

Thought Piece

Queerbaiting and Real Person Slash:

The Case of Larry Stylinson

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While discussion of queerbaiting has often focused on fictional representation in popular culture, this term is also sometimes used in reference to celebrities. Celebrities who are not openly LGBTIQ but hint at sexual experimentation through language, action or the use of symbols (such as rainbows) open themselves to allegations of marketing to queer audiences while safely maintaining their status as “straight.”¹ Along these lines, former boy band One Direction has been accused of queerbaiting, with media articles citing examples of “close friendship,” “grope” and “mock-kisses” between band members as evidence.² However, simultaneously, many One Direction fans have engaged in “shipping” members of the band together. Analysis of one of the most popular and controversial fan ships of One Direction, between Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson (known by the portmanteau “Larry Stylinson”), reveals how queerbaiting intersects with ambiguities around what is “real” and what is not in the public lives of celebrities. Using this case study, we consider how accusations of queerbaiting might occlude disruptions of heteronormative paradigms unfolding in celebrity fandoms.

The “Larry Stylinson” ship is shortened to “Larry” by shippers, who self-identify as “Larries.”³ This can be considered a form of “Real Person Slash” (RPS), constituting a homoerotic pairing of real people as opposed to fictional characters.⁴ RPS

has seen a surge in interest and some scholars argue it will soon rival fictional slash in popularity.⁵ However, given that many Larries also truly believe Styles and Tomlinson have been/are in a relationship, this raises questions of whether this qualifies as shipping/RPS practice at all. For Larries, fan practice involves analyzing interactions between Styles and Tomlinson to identify queer moments that might demonstrate how “Larry is real.”⁶

Larries claim that Styles and Tomlinson remain closeted due to homophobia in the music industry, at the behest of their original management company, Modest Management.⁷ According to Larries, Modest cultivated normatively masculine images of the boys. For example, Styles was promoted as the “womanizer,” a framing actively challenged by Larries.⁸ Far from accusing Modest of queerbaiting, Larries *emphasize* queer readings of Styles and Tomlinson and reject the “heterobaiting” strategies undertaken by management.⁹ In 2017, Styles commented in an interview with *GQ* magazine that he has “never felt the need to label” his sexuality,¹⁰ though did not address the Larry issue. However, in the same year, Tomlinson denied the Larry relationship outright.¹¹ Despite these “facts” being promoted, the Larry fandom persists in seeking “proof” that Larry is real.

One of the central stories in the Larry canon that operates as “proof” is that of the rainbow colored stuffed toy bears that appeared at many of One Direction’s concerts in 2015, which were read by Larries as conveying Larry-related messages. In late 2014 on tour, a fan threw a rainbow-colored toy bear onto the stage. Eventually the larger bear was joined by a smaller bear. Images of the bears in various poses and costumes, including some bondage-style attire, subsequently appeared via a dedicated Twitter account. Fans dubbed the characters “Rainbow Bondage Bear” (RBB) and “Sugar Baby Bear” (SBB), names which were then adopted by the bears on social media.¹²

The bears became specifically associated with the Larry ship early on through the use of blue and green markers (the colors associated with Styles and Tomlinson onstage), and the inclusion of a picture of Larry Grayson next to the bears in one image, signed “Love, Larry.” The inclusion of images of gay icons alongside the bears became increasingly prolific, with the bears posing with books, photographs, costumes and images of various figures including Freddie Mercury, K. D. Lang, Devine, Judy Garland, Grace Jones, Danny La Rue, Bette Davis, and Liberace. Photographs posted to the bears’ account that can be connected to Styles and Tomlinson’s location have further fed fan theories that they were behind the stunt. However, the band denied knowledge of their origin or significance.¹³ The question of whether the bears were merely Styles and Tomlinson/their management queerbaiting, or Larry “proof” has been heavily debated within the fandom.¹⁴

Though Larries are invested in establishing “proof,” their fan practices demonstrate how RPS can create the conditions for queer desire and queer reading regardless of whether queerness is “made real.” Analysis on the basis of whether queer desire is actualized (that is, whether Larry is indeed real or not) misses a richer understanding of the event for the Larry fan base, and the queer texts that have been produced and re-circulated by fans ever since. As new RBB and SBB posts were made on social media, fans would undertake the forensic process of analyzing every detail of the images, reading deeply into the histories of the gay icons referenced, their songs, films, and importantly, their significance to LGBTIQ issues and activism. Fan re-shares of this on social media shows fans “learning” and repeating LGBTIQ history, such as investigating queer icons referenced by the bears, and integrating these figures into the Larry canon.

The Larry case reveals the limitations of understanding queerbaiting only in terms of what is represented or enacted. As Joseph Brennan has argued, even in instances of queerbaiting, the “queer play” fans engage in proliferates new queer readings of the media text.¹⁵ Larry Stylinson offers a rich case study to explore the issue of queerbaiting as no certainty can be gained on questions of actualization and representation, or indeed who was responsible for the queer subtext. This ambiguity of what is “real” has made space for fans to emphasize queerness and challenge the heteronormative narratives of popular culture. In emboldening fans to pursue the Larry ship, RBB and SBB acted as conduits for investigation not only of LGBTIQ history but further incited the deep-reading strategies of fans, who looked to every symbol, color and pose of the bears to understand their underlying queer meaning.

Queerbaiting or otherwise, the case of RBB and SBB associated with the Larry ship reveals the generative capacities of transgressions from linear heterosexual narratives that are often picked up by fan bases, and which take on a queer life of their own. As Douglas Crimp suggests, discussions about the sexuality of celebrities reflect more about the speakers than what is “real”—what is important is the identifications and communities that are formed around these queer readings.¹⁶ In the case of Larries, the repetition and re-circulation of images online long after stunts like RBB and SBB are finished, has ensured that Larry leaves an enduring queer legacy whether really “real” or not.

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Notes

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