiences respond in written form, rendering acts of decoding observable within comment sections.



Studies of YouTube comment cultures show how this works in practice. Pelttari (2022) analysis of affective narratives demonstrates how commenters often align themselves with the stance of the video creator. She uses the term “convergent alignment” to describe agreement with the stance lead, which can include explicit endorsement but also personal disclosure (Pelttari, 2022, pp. 42–43). Responses extend beyond approval or disagreement. Similar patterns appear in research on digital mourning. Yelboğa (2025) identifies recurring emotional themes in grief-related comments under YouTube music videos, including longing, sadness, anger, guilt, and loneliness (Yelboğa, 2025, pp. 852–854). I read this as part of a broader development in which platforms function as archives of emotion, where testimony remains accessible and open to renewed engagement.

However, platform environments do not treat all forms of engagement equally. In their study of official artist channels on YouTube, Oh and Choeh (2021) demonstrate that while passive engagements such as likes and dislikes show limited explanatory power, aggregated comment activity is positively associated with increases in official channel subscribers, indicating that written participation carries greater structural weight within YouTube’s engagement economy (Oh & Choeh, 2021, p. 816). This distinction between passive and active engagement suggests that commenting operates not only as personal expression but as a measurable and consequential form of participation within the platform’s structuring mechanisms (Oh & Choeh, 2021, pp. 815–816). The comment section functions as a space where affective expression becomes tied to processes of visibility and channel growth.

Cross-platform studies extend this understanding. Research on Chinese video creators demonstrates that identity is curated differently across platforms in response to imagined audiences, platform affordances, and algorithmic visibility, while also negotiating pressures toward identity consistency within each platform (Ziying Meng & Nansen, 2022, pp. 31–33; 36–37). Emotional expression is platform-conditioned. Cross-platform political campaigning research shows that emotional cues in visual content generate different engagement patterns across platforms (Bossetta & Schmøkel, 2022, pp. 48–50). Emotional participation does not

circulate in the same way everywhere, it is shaped by the technical and social conditions of each platform.

What I find particularly important across this scholarship is the way platforms make emotional expression persistently visible to others within networked environments. I approach comment sections here not as something as sites of interaction or engagement, but as mediated environments where affect accumulates, emotional expressions remain publicly accessible, and personal experiences become increasingly visible within networked communication. Existing platform research importantly explains how participation becomes amplified, circulated, and structured through platform logics. However, I argue that less attention has been given to why individuals narrate emotionally vulnerable experiences publicly within these spaces in the first place. While platform studies explain the visibility and circulation of affective expression, the social conditions that make emotionally difficult experiences publicly speakable among strangers remain less fully explored.

## **Research Gap**

Across existing scholarship, music is explored as an emotional resource through which individuals organise feeling and everyday experience, fandom is examined as a relational space connecting audiences to artists and one another, and platforms are analysed as infrastructures that intensify visibility, participation, and affective circulation. Yet these perspectives leave an important question insufficiently addressed such as: why do individuals increasingly narrate deeply personal experiences within digital fan communities composed largely of socially distant others? Existing studies explain emotional attachment to music, artists, and online participation, but provide less explanation for why intimate experiences are publicly articulated in front of audiences that remain anonymous, shifting, and personally unknown.

This limitation becomes especially visible within contemporary research on parasocial relationships. Giles and Stever (2024) argue that parasocial relationships function as enduring forms of emotional attachment sustained through repeated mediated exposure, familiarity, and

symbolic intimacy. Their work importantly demonstrates that parasocial engagement is not just an abnormal substitute for “real” social interaction, but part of ordinary social life and emotional experience. At the same time, parasocial research still focuses primarily on the emotional bond between audiences and media figures. These approaches explain how listeners develop feelings of closeness, recognition, and continuity toward artists, yet they do not fully explore why audiences begin publicly narrating experiences of grief, loneliness, emotional crisis, family conflict, or personal struggle within those mediated environments. Research on music and well-being in everyday life, demonstrates how listening supports emotional regulation, memory, and self-organisation (DeNora, 2000), yet these processes are often treated as internal experiences without sufficient attention to how they become externalised through storytelling in shared digital spaces.

Research on fandom and platforms also leaves this issue insufficiently examined. Studies of fandom explain how collective identity, participation, and affective belonging develop within fan communities, while platform studies demonstrate how algorithms, visibility, and networked communication intensify emotional circulation online (Papacharissi, 2014). However, these perspectives still devote limited attention to storytelling itself as a social practice. Comment sections are frequently approached as sites of engagement, discourse, or affective exchange, but less attention has been given to why these spaces increasingly function as environments where people publicly narrate suffering, vulnerability, emotional recovery, or personal transformation among strangers.

Existing scholarship explains emotional expression primarily through attachment, participation, identity, or affective circulation, but provides less explanation for why social distance itself may enable vulnerable disclosure. Digital fan communities place individuals within environments where strangers remain continuously present as readers, witnesses, and sources of recognition without becoming personally embedded in one another’s lives. This condition shapes how personal experiences become publicly speakable within mediated environments.

This study addresses that gap by bringing together storytelling, parasociality, and Simmel’s (1950) figure of the stranger within a single analytical framework. The study examines

storytelling not simply as emotional expression, but as a socially situated practice shaped by mediated forms of distance, presence, and recognition. Frank's (2013) concept of the wounded storyteller provides a way of understanding why emotionally difficult experiences become narratable, while Simmel's (1950) concept of the stranger explains the social conditions that make such narration possible among people who remain personally unknown to one another. Parasocial theory further clarifies how emotionally meaningful relations are sustained through repeated mediated familiarity despite the absence of reciprocal interaction (Giles & Stever, 2024). Through this combination, the study develops the concept of "parasocial strangers" to explain how storytelling unfolds through emotionally meaningful yet socially distant relations within contemporary digital fan communities.

### *Storytelling as a Way of Making Experience Communicable*

DeNora's (2000) perspective provides the starting point by showing how music is used in everyday life as a resource for shaping emotion, memory, and routine. Music not only reflects such experience, but is also incorporated into how individuals organise their lives. Individuals curated music based on their own emotional states to regulate their everyday life (DeNora, 2000, p. 49). This helps explain why songs become closely tied to personal histories and emotional bonds to organise how and what they feel going through everyday situations (DeNora, 2000, p. 48). I use this theoretical work as a foundation of this study because it situated musical engagement within the ongoing formation of personal experience. However, while DeNora (2000) explored how music becomes meaningful, her framework primarily focused on how individuals work with music internally.

The issue examined in this study extends beyond how music becomes meaningful internally. Once experiences become emotionally difficult, unresolved, or personally significant, listeners may begin articulating them publicly through storytelling. Frank's (2013) concept of the wounded storyteller becomes important here because it explains why emotionally unresolved experiences often generate a need for narration and recognition. Stories allow individuals to place suffering, vulnerability, crisis, or disruption into narrative form so that experiences become communicable and recognisable. The story does not function as description, but as an attempt to

make experience socially meaningful. Frank (2013, p. 61) describes this process as “narrative truth,” where coherence is constructed through storytelling itself.

This becomes especially relevant within digital fan communities, where listeners frequently narrate experiences of heartbreak, loneliness, emotional exhaustion, family conflict, insecurity, or recovery through shared engagement with music. The comments examined throughout this study show that listeners not only interpret songs, but use them to articulate experiences that remain emotionally unresolved within their lives. Music provides a symbolic and emotional language through which these experiences become easier to express publicly.

The act of storytelling also assumes the presence of others. Mead (1962) distinction between the “I” and the “Me” helps clarify this process. The “I” refers to spontaneous, subjective expression, while the “Me” reflects the internalised perspective of others (Mead, 1962). Expression is always socially oriented, even in the absence of direct interaction. Therefore, individuals not just tell their experiences, they also tell them in ways that anticipate how they will be received. This situation in a way becomes relevant in digital environments, where expression is produced in awareness of an audience that is present but not personally known. The movement from “I” to “Me” also helps explain the emergence of collective language such as “we,” where individual experiences are shaped in relation to an imagined social field.

While Frank (2013) establishes the necessity of storytelling and Mead (1962) helps how the collective storytelling unfolds, this perspective assumes the presence of an audience without specifying its nature. If storytelling depends on the presence of others, then what kind of audience makes these forms of vulnerable expression possible within digital fan communities where participants remain personally unknown to one another?

### *Storytelling and the Figure of the Stranger*

Simmel’s (1950) concept of the stranger provides an important way of understanding the social conditions under which mediated storytelling becomes possible. The stranger occupies a position of simultaneous nearness and distance, participating within a shared social environment while remaining outside the obligations and familiarity associated with closer personal relationships

(Simmel, 1950, p. 450). This position matters because social distance can make certain forms of disclosure easier to articulate publicly. Experiences that may feel difficult to express within intimate relationships can become more speakable in front of people who remain personally unknown. Storytelling depends not only on the presence of an audience, but on a particular kind of social relation that allows vulnerable experiences to be communicated without requiring intimacy or reciprocity.

This condition appears within digital fan communities. Listeners participate in shared emotional environments organised around music, artists, and collective attachment while remaining socially unbound from one another. Comment sections allow individuals to narrate experiences publicly in front of audiences that are continuously present as readers and witnesses, yet remain outside their everyday interpersonal lives. The stranger in this context is less a specific individual than a recurring social presence through which recognition becomes possible among people who do not personally know each other.

Bringing Frank's (2013) wounded storyteller together with Simmel's (1950) stranger shifts storytelling from an individual act of expression toward a socially situated communicative practice. Stories about grief, loneliness, emotional crisis, or recovery are not simply narrated into empty space, but directed toward environments populated by strangers who may recognise similar experiences within their own lives. The importance of the comment section lies less in direct interaction than in the possibility of witness. Listeners do not necessarily seek advice, solutions, or reciprocal relationships from others present in the space. What matters is that personal experiences become acknowledged within a shared mediated environment where emotional realities can circulate publicly among strangers.

### *Parasocial Relations and Mediated Strangers*

This social configuration is intensified further through the presence of the artist as a mediated figure. Parasocial theory explains how the artist becomes part of this relational structure. Early work on parasocial interaction describes the illusion of reciprocal communication with media figures, while later developments conceptualise parasocial relationships as enduring one-sided

attachments (Giles & Stever, 2024, pp. 8–9). Giles and Stever's (2024) highlights how such relationships provide a sense of emotional presence and perceived understanding. Through ongoing engagement across music, interviews, performances, and digital platforms, artists become emotionally present within listeners' everyday lives while remaining socially distant from them.

Within this study, parasociality is understood not only as attachment to a media figure, but as part of a broader relational structure shaping how storytelling becomes organised within fan communities. The artist occupies a position closely aligned with Simmel's (1950) stranger where emotionally near, repeatedly encountered, but socially outside the listener's direct interpersonal world. This position allows the artist to become an addressee of vulnerable storytelling without requiring reciprocal intimacy. Listeners may address artists directly, attribute emotional understanding to them, and narrate deeply personal experiences toward them despite never entering mutual social relationships.

At the same time, similar relational dynamics extend beyond the artist alone. Other listeners encountered repeatedly through shared participation within comment sections also become emotionally recognisable figures despite remaining personally unknown. Digital platforms, then, expand the social role of the stranger by making emotionally meaningful yet socially distant relations continuously accessible within everyday communication.

### *Towards Parasocial Strangers*

Storytelling within digital fan communities cannot be understood solely as emotional attachment to music, participation within fandom, or interaction shaped by platforms. What becomes important is how these processes converge within mediated environments where listeners publicly narrate personal experiences in front of socially distant others. Music becomes tied to memories, routines, emotional crises, and everyday reflection, while digital platforms provide spaces where those experiences can be articulated in the presence of audiences who remain personally unknown.

Songs first become integrated into listeners' emotional lives through repetition, memory, and everyday use (DeNora, 2000). Once these experiences become difficult, unresolved, or emotionally significant, storytelling provides a way of organising them into narratives that can be communicated publicly (Frank, 2013). However, these stories are shaped by awareness that others are present within the communicative environment. Listeners articulate experiences in front of readers, witnesses, and potential sources of recognition, even when no direct interaction takes place (Mead, 1962). Personal storytelling unfolds within an imagined social field structured through the visibility of others.

The presence of strangers becomes structurally important within this process. Social distance reduces many of the interpersonal obligations and risks attached to vulnerable disclosure in intimate relationships (Simmel, 1950). Digital platforms intensify this condition by making strangers persistently accessible within everyday communication. Through repeated participation around the same songs, artists, and emotional narratives, listeners repeatedly encounter people who remain personally unknown while still becoming familiar through recurring forms of expression and emotional orientation.

Parasocial relations extend this structure further. Artists remain socially distant while occupying an ongoing emotional presence within listeners' everyday lives through repeated mediated familiarity (Giles & Stever, 2024). At the same time, similar dynamics increasingly develop among listeners themselves. Individuals return to the same comment sections, encounter recurring emotional patterns, recognise similar forms of suffering or reflection, and begin orienting themselves toward others who remain strangers outside the mediated environment.

From this condition, the concept of "parasocial strangers" becomes useful for understanding how storytelling operates within contemporary digital fan communities. Parasocial strangers are socially distant yet emotionally meaningful figures who participate in one another's narrative lives through repeated mediated exposure, shared emotional orientation, and public storytelling. The concept refers not only to the relation between audiences and artists, but also to relations among listeners who remain personally unknown while continuing to recognise, validate, and repeat one another's experiences within shared digital environments. The importance of these



relations lies not in reciprocity or interpersonal intimacy, but in the way mediated stranger relations make vulnerable storytelling publicly possible within contemporary digital culture.

### *Synthesise*

The perspectives outlined above collectively suggest that digital fan communities function not only as spaces of media consumption or fandom, but as mediated environments where personal experiences become publicly narratable through emotionally meaningful yet socially distant relations. Music provides listeners with emotional and symbolic resources for interpreting everyday life (DeNora, 2000), while storytelling allows difficult experiences to be organised into communicable narratives (Frank, 2013). These expressions are shaped through awareness of others who remain present within the communicative environment (Mead, 1962), even when those others are personally unknown. Simmel's (1950) concept of the stranger used to explain why vulnerable storytelling becomes possible within relationships structured through distance rather than intimacy, while parasocial theory demonstrates how emotionally meaningful forms of familiarity develop without reciprocal interaction (Giles & Stever, 2024).

At the same time, pulling these perspectives together is not straightforward, because they were not originally developed within the same analytical framework. None of these theories were developed to explain YouTube or Instagram comment sections under Indonesian songs. And yet, bringing these perspectives together shifts the analysis away from fandom as mere admiration or emotional attachment and toward the social conditions that make public storytelling possible within digital environments. The concept of "parasocial strangers" thus provides a framework for examining how listeners narrate grief, loneliness, emotional struggle, healing, and personal reflection through shared engagement with music in front of socially distant yet emotionally meaningful others.

## Methodology

This thesis uses a qualitative case study approach to examine how listeners express personal experiences through music within digital fan communities. The study focuses on the stories shared by listeners in online comment sections and how these expressions emerge through interaction with songs, artists, and other listeners within a shared mediated environment. The research is concerned with how listeners narrate emotions, interpret experiences, and position themselves socially through language. Because these forms of expression are closely tied to context, interpretation, and interaction, the study requires an approach capable of examining meaning in relation to the environment in which it appears.

The use of a case study approach is important because the research concerns situated forms of meaning-making that are closely tied to context. Flyvbjerg (2001, p. 73) argues that in the study of human affairs, “concrete, context-dependent knowledge is more valuable than the vain search for predictive theories and universals.” He further explains that “the particular and the situationally dependent are emphasized over the universal and over rules” (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 58). These arguments are particularly relevant to the present study because the focus lies on how listeners articulate experiences within a specific fan environment shaped by music, platform culture, and public interaction. The aim is not to generalise all forms of online fan participation, but to understand how storytelling unfolds within a particular communicative setting through the language, emotions, and narratives expressed by listeners themselves.

Flyvbjerg (2001, p. 77) also notes that information-oriented case selection is useful when the objective is to maximise the depth of understanding surrounding a particular phenomenon. The fan community of Hindia provides a particularly suitable case in this regard because audience engagement within this environment frequently extends into detailed personal storytelling. Listeners use songs as points of reflection for discussing experiences such as grief, heartbreak, loneliness, family conflict, emotional exhaustion, and personal change. These forms of expression appear repeatedly across comment sections and are shared publicly among people who do not personally know one another. The case offers a rich setting for examining why online fan communities become spaces where intimate experiences are communicated openly through shared engagement with music.

The analysis focuses on comments collected from YouTube and Instagram under Hindia's song *Everything U Are*. These comments function as naturally occurring data in which listeners voluntarily express emotions, interpretations, and personal reflections in a public setting. Unlike interview-based research, the comments are not produced in response to the researcher's questions, but emerge through everyday interaction within the platform environment itself. This allows the study to examine how listeners express experiences in their own terms and within naturally occurring communicative situations. The comments provide access to forms of storytelling already situated within the fan community, including how listeners narrate emotions publicly, address others, and position themselves in relation to the artist and the wider audience.

The dataset consists of 118 comments gathered across five posts and videos from YouTube and Instagram. Most comments were written in Bahasa Indonesia and have been translated into English for analytical purposes. All excerpts are presented in English to maintain consistency, while preserving the original meaning and tone as closely as possible. The comments vary in length and form, ranging from short emotional statements to longer narrative accounts recounting personal experiences and reflections. While some comments directly address the artist, others speak more generally to fellow listeners or to the wider community present within the comment environment.

YouTube and Instagram were selected because both platforms encourage visible forms of audience participation organised around media content. Their comment sections allow listeners not only to respond to songs, but also to read, recognise, and interact with the expressions of others. This creates a shared communicative environment where personal storytelling appears alongside other audience responses and becomes part of a collective space of interaction. The platform structure is important to the study because it shapes how listeners publicly articulate emotions and experiences in relation to a wider audience of strangers gathered around the same media object.

Jensen (2012, p. 266) argues that qualitative audience research centres on meaning as both an object of study and an interpretive process through which audiences make sense of mediated experiences. This perspective informs the analytical approach of the study. The focus lies on how listeners construct meaning through storytelling, how they connect lyrics to personal

experiences, and how these expressions take shape within a shared social environment. The meanings expressed within the comments cannot be reduced to keywords or surface-level themes alone. Listeners frequently communicate through fragments of stories, emotional references, shared cultural language, and indirect forms of expression that require contextual interpretation. Close reading becomes necessary in order to examine how meaning is articulated through language, narrative form, and emotional expression.

### **Sampling Strategy**

From the dataset collected under YouTube and Instagram posts related to Hindia's song *Everything U Are*, comments were selected using purposive sampling. As Jensen (2012, p. 245) explains, a purposive sample involves selecting data according to criteria directly relevant to the research focus. In this study, the selection is guided by the aim of understanding how listeners articulate personal experiences in relation to the music, the artist, and other listeners within the comment environment.

The dataset contained substantial variation in the forms of participation visible across the comment sections. Many comments consisted of short reactions, emojis, repetitive praise, lyric quotations without elaboration, tagging activity, or brief statements of admiration. Alongside these forms of engagement, however, there were also comments in which listeners reflected on emotional experiences, interpreted lyrics through autobiographical situations, or narrated personal difficulties in relation to the music. Narrative and emotionally reflective comments did not appear uniformly across the dataset, making selective sampling necessary in order to focus analytically on comments that provided richer insight into how listeners communicate experiences publicly within the fan environment.

The selection focused on comments containing: (1) forms of emotional expression, (2) interpretations of lyrics or songs in relation to lived experience, and (3) references to personal memories, relationships, struggles, or forms of self-reflection. This includes both brief statements and longer narratives, as long as they contribute to understanding how listeners express meaning through storytelling. The focus not only on the presence of emotion itself, but

on comments in which listeners moved beyond immediate reaction and articulated experiences in ways that positioned the self within a broader emotional or social context.

Comments consisting solely of emojis, short praise, repetitive reactions, unrelated tagging activity, or highly abbreviated reactions were not prioritised further in the analysis. This exclusion was not intended to suggest that such comments were unimportant forms of fan participation. On the contrary, these responses remain part of the affective and participatory dynamics of digital fandom. However, because the analytical focus of the study concerns how experiences become publicly communicable within mediated environments, comments offering limited narrative or reflective content provided less insight into the processes of expression, interpretation, and emotional articulation examined in this research.

The intention of the sampling strategy is not to achieve statistical representativeness, but to capture a range of ways in which listeners publicly articulate experiences within this particular digital setting. While the selection follows specific criteria, it also involves interpretive judgement in identifying which comments are analytically relevant. This approach is consistent with qualitative research in which sampling is guided by the analytical purpose of the study and interpretive depth rather than statistical generalisation (Jensen, 2012, p. 245).

### **Coding and Analytical Approach**

The analysis follows a qualitative text analysis approach centred on the interpretation of written data. Qualitative text analysis is concerned with understanding how meaning is constructed within texts through interpretation, contextual reading, and attention to the ways language organises experience (Kuckartz, 2014, p. 33). The analysis approaches the comment as socially situated expressions produced within a particular mediated environment. The comments are understood as communicative acts through which listeners articulate emotions, narrate experiences, and position themselves in relation to the artist, the music, and other listeners present within the comment space.

This analytical orientation is grounded in hermeneutic principles, where interpretation develops progressively through continuous engagement with the material and through attention to how

meaning is expressed contextually through language (Kuckartz, 2014, pp. 17, 31). Hermeneutic analysis assumes that meaning cannot be understood solely through surface content, but must be interpreted in relation to broader narrative structures, emotional orientation, and the social context within which expression takes place. In the present study, this was particularly important because many comments communicated experiences indirectly through fragments of stories, emotionally loaded phrases, references to lyrics, or culturally familiar forms of expression that required contextual interpretation rather than literal reading alone.

The analytical process began with repeated close readings of the full dataset in order to familiarise the recurring patterns of expression across the comments. During this initial stage, attention was directed toward how listeners narrated experiences, described emotions, addressed the artist, referred to other listeners, and connected songs to personal memories or everyday situations. The aim of these early readings was not immediately to impose theoretical categories onto the material, but to identify recurring forms of language, emotional articulation, and narrative organisation emerging from the dataset itself.

The first initial stage of formal analysis used coding procedures commonly associated with Grounded Theory, including open, axial, and selective coding (Kuckartz, 2014, p. 43). Open coding involved assigning provisional labels to recurring forms of expression appearing throughout the comments. These included emotional vocabulary, autobiographical references, references to mental distress, memories, family relations, loneliness, gratitude toward the artist, collective pronouns such as “we,” recurring metaphors of being “saved,” and descriptions of music as comfort, support, or companionship. At this stage, coding remained intentionally expansive and exploratory in order to avoid prematurely narrowing interpretation.

As the analysis progressed, axial coding was used to examine relationships between categories and identify broader patterns connecting different forms of expression. Certain emotional themes repeatedly overlapped with specific narrative structures. For example, comments describing emotional crises often also involve references to repeated listening, feelings of recognition, or direct forms of address toward the artist. Similarly, comments using collective language frequently connected personal experiences to broader forms of belonging within the fan

community. Axial coding helped move the analysis beyond isolated thematic categories toward relational patterns within the dataset.

Selective coding further narrowed the analytical focus by identifying recurring dynamics most relevant to the research questions. At this stage, attention increasingly centred on how listeners transformed personal experiences into publicly communicable narratives within the presence of socially distant others. The analysis began focusing less on isolated emotional themes themselves and more on how listeners organised experiences narratively, positioned audiences implicitly or explicitly within their comments, and constructed forms of emotional recognition through shared language and mediated participation.

As the categories became clearer through multiple rounds of coding, an initial codebook was developed alongside preliminary theoretical reflections. However, the analysis gradually moved beyond categorisation alone. Recurring patterns within the comments increasingly pointed toward broader relational and social dynamics that could not be fully understood through thematic coding by itself. The comments were organised not only around recurring themes, but also around particular ways of narrating experiences, addressing others, and positioning the self within the shared environment of the fan community. This required a more interpretive hermeneutic approach capable of examining how these expressions gained emotional, social, and relational meaning within the mediated setting.

This shift required a more interpretive hermeneutic approach capable of examining how comments functioned within a broader communicative and relational context. The analysis increasingly attended to narrative form, emotional orientation, implied audiences, recurring metaphors, and patterns of collective language. Expressions such as “we saved each other,” “you understand us,” or “this song represents my life” were approached not simply as emotional statements, but as socially meaningful forms of positioning through which listeners organised experiences and negotiated relationships within the mediated environment.

The later stages of analysis moved continuously between individual comments, broader patterns across the dataset, and the theoretical perspectives guiding the study. This iterative movement reflects a classic hermeneutic process in which interpretation develops progressively through repeated reading, contextual comparison, and movement between parts of the text and the larger

interpretive whole (Kuckartz, 2014, p. 17). Interpretation did not proceed linearly from “data” to “theory,” but developed through ongoing dialogue between empirical observation and conceptual understanding.

The aim of the analysis was consequently not only to identify recurring themes, but to understand how listeners construct meaning, narrate emotionally significant experiences, and communicate forms of vulnerability, recognition, and belonging within a mediated social environment. Particular attention was given to how listeners publicly articulated experiences in front of others who remained socially unknown, and how mediated forms of familiarity shaped these expressions.

Documentation of the coding process, including coding categories and analytical notes, is available upon request.

### **Reflexivity and Limitations**

Because this study uses an interpretive and hermeneutic approach, my position as the researcher forms part of the analytical process. The comments analysed in this thesis are not treated as transparent representations of stable inner emotional states, but as public expressions produced within specific digital environments. Listeners write with awareness that their comments are visible to large audiences, including other fans, strangers, and potentially the artist themselves. The comments are shaped not only by personal experience, but also by platform visibility, audience awareness, shared fan language, and the communicative norms of online participation. For this reason, the analysis does not assume that comments provide direct access to what listeners “truly” feel internally. Instead, the comments are approached as socially situated forms of expression through which listeners present, organise, and communicate experiences publicly.

This became particularly important during the interpretation of emotionally intense comments. Many comments were brief, indirect, fragmented, or written through exaggeration, humour, slang, lyric references, or emotionally condensed phrases. Expressions such as “this song saved me,” “I almost died before hearing this,” or “you are my psychologist” could not automatically



be interpreted literally or psychologically without attention to context. In many cases, meaning depended on tone, repetition, surrounding comments, shared fandom language, and familiarity with Indonesian online communication styles. Some comments also shifted rapidly between sincerity, humour, irony, and emotional intensity within a single sentence. Because of this, interpretation required repeated close reading in order to examine not only what listeners were saying, but how they positioned experiences socially and emotionally within the comment environment.

The interpretive process also involved analytical judgement in deciding which patterns became significant within the study. Identifying recurring themes, selecting excerpts, and connecting comments to theoretical concepts required decisions about emphasis, coherence, and relevance. Some comments clearly articulated autobiographical experiences, while others only implied emotional states indirectly. I, therefore, remained cautious about imposing fixed meanings onto comments that were ambiguous, emotionally fragmented, or open to multiple interpretations. The aim of the analysis was not to determine the “real” intentions or psychological conditions of commenters, but to understand how experiences were publicly communicated and made socially recognisable within the fan environment.

Additional reflexive attention was necessary during the translation process from Bahasa Indonesia into English. Many comments used informal phrasing, internet slang, abbreviations, humour, and culturally specific expressions that do not always translate directly without altering tone or meaning. Indonesian online communication often relies on emotional shorthand and conversational styles that can sound either overly dramatic or emotionally flattened when translated literally into English. Some phrases also carried forms of intimacy, familiarity, or emotional nuance that were difficult to reproduce fully across languages. For this reason, the translations prioritised preserving communicative meaning, emotional orientation, and narrative context rather than producing strictly literal translations. In some cases, minor grammatical adjustments were made to maintain readability while retaining the original tone and relational meaning of the comments.

Several limitations should also be acknowledged. First, the study analyses publicly available comments rather than interviews, ethnographic observation, or private communication. The

analysis focuses on storytelling as public expression rather than attempting to verify commenters' lived realities or psychological intentions. Comments may involve exaggeration, emotional performance, selective self-presentation, or forms of expression shaped by the visibility of the platform itself. The study consequently approaches comments as communicative acts situated within digital fan culture rather than as direct evidence of objective personal truth.

Second, the structure of platform communication limits the amount of contextual information available. Many comments appeared without extended interaction, making it difficult to determine how commenters interpreted one another beyond what remained publicly visible. Platform algorithms, deleted comments, moderation systems, and changing engagement patterns also shape which comments remain accessible and visible over time. The dataset reflects platform-visible participation rather than the entirety of audience interaction surrounding the music.

Last, the study focuses on a single fan community and primarily on one song case. The findings are not intended to be statistically generalisable across all fandoms, music communities, or digital cultures. Different fan communities may organise emotional expression differently depending on platform affordances, genre conventions, cultural context, audience demographics, and the public persona of the artist involved. The value of the case instead lies in its analytical depth and its ability to illuminate broader dynamics of mediated storytelling, parasociality, emotional recognition, and stranger relations within contemporary digital culture.

## **Ethical Considerations**

All data used in this study are publicly accessible comments collected from open digital platforms. To respect user privacy, no usernames, profile images, or identifiable information are included in the thesis. Comments are anonymised and referenced numerically (e.g., Comment 1–100). The analysis focuses solely on the content of the comments as expressions situated within a public communicative environment.

Although the comments are publicly available, the study recognises that individuals may not necessarily anticipate their expressions being used within academic research. Particular care was

taken when selecting and presenting excerpts involving emotionally vulnerable experiences, including references to grief, mental health struggles, emotional distress, or self-harm. The purpose of the analysis is not to evaluate individual commenters, but to understand the broader communicative and social patterns through which storytelling unfolds within digital fan communities.

Special attention was also given to the translation process from Bahasa Indonesia into English. Translations were approached carefully in order to preserve the original tone, emotional meaning, and context of the comments as closely as possible while avoiding unnecessary exposure of identifiable details or culturally specific information that could compromise anonymity

## The Social Life of Musical Experience

This chapter begins with how the social life of listening to music extends beyond a moment of individual response, where musical experience becomes expressed through storytelling. In the comment sections under Hindia's songs, listeners connect music to memories, emotions, and personal experiences, writing them publicly among strangers connected through the same song.

### *From Listening to Storytelling*

The listening experience begins with Parasocial Interaction (PSI), which is the moment-by-moment response a listener has to the music or the artist (Dibble et al., 2016, p. 28; Giles & Stever, 2024, p. 9). In this moment, the listener may feel "seen" by the artist, providing the initial comfort needed to open up, which creates a mediated illusion that the listener is part of a mutual social communication (Giles & Stever, 2024, p. 50). This experience continues through what is described as Retrospective Imaginative Involvement (RII), where the media experience carries on even after it has technically ended (Slater et al., p. 330; Giles & Stever, 2024, p. 171).

It is within this continuation that storytelling begins. When I began reading the comment sections, what became visible was how listeners used these spaces to articulate emotions, memories, and fragments of their own life experiences. They begin to narrate their experiences through the music, positioning themselves as storytellers of their own lives. The narrative in the comments mostly appears from moments of difficulty and personal strain. Drawing on Arthur Frank's concept of the wounded storyteller, the act of storytelling can be understood as a way of an individual making sense of difficult experiences through narration (Frank, 2013, p. xi). In this case, listeners are not necessarily "wounded" in a strictly medical sense, but they engage in similar narrative practices by sharing moments of vulnerability, loss, and emotional struggle.

One prominent pattern is storytelling structured around crisis and survival. It is worth returning here to the comment that opened this thesis:

...Maybe before this song was released, **I would have already hanged myself...**  
(Comment 2).

When this statement appeared in the introduction, it illustrated the emotional intensity of digital fan expression. Within the framework of wounded storytelling, however, it can be understood more specifically as a public articulation of suffering through narrative (Frank, 2013).

Several listeners similarly recount moments in which they position themselves at the edge of emotional breakdown:

Hearing this song gave us spirit again, especially the part: **“we almost died...** (Comment 16).

In 2019, if I hadn’t listened to Evakuasi, **I would have jumped off a bridge..** (Comment 25).

Hindia’s music **saved me from multiple suicide attempts..** (Comment 81).

What I find in these comments is not simply emotional expression, but an effort to place moments of crisis into narratable form. Frank (2013, p. 170) describes suffering as an existential universal that cuts across different lives and situations. This is why listeners are able to recognise aspects of their own experiences in the stories shared by others throughout the comment sections. However, suffering does not magically disappear when the story is told, but through telling and hearing stories, it can feel less alone (Frank, 2013, p. xi). Listeners have described what they felt, what almost happened, and what changed, as a way of voicing their experiences of suffering and making sense of those moments in relation to others who may have gone through similar situations where they can be recognised and not felt alone. Storytelling therefore functions not only as expression, but as a way of distributing emotional experience across a shared social space.

The narratives of crisis are not limited to the moment itself, but extend into reflections on the past. Storytelling moves into narratives of memory and relationships, where listeners reconstruct earlier experiences:

When I hear this song, it feels like it pulls all those **memories back**. The late-night conversations, small laughter, silly fights... (Comment 6).

...**I was loved for who I am**, with my flaws and my limits. (Comment 24).

When I hear this song, it **reminds me of someone** who accepted me as I am. (Comment 53).

This storytelling organises past experiences into a coherent narrative. What is told is not the past as it was, but a version that creates continuity and meaning, or what is described as “narrative truth” (Frank, 2013, p. 61). Listeners not only interpret the song, but think with it, allowing it to shape how they understand their own experiences and recognise a certain truth in their lives (Frank, 2013, p. 23). These reflections not just recall the past, but reshape it in ways that remain relevant to how listeners understand their present lives.

This process is made possible by the sense of familiarity listeners develop with the artist. The repeated exposure to an artist’s voice, words, and persona makes it easier to form a parasocial attachment, provides a sense of comfort and safe haven, even in parasocial contexts (Giles & Stever, 2024, p. 55). What becomes noticeable in these comments is that the song does not only bring back memories, but does so within a relation that feels emotionally secure, allowing listeners to revisit past experiences in ways that feel both personal and safe.

Alongside recalling past experiences, listeners also position themselves within those experiences through recognisable roles and life situations:

**This middle-aged heart of mine** broke down in tears as it played.. (Comment 3).

This represents **my life in my 30s**, when life begins to change.. (Comment 13).

**I’m a mother of two...** I feel like this song represents my feelings for my own mother... (Comment 5).

**I’m the fifth of five siblings** and the last hope of my family... (Comment 19).

What interests me in these comments is how listeners rarely narrate experiences abstractly. Listeners specify who they are—through age, family roles, or responsibility—in order to position how their experiences should be understood. The act of telling is not only expressive, but a way of organising the self over time (DeNora, 2000, p. 66). Interpretation does not begin with the song, but with the self. The song is taken up as a resource through which listeners articulate and position who they are, therefore, meaning is not derived from the music itself, but actively produced as listeners appropriate it for their own social and emotional use (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 833).

What repeatedly appears across the comments is not storytelling about recovery in a straightforward sense, but storytelling that remains oriented toward living with suffering over time. Frank's (2013, pp. 115–116) concept of the “quest narrative” becomes useful here, although the comments also complicate it slightly. Listeners are not necessarily presenting suffering as meaningful or resolved. Instead, the act of continuing to narrate difficult experiences seems to matter more than arriving at closure. The significance of these stories lies in the ability of listeners to remain present as tellers of their own experiences (Frank, 2013, p. 115). So, what happens in the comment section is not that suffering is overcome, but that it can be articulated and sustained as part of the self through storytelling.

This process then extends into how listeners organise their everyday lives through music as a technology of the self (DeNora, 2000, p. 45). Listeners narrate their feelings and states of being, and sustain them through repeated listening:

Artery 3x a day, Everything U Are **24 hours without stopping** (Comment 105).

...have a **new sleeping habit** to look for (listening/play a song) Everything U Are, not bolster... (Comment 110).

While another says:

Every second, every minute I **keep playing this** (Comment 106).

The repetition is not incidental. It shows that listeners use the music as part of how they stay with what they feel. Storytelling here is not separate from practice, but carried through it, as music becomes a way for individuals to organise how they feel, what they do, and how they move through everyday situations (DeNora, 2000, p. 48).

This becomes more apparent when listeners connect the music to specific situations such as work:

Because of your songs I feel **motivated** when going to work. (Comment 84).

They really **keep me from getting bored** when I'm tired of working, drawing, and writing. **Their songs accompany me..** (Comment 98).

These comments, including the prior three comments, show how music is positioned in relation to particular needs and moments. Individuals do not passively receive music, but they actively select and arrange it in relation to their needs, acting “like disc jockeys to themselves” (DeNora, 2000, p. 49). In this context, listeners act like disc jockeys by organising the music and returning to them as a way of sustaining and regulating those experiences over time as needed.

The engagement with the music moves beyond the individual and enters shared contexts. Some listeners describe how the music becomes part of everyday situations with others:

**Wherever we go**, the favorite **playlist in the car always** includes Hindia songs. (Comment 14).

**I keep playing it until my kindergarten child memorises the lyrics...** it's a song that gives us spirit. (Comment 18).

What begins as personal storytelling becomes incorporated into everyday practices that are lived with others. This is showing that listeners engage in multisocial interaction, where personal engagement with the artist's work is shared as a resource within their collective self-narratives



(Hills, 2015, p. 471). Through sharing this storytelling, personal listening practices are transformed into collectively recognisable patterns that make listeners connect with others who use the music in similar ways.

At the same time, listeners describe the music not only as something socially shared with others, but as something physically felt in the body. Alongside narrating memories, relationships, and collective experiences, listeners repeatedly describe physical sensations produced through the music itself:

Every time this song plays, I get **goosebumps** and feel like the lyrics are speaking directly to my life. (Comment 43).

The drum beat before the final chorus gives me **goosebumps**. (Comment 42).

.. But after hearing this song it keeps **echoing in my ears**.. (Comment 17).

The repeated references to “goosebumps” suggest that the song is not experienced at a distance, but as something that unfolds directly in the listener’s body. While Giles and Stever (2024, p. 47) argues that mediated encounters are defined by how they are felt as present, these responses show that presence is not only perceptual but embodied. The reaction is described as happening in the moment—“every time this song plays,” “before the final chorus”—indicating that the music is experienced as acting on the body as it unfolds. This happens because music does not just accompany experience, but can shape bodily and emotional states as they occur, so that the song is understood through feeling rather than as something interpreted afterwards (DeNora, 2000, p. 49; Frank, 2013, p. 50). The comments show that listeners experience the music not only cognitively or emotionally, but physically, where bodily sensations become part of how meaning is recognised and articulated.

Once these bodily reactions are written publicly in the comment section, they no longer remain private emotional responses. Their visibility allows affect to circulate across listeners who encounter similar intensities through the same song. At the same time, media can sustain and amplify affect, allowing individuals to attune to how strongly something is felt by others

(Papacharissi, 2014, p. 118). In this context, the comment section organises emotional responses into a shared affective environment, where listeners become oriented toward one another through the public expression of feeling. The significance of these comments lies not only in what individuals feel, but in how emotional intensity becomes socially distributed and recognised through mediated visibility.

As these emotional responses circulate publicly among listeners, the comment section becomes more than a space of individual reaction. Listeners use the space to narrate experiences of crisis, comfort, memory, loneliness, and emotional struggle in ways that are witnessed by others gathered around the same music. The storytelling unfolds within a mediated social environment where listeners are aware that others are present, reading, and potentially recognising similar experiences. This kind of sharing reflects a parasocial relationship that operates as a “normal social activity” and is not perceived as a threat to real-life relationships (Giles & Stever, 2024, p. 62). When a wounded storyteller posts a comment, they are not only engaging in a moment of parasocial interaction with the artist, but also participating in a discursive event witnessed by others within the community (Frank, 2013; Hills, 2015, p. 471).

This shared vulnerability becomes collective, as similar expressions accumulate and create a sense of being part of a shared experience, or what can be understood as “collective effervescence” (Giles & Stever, 2024, p. 136). What develops through this accumulation of stories is a shared emotional environment in which listeners become oriented toward one another through similar experiences and forms of expression. This shared environment sets up the next chapter, which examines how storytelling unfolds in the presence of strangers.

### *Storytelling in the Presence of Strangers*

In the digital sphere, these forms of storytelling are written in front of other listeners, which means that personal interpretations also become social acts. This is where listeners begin to exercise semantic agency by claiming the power to tell their own stories and connect them to broader public narratives (Papacharissi, 2014, pp. 131, 136). Although listeners do not necessarily know one another personally, the comment section still creates a shared orientation in

which thoughts, emotions, and experiences are expressed with the awareness that others are present and reading them. This reflects a broader parasocial condition in which mediated forms of connection may lack direct interaction, yet still produce meaningful social effects (Giles & Stever, 2024, p. 7). The important question, then, is what kind of social relation emerges among listeners who remain personally unknown to one another while continuing to participate within the same emotional and communicative environment.

This is reflected in the social condition described in Simmel's (1950) concept of the stranger. He conceptualises the stranger as someone who is simultaneously near and distant—"an element of the group itself" whose position involves both belonging and detachment (Simmel, 1950, p. 448). The stranger shares certain commonalities with others while remaining socially unbound by specific personal ties. This dual position becomes particularly relevant within digital fan communities, where listeners gather around shared experiences and emotional attachments without necessarily developing direct interpersonal relationships. The comment section creates a social environment in which forms of openness and storytelling can unfold among people who remain strangers to one another.

The comment below appeared to express the relations with strangers:

...I've met **many good people** in this community. (Comment 91).

For a wounded storyteller who may feel isolated or alone in their everyday life, the discovery of "good people" within this digital community can become a source of comfort and emotional reassurance that may be difficult to find elsewhere (Frank, 2013; Giles & Stever, 2024, p. 136). What becomes important here is that these forms of recognition emerge among people who remain personally unknown to one another. The community provides a space where listeners can feel emotionally acknowledged through shared experiences of vulnerability and suffering. In this sense, the strangers in the community transform into social ghosts—as internalised figures whom listeners feel "know" them emotionally, even without direct or reciprocal relationships (Gergen, 2001; Giles & Stever, 2024, p. 79).

In the phenomenon of the stranger, distance means that “he who is close by is far” (Simmel, 1950, p. 448). The physical present is not an issue in the digital sphere as what holds this community together is not personal connection, but a more general sense of commonality that could extend to many others. The relation remains impersonal, yet still meaningful, as listeners attempt to stabilise a shared space among strangers through the recognition of common experience.

These comment is shown in how listeners recognised others even when they are not addressing anyone directly:

Hopefully **Gen Z like this** will bring a positive direction to the country in the future. Also, the music he brings blends developments across eras — the 70s, 80s, 90s, and 2000s. (Comment 27).

Every concert is always full, **so many people are willing to travel far** just to see Hindia. **Loved by this many people!** (Comment 29).

Such openness is expressed within a community space where listeners are present but not personally known to one another. The stranger often becomes the recipient of forms of openness that would be withheld in closer relationships, because the absence of established ties reduces the social risks attached to disclosure (Simmel, 1950, p. 449). At the same time, the storytelling remains inherently social as stories are always told to someone, whether that other is immediately present or not (Frank, 2013, p.3). In the comment section, this “someone” is not a specific individual, but a group of strangers in the shared community who act as “witness” to the wound. The value of the response is less in direct reciprocity than in the knowledge that one’s experiences have been seen and recognised by others.

This orientation toward others becomes more explicit when listeners begin to speak on behalf of one another:

**Don’t feel insecure if you just started** listening to Baskara and get called **FOMO**. If you like it and feel “saved,” who cares? **What do they know about you?** (Comment 86).

The comment shows that listeners are not only expressing personal experiences, but also responding to the emotional vulnerability of others within the community. By reassuring newer listeners who may feel judged for being “FOMO,” the commenter positions themselves in relation to people they do not personally know, yet still feels compelled to defend and validate them. The statement “what do they know about you?” dismisses outside judgement while simultaneously affirming the emotional legitimacy of feeling “saved” by the music. What appears here is a form of recognition among strangers, where listeners orient themselves toward one another through shared emotional experience without requiring direct personal ties. The relation remains both close and distant, where shared emotional experiences bring listeners together while keeping them socially unbound from one another (Simmel, 1950, p. 450).

As listeners position themselves within this shared space, their expressions begin to shift. What starts as an individual response moves toward speaking in relation to others, where the presence of others is taken into account. This shift can be understood through Mead’s (1962) distinction between the “I” and the “Me,” where the “Me” reflects how individuals imagine they are seen by others, while the “I” is their personal response. In the comment section, listeners speak as the “I,” but do so in ways that anticipate others, making a sense of “we” possible as a collective language.

Several comments show this transition:

... **We** feel like **we** “**exist**” in every part of Hindia’s journey itself.. (Comment 28).

...it’s just like what **we** **feel**. (Comment 41).

The “we” here shows that listeners carry not only their own experiences, but also those of others. This can be understood through Frank’s idea of “borrowed stories,” where storytellers draw on familiar narrative forms when they lack the resources to fully express their own experiences (Frank, 2013, p. 197). The shift toward “we” allows listeners to express their experiences

through forms that are already recognised, while shaping them into their own personal reflections.

At the same time, in the other type of comment, the “we” is no longer about commonality or similarity, but a position. Listeners define themselves as part of a collective (“fans,” “listeners”), even though they are not directly connected as in interacting with the strangers.

**We loyal listeners** are very proud.. (Comment 85).

...**we as fans** truly feel celebrated by you, Bas. (Comment 28).

These comments show the collective identity projected amongst fans and or listeners as they turn the “me” into the “we”. Mead describes the “me” as where they internalised social attitudes on ways of seeing oneself from the perspective of others, hence, the “we” appears because listeners imagine how others in the same position, feel, and align themselves with that imagined perspective (Mead, 1962).

In other cases, the use of “we” goes further by suggesting a form of mutual relation:

..Turns out **we save each other too** (Comment 85).

Proud that **we’ve saved each** other until today. (Comment 90).

..because it’s not just you who have saved so many people, **but we’ve saved you too**.  
Long life! (Comment 10).

Listeners do not only align their experiences, but position themselves as part of a shared process of support within the community. The “we” in these comments are constructed through the storytelling itself, which uses the borrowed stories when listeners adopt and repeat narrative forms such as “saving” and “being saved” (Frank, 2013, p. 197). The language of “saving each other” functions less as a literal exchange, and more as a collectively recognisable way of making sense of suffering.

The use of “we” also extends beyond the shared space of the comment section, connecting listeners across relationships and time:

**Wherever we go**, the favorite playlist in the car always includes Hindia songs.  
(Comment 14).

..life is difficult and full of wounds, but in the middle of it **we can find someone** who not only accepts us but is also saved by us. (Comment 15).

And **we both** love these songs... yuhuuu! (Comment 20).

The borrowed storytelling is shifting the “we” here, where listeners include people who are not part of the interaction such as: family members or partners and share not only the song, but interpreting experiences that can be carried into different relationships (Frank, 2013, p. 197). Hence, this is not limited to co-present listeners, but continues across time as these narratives are retold and recontextualised.

Across these comment variations, the “we” emerges in different forms and depends on how individuals relate their experiences to others. The shift from “I” to “we” can be understood as a movement from personal response toward a socially oriented “me,” where listeners take into account the presence of others in shaping how their experiences are expressed (Mead, 1962). At the same time, this “we” is not a fixed collective. As storytelling often draws on what Frank (2013, p. 197) describes as borrowed stories, listeners use shared narrative forms to make their experiences expressible within a space where others are present but not fully known.

These patterns suggest that the stranger is not only a theoretical figure within Simmel’s (1950) account of social life, but a social relation made increasingly accessible through digital media. In comment sections, strangers remain continuously present as potential readers, witnesses, and sources of recognition. Digital platforms do not create the stranger itself, but extend the conditions under which stranger relations can persist over time. Listeners are able to return to the same spaces, encounter others who share similar emotional attachments, and articulate personal experiences without entering direct interpersonal relationships. In this sense, digital fan communities expand the social function of the stranger by making emotionally meaningful yet socially distant forms of recognition more continuously available.

At the same time, these forms of storytelling do not remain oriented only toward other listeners. The artist gradually becomes part of the same relational environment through which experiences are expressed, recognised, and shared. As listeners narrate personal experiences publicly in front of strangers, the artist also becomes positioned as someone emotionally present within this shared space despite remaining socially distant. What begins as collective storytelling among listeners therefore starts to develop into a parasocial dynamic in which the artist is increasingly addressed, recognised, and incorporated into the circulation of shared emotional meaning.

The next chapter examines this shift more closely by exploring how the artist comes to occupy the position of a stranger who remains emotionally present and meaningful without entering direct social relations with listeners.

### *Parasocial Dynamic of The Artist as "The Stranger"*

This section examines the artist as a digital-era “stranger” within a parasocial dynamic. In the previous chapters, listeners used the music to narrate their lives, made those narratives visible in front of strangers, and gradually shifted from “I” to “we” in the shared space of the comment section. What becomes important here is that this collective storytelling does not stay only among listeners, but increasingly turns toward the artist. The artist becomes the figure to whom these stories are addressed, through whom they are recognised, and around whom they are organised. In this sense, what has happened is not only a moment of parasocial interaction, but a more sustained parasocial relationship (PSR), where the artist remains physically absent yet emotionally present over time (Giles & Stever, 2024, pp. 8–9).

This relation becomes possible because the artist occupies a social position comparable to Simmel’s (1950, p. 448) figure of the stranger: someone who is simultaneously near and distant, emotionally present yet outside the listener’s everyday social world. What becomes particularly important in digital environments is that media technologies make this form of stranger relation persistently accessible. Through platforms such as YouTube and Instagram, listeners are able to return repeatedly to the same artist across different emotional situations and periods of life. The artist functions as a mediated stranger who can receive forms of emotional disclosure, recognition, and attachment while remaining socially distant. However, the artist’s social



distance becomes structurally important because it allows listeners to articulate vulnerable experiences without entering the reciprocal demands of ordinary social relationships.

One of the patterns show how listeners address the artist directly by name in the comment section, as if they are speaking to him personally:

Love you, stay healthy, **Bas** (Comment 43).

Love you so much, **Baskara..** (Comment 97).

Your goal is achieved, **Bas..** (Comment 12).

**Bas**, want me to be the one who handles your stage video? (Comment 64).

Super proud of you, **Baskara.** (Comment 100).

Addressing the artist by name gives the form of a personal relation, as if they know each other and are speaking to one another, but it is not grounded in any direct or two-way interaction. Instead, the artist is treated as an interactional partner within a one-sided relation, reflecting the structure of a parasocial relationship (PSR), where communication is directed toward a figure who does not respond (Giles & Stever, 2024, pp. 8–9). The sense of closeness emerges through shared meanings that can apply to many others, where the stranger is close through common features yet remains distant because these are not specific to any one relation (Simmel, 1950, p. 450). What appears here is not a momentary reaction, but a repeated form of address that sustains the sense of an ongoing relation over time.

This relation becomes stronger when the artist is positioned not only as someone who can be spoken to, but as someone who understands:

It feels like Bas **knows exactly what I'm feeling.** (Comment 6).

The comment shows the listener seems struggling to articulate their own emotions and positioning the artist as someone who helps them make sense of what they have been through. By claiming that Bas “knows” their feelings, the commenter expresses a personal connection that is not grounded in any direct interaction, reflecting the parasocial “illusion of reciprocity,” where a sense of mutual understanding is felt without a two-way social relation (Giles & Stever, 2024,

p. 50). The artist becomes a point through which listeners feel emotionally recognised. Listeners do not only recognise themselves in the song, but begin to experience the artist as someone capable of understanding and reflecting their inner emotional life.

This relation moves beyond emotional recognition alone and begins to shape how listeners interpret the meaning of the song itself. The listener's attention shifts from personal reflection toward the artist's perspective and journey:

You can really see that **he sings with genuine feeling. It's like he's not just singing, but telling a story..** (Comment 51).

Honestly, at first I thought this song was about romantic love for a partner. But after watching the video, **I realised it's about Baskara's journey and his fans.** (Comment 30).

What is important here is that the artist is no longer treated only as the creator of the text, but as the figure through whom its meaning is organised. The listener begins to see the song from the artist's point of view, not just their own, taking on the artist's position in understanding the process being described as a form of cognitive identification (Giles & Stever, 2024, pp. 168–169). At the same time, this identification does not remove distance. The artist's journey can be followed and understood, but it does not originate from the listener's own experience, which reflects the position of the stranger as someone who is present yet not fully part of the group (Simmel, 1950, p. 448). The artist thus becomes a mediator of collective meaning, through which listeners connect their own experiences to a larger shared narrative.

The relation is intensified further when listeners frame the artist in explicitly therapeutic terms:

I feel like **I need you even more** than going to a psychologist (Comment 2).

Others describe the artist metaphorically as “a psychologist,” suggesting that listeners position him as someone capable of receiving emotionally vulnerable disclosure despite remaining outside their immediate social world:

..not a singer — **he’s a psychologist** (Comment 65)

..**a psychologist** disguised as a musician (Comment 80)

You’ve become **our psychologist** (Comment 97).

These comments position the artist as someone capable of receiving emotional disclosure and helping listeners organise difficult experiences into emotionally meaningful forms. The comparison to a psychologist is significant because the psychologist may represent a familiar social figure through whom intimate experiences are communicated to someone who remains outside the listener’s ordinary interpersonal life. People may turn to psychologists not because they are intimate relations in the traditional sense, but because their distance can reduce some of the reciprocal obligations, judgements, and interpersonal consequences attached to emotionally vulnerable disclosure. In this sense, the psychologist can be understood as a particularly recognisable example of what Simmel (1950) conceptualises as the stranger; someone socially outside the individual’s immediate world, yet trusted with forms of openness that may not be expressed within closer relationships.

A similar relational structure appears in how listeners position the artist. What I find particularly important here is that the artist’s distance is not an obstacle to disclosure but part of what makes disclosure possible. The artist is not treated as someone capable of resolving suffering directly, but as someone through whom suffering becomes easier to narrate publicly. Simmel (1950, pp. 449–450) argues that strangers are often entrusted with forms of openness that might not be expressed within closer social ties precisely because distance creates a different communicative condition. In this sense, the artist occupies a socially distant yet emotionally available position that enables listeners to narrate experiences without requiring reciprocal intimacy or direct personal involvement. In this sense, the artist occupies a socially distant yet emotionally available position through which listeners can narrate vulnerable experiences without requiring reciprocal intimacy or direct personal involvement.

The therapeutic dimension of the parasocial relation lies less in interaction itself than in the mediated structure surrounding it. Songs provide emotional vocabulary, narrative framing, and interpretive language through which listeners articulate experiences that may otherwise remain difficult to communicate. Listeners repeatedly return to the artist as a figure through whom experiences of loneliness, emotional crisis, heartbreak, or exhaustion can be narrated and organised publicly. Storytelling becomes part of how suffering is lived with and interpreted over time (Frank, 2013, p. xi). At the same time, these disclosures unfold within a wider fan environment where other listeners witness, recognise, and validate similar experiences. The artist functions not only as an emotional support figure, but as a central point around which broader forms of recognition and collective storytelling become organised (Giles & Stever, 2024, pp. 136–137).

The relation to the artist is sustained through repeated return and carried across everyday situations, where listeners come back to the same figure over time and bring that relation into shared contexts:

Artery 3x a day, Everything U Are **24 hours without stopping** (Comment 105).

**Every second, every minute** I keep playing this (Comment 106).

...have **a new sleeping habit** to look for (listening/play a song) Everything U Are... (Comment 110).

**Wherever we go**, the favorite playlist in the car always includes Hindia songs. (Comment 14).

**I keep playing it** until my kindergarten child memorises the lyrics... (Comment 18).

These comments show that the artist is not encountered only in specific moments of listening, but becomes integrated into routines, habits, and shared everyday situations through repeated return (Giles & Stever, 2024, pp. 8–9; DeNora, 2000, p. 45). Listeners repeatedly position the music within ordinary activities such as sleeping, travelling, working, and spending time with family, suggesting that the relation to the artist persists through continuity and repetition rather

than direct interaction. The repeated replaying of the songs also indicates that attachment is sustained affectively through ongoing exposure, where listeners repeatedly return to the same music as part of how they organise emotional states and everyday experiences. The artist here remains present not through physical proximity, but through continual mediated recurrence within listeners' daily lives.

As this repeated engagement becomes embedded within everyday life, the relation to the artist also begins to move beyond the individual listener and into shared family and generational contexts:

Thank you for **uniting the musical tastes of two generations** — father and child.  
(Comment 14)

And **we both** love these songs... (Comment 20)

I keep playing it **until my kindergarten child memorises** the lyrics... (Comment 18)

The parasocial relation here is no longer confined to private listening practices, but carried into relationships with others. The artist becomes part of shared routines, family interaction, and intergenerational experience, allowing attachment to persist socially beyond the individual listener (Giles & Stever, 2024, pp. 8–9). Listeners bring the music into shared situations with partners, children, and family members, making the relation to the artist part of everyday collective experience instead of something experienced alone.

The relation is sustained not only across social situations, but also across time itself, as listeners position themselves as having grown alongside the artist over multiple years:

Thank you for **growing together with us since 2019** (Comment 92)

**Back in 2019... not famous at all.** Proud of you, Bas. (Comment 77)

**Now you're winning so many awards.** Super proud of you, Baskara. (Comment 100)

These comments position the artist within a shared narrative of continuity, where listeners organise their own experiences alongside the artist's perceived development over time. What is constructed here is less a factual chronology than a narrated sense of “growing together,” which sustains attachment by integrating the artist into listeners' personal histories (Frank, 2013, p. 61; Giles & Stever, 2024, p. 34). The artist becomes part of how listeners remember periods of their own lives, allowing the relation to persist through an imagined continuity shared between audience and artist. The repeated references to earlier years also suggest that listeners connect the artist's development to their own personal histories, allowing the relationship to persist across different stages of their lives.

As listeners position themselves within this shared history, the artist's public recognition also becomes emotionally meaningful to the community itself:

**Your goal is achieved, Bas.** Now when you type ‘Hindia’ on Google, what appears is not Indonesia's dark history — but you. (Comment 12).

We loyal listeners are **very proud**.. (Comment 85).

Still can't believe that many people know you now... **proud of you, Bas.** (Comment 77).

Now you're winning so many awards. **Super proud of you, Baskara.** (Comment 100).

The artist's success is experienced not as something external to listeners, but as something that confirms and validates their own long-term attachment. Public recognition of the artist reinforces collective value within the community, allowing listeners to experience pride and belonging through their continued connection to him (Giles & Stever, 2024, pp. 136–137). The comments position the artist's achievements as emotionally shared accomplishments, where listeners narrate themselves as having participated in the artist's journey through continued support and attachment over time. In this way, the artist's increasing visibility strengthens the symbolic value of belonging to the fan community itself.

In some comments, this attachment develops further into aspiration, where listeners begin to position the artist as a figure through whom they imagine possible versions of themselves:

If there's a second life, **I'd want to be like you, Bas.** (Comment 22).

Bro, **your journey to where you are now motivates me** to go through my own process. (Comment 83).

Baskara is a **genius of Gen Z and Alpha.** (Comment 66).

These comments move beyond admiration into aspiration, where the artist becomes an idealised figure through whom listeners imagine another version of themselves. When a listener says, “If there's a second life, I'd want to be like you,” they express a form of wishful identification, where the audience aspires to be like the persona in a fundamental way (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Giles & Stever, 2024, p. 168). This matters because the artist is no longer only someone who reflects the listener's feelings, but someone onto whom the listener projects an imagined future self. At the same time, this aspiration depends on distance. Distance allows the artist to be idealised, while closeness makes that ideal feel reachable (Simmel, 1950, pp. 449–450).

A further pattern appears when the artist is drawn into the collective “we” that listeners have already built among themselves:

In the song Everything U Are, **we as fans truly feel celebrated by you, Bas.** We feel like **we ‘exist’ in every part of Hindia's journey** itself. (Comment 28).

Thank you, Bas. I was moved watching this MV. **All of us in Team Hindia feel appreciated and celebrated** through Everything U Are. (Comment 29).

It's not just you who have saved so many people, but **we've saved you too.** (Comment 10).

Turns out **we saved each other too.** (Comment 85).

These comments show that the artist is not only an external figure, but is drawn into the collective “we” that listeners have formed among themselves. The “we” that earlier connected

listeners to one another is now extended toward the artist, but not as an equal participant in the same social relation. Instead, the artist occupies a central position around which the collective relation is organised, while remaining outside it, reflecting the position of the stranger as someone who is included in the group yet not fully bound by it (Simmel, 1950, p. 448). This is why the artist can be addressed, thanked, relied upon, and symbolically included in mutual language such as “we save each other,” even though the relation remains one-sided, consistent with the structure of parasocial relationships where connection is felt without reciprocal interaction (Giles & Stever, 2024, pp. 8–9). At the same time, the use of shared expressions such as “we save each other” draws on what Frank (2013, p. 197) describes as borrowed stories, where familiar narrative forms are repeated to make experiences collectively recognisable.

Across these comments, the parasocial relation to the artist is not only emotional but structural. The artist becomes the addressee of collective storytelling and the point through which recognition is organised, while the sense of connection is reinforced through others who share and validate similar experiences (Giles & Stever, 2024, pp. 136–137). However, this does not remove distance. The artist remains a stranger, where closeness is formed through shared meanings rather than personal ties (Simmel, 1950, p. 450). What shows is a parasocial relationship in which the artist becomes central to the collective field of meaning, not by entering it as an equal participant, but by remaining outside it.

## **Conclusion**

This study began with a broader question about why deeply personal experiences are increasingly expressed within public digital environments populated by strangers. Through the case of Hindia’s fan community, the analysis shows that music becomes more than an object of listening or emotional attachment. Songs become resources through which listeners narrate grief, heartbreak, loneliness, family pressure, healing, insecurity, and personal change in front of others gathered around the same music. Listening develops into storytelling, where individuals organise emotions, interpret difficult experiences, and communicate aspects of themselves that might otherwise remain unspoken. The comments examined throughout this study show that listeners



do not only respond to music, but use it to narrate their lives publicly within a shared digital environment.

The findings demonstrate that these forms of expression are connected to what Frank (2013) describes as the wounded storyteller. Many listeners describe experiences that remain emotionally unresolved, including heartbreak, loneliness, family pressure, emotional exhaustion, and suicidal thoughts. Several comments explicitly frame the music as something that helped listeners continue through difficult moments, such as comments describing Hindia's songs as having "saved" them during periods of crisis. Others recount memories of past relationships, feelings of isolation, or struggles that continue into the present. These stories are rarely narrated as fully resolved experiences. Instead, listeners repeatedly return to them through the music, using the comment section to articulate experiences that still remain emotionally significant in their lives. What becomes important in these comments is not only emotional disclosure itself, but the act of making difficult experiences recognisable in front of others who may understand similar feelings. Storytelling, then, functions as a way of placing suffering into a shared social space where experiences can be acknowledged, repeated, and recognised collectively within the community.

What becomes significant, however, is that these stories are not told within intimate or familiar social relationships. They unfold publicly among strangers gathered around shared engagement with music. This is where Simmel (1950) concept of the stranger becomes central to understanding the social conditions that make these expressions possible. The stranger occupies a position of simultaneous proximity and distance, present enough to recognise the story while remaining socially unbound by direct intimacy or long-term obligation. The findings suggest that listeners are often able to express vulnerable experiences precisely because the audience remains socially distant. The stranger provides recognition without requiring the forms of reciprocity, responsibility, or judgement associated with closer personal relationships. In this sense, digital fan communities reorganise the social conditions under which storytelling becomes possible.

Contemporary media technologies intensify this condition by making mediated stranger relations continuously accessible within everyday life. Comment sections, fan communities, and platform-based interaction create environments where individuals repeatedly encounter

emotionally familiar others through shared participation around music, artists, and collective experiences. The stranger is no longer an occasional figure encountered within social life, but an ongoing presence embedded within digital communication itself. Through platforms such as YouTube and Instagram, strangers become audiences, witnesses, and participants in one another's emotional narratives despite remaining personally unknown to each other. The findings suggest that digital media expands the social function of the stranger by making spaces of emotional disclosure and recognition far more accessible within ordinary everyday interaction.

From this, the study develops the concept of "parasocial strangers" to describe socially distant yet emotionally meaningful others who become witnesses to personal storytelling through mediated interaction. These relations are formed through repeated exposure, shared emotional orientation, and ongoing participation within the same communicative environment. The concept refers not only to the relation between listeners and the artist, but also to relations among listeners themselves. The artist becomes emotionally meaningful through continued mediated presence, while other listeners become meaningful through recognising, repeating, and validating shared experiences despite remaining personally unknown to one another.

What holds these relations together is not reciprocity or direct intimacy, but the circulation of stories, emotional recognition, and mediated familiarity. The findings suggest that parasociality extends beyond audience-celebrity attachment and operates as a broader social structure through which storytelling unfolds collectively within digital environments. Listeners recognise themselves in the stories of others, repeat shared narrative forms, and position their own experiences within collectively understandable frameworks. Through this process, suffering, healing, loneliness, or emotional struggle become socially communicable within the community itself. The concept of parasocial strangers combines the wounded storytelling described by Frank (2013) with Simmel (1950) figure of the stranger, showing how digital media reorganises stranger relations into conditions under which vulnerable storytelling becomes publicly possible.

The role of the artist remains central within this structure. Listeners repeatedly address Baskara Putra (Bas) directly, attribute emotional understanding to him, and return to his music across everyday situations and different periods of their lives. In many comments, the artist is framed in therapeutic terms because the music provides listeners with a language through which difficult

experiences become speakable. The artist functions less as a direct interaction partner than as a mediated figure around whom collective storytelling becomes organised. What listeners seek is not necessarily reciprocal interaction, but recognition through a shared emotional and symbolic environment shaped by the music itself. Parasocial relations matter here not only because audiences feel emotionally attached to media figures, but because these relations create conditions in which difficult experiences become easier to narrate publicly.

The analysis also shows that fan communities function as more than spaces of admiration or entertainment. They operate as communicative environments where personal experiences are collectively expressed, recognised, and sustained through shared narrative forms. The movement from “I” to “we” across the comment sections demonstrates how individual experiences become socially organised within the community itself. Listeners borrow, repeat, and extend forms of storytelling that allow emotional experiences to become collectively recognisable. Belonging therefore emerges not through direct familiarity, but through participation in shared emotional and narrative frameworks organised around music. What binds the community together is not necessarily interpersonal intimacy, but the ongoing circulation of stories, emotions, and recognition within the shared mediated environment.

While this study focuses on Hindia’s fan community, the findings point toward broader transformations in contemporary digital culture. These dynamics are not limited to one artist or one national context, but increasingly appear across global fan cultures organised around music, entertainment, and online media figures. Fan communities surrounding artists such as Taylor Swift or Billie Eilish, for example, frequently use comment sections, TikTok videos, fan forums, and social media discussions to narrate heartbreak, loneliness, mental health struggles, family experiences, and personal transformation through songs and fandom participation. Similar patterns can also be observed around online creators, streamers, influencers, and film communities, where audiences gather not only to discuss media texts, but to communicate experiences about themselves through those texts. Across these environments, strangers increasingly become witnesses to one another’s emotional lives through shared attachment to media figures and cultural texts.

The concept of parasocial strangers, however, extends beyond a single fandom or platform and offers a way of understanding broader transformations in mediated sociality. Contemporary digital platforms do not eliminate distance between individuals, but reorganise distance into forms that make emotional disclosure, recognition, and storytelling increasingly accessible within everyday life. Strangers become emotionally meaningful not because intimacy disappears, but because mediated environments allow individuals to encounter recognition without requiring direct reciprocity or long-term personal ties. What unfolds from this study is a broader social configuration in which storytelling, mediated presence, and stranger relations become deeply intertwined within contemporary digital culture. Through platforms, music, and shared participation, strangers increasingly become witnesses to one another's emotional lives.

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