

## Why Celebrity Relationships Feel Like Public Property

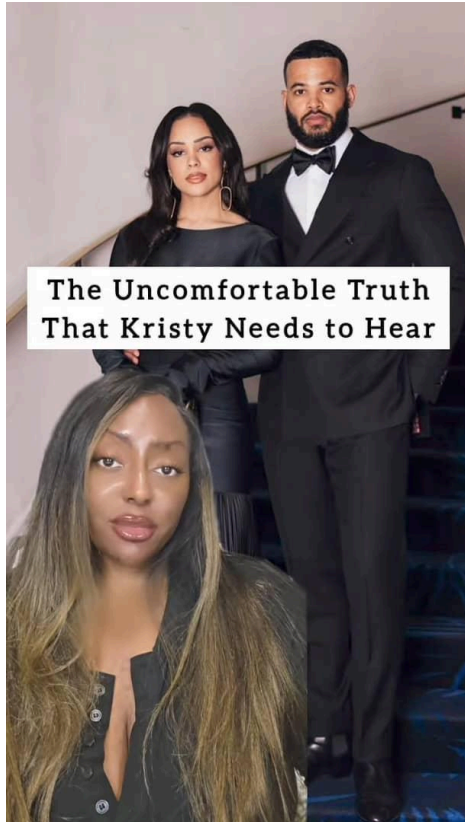
Article by: Ruth Oritse

Social media: [Substack](#)

When **Selena Gomez** and **Justin Bieber** broke up, the internet was chaotic. Millions of people argued about who was at fault, what went wrong, and years later, the public still finds ways to reopen this debate. The plot thickened when Justin Bieber announced his marriage to **Hailey Bieber**. Almost overnight, fans began writing essays and endless comment threads on emotional abuse, building timelines and passionately defending strangers they have never met.

This pattern repeats itself constantly. The public remains fully invested in **Taylor Swift's** romantic history, **Kendall Jenner** and **Travis Scott's** past relationship, and even rumors about **Zendaya** and **Tom Holland** regularly trend online. Fans have completely discarded their realistic roles as observers, and stepped into the role of participants in these relationships. Celebrity breakup trends worldwide because the public has, quite frankly, expanded the role it believes it should play.

Across social media platforms, the public has created what could be called “a court of love” that turns relationships into spectator sports. Users on Twitter — now X — debate verdicts, while TikTok creators produce detailed breakdowns explaining every possible reason a couple might have separated. On YouTube, people go as far as analyzing body language frame by frame, to read meanings into ordinary daily interactions. This unfolded around **Kristy Sarah** and **Desmond Scott** after their separation. At another point in 2024, Justin Bieber trended as the “*final boss of men who hate their wives*”, despite he and Hailey Bieber publicly describing their marriage as peaceful.



Credit: Instagram, [Paulette](#)

Fans build elaborate narratives filled with villains, victims and conspiracies. Yet, the instinct behind this behavior didn't begin with the internet. Long before Instagram and other dopamine-driven social platforms existed, celebrity relationships have always fascinated the public imagination. By the 1990s, paparazzi culture was booming, and publishers filled tabloid magazines with intimate and the latest details of celebrity life. The royal wedding of **Prince Charles** and **Princess Diana** was televised to millions, marking a moment when romance, spectacle, and public curiosity merged on a global stage. It was the Hollywood golden age of gossip, and a preview of the obsession that social media would later amplify.



Credit: In Touch Weekly

People once waited for weekly magazines to deliver celebrity gossip. But now the news arrives uninvited with every 30-second refresh. The fascination itself isn't new, but what has changed is the speed, proximity, and constant access.

### **The Psychology of Imaginary Intimacy**

Fans often tend to subconsciously develop what psychologists call Parasocial Interaction. A parasocial relationship is a one-sided sense of intimacy a fan feels toward a public figure – that is largely unreciprocated. It is an emotional connection that is never actually returned. At its mildest, the fan feels as though the celebrity is a distant friend. At its extreme, the fan begins to feel a kind of ownership over the celebrity's life.

This feeling grows easily in the era of social media. People watch interviews, follow vlogs, and keep up with daily updates through platforms like Instagram and YouTube. Over time, the steady stream of stories, livestreams, and behind-the-scenes moments creates the impression of familiarity. Some fans express their admiration through posters on bedroom walls or by using a celebrity's image as a profile picture online. Others cry at concerts or defend these figures passionately in online debates.



Image Credit: Jack Guez

Yet the relationship itself is an illusion. In reality, most fans will never meet the celebrity, and the celebrity will never meet them. What the public sees is only what the celebrity chooses to reveal — content that is often curated, edited, and filtered through millions of interpretations before it ever reaches someone's feed.

The sense of connection is a mirage, but emotionally, it can feel entirely real — and this is where the tension begins. When a celebrity's relationship collapses, fans feel personally affected - not because they have lost anything, but because the illusion has been broken. A high profile breakup forces a sudden realization that fans do not know the personal life and routine of the public figure, as much as the emotional connection makes them think.

And when that illusion breaks, the public instinctively tries to rebuild the story — often louder, more certain, and more involved than before.

### **The Economics of Romance**

The social media algorithm has also turned love into content. Platforms reward engagement, speculation, outrage, and storytelling — and celebrity romance happens to supply all four. Not surprisingly, the love lives of public figures have become perfect material for the internet. They offer publicly visible romance, conflict, betrayal, and sometimes a touch of mystery, as seen in the fascination surrounding Zendaya and Tom Holland’s relationship.



Credit: Getty Images

In many ways, celebrity relationships now resemble a television drama series. The difference is that the story involves real people, and millions of viewers willingly step in as unpaid detectives. Every gesture is dissected, and even silence is interpreted. Because the story unfolds in real time rather than from a script, it carries the appeal of unscripted entertainment. Unlike a novel or a film, the

actions of these public figures cannot be predicted in advance — and that unpredictability makes the spectacle feel organic, compelling, and strangely addictive to audiences around the world.



Credit: The Sun

But the spectacle is not only cultural; it is also economic. Celebrity relationships generate income — sometimes for the celebrities themselves, and often for everyone watching from the sidelines. Relationship drama drives clicks, views, advertising revenue, and endless engagement. Media outlets build entire cycles of coverage around it, while platforms like TikTok, YouTube and Instagram amplify the conversation.



Credit: Snobette

In this environment, couples are treated almost like brands. Breakups become events, reconciliations become plot twists, and fans unintentionally act as marketing engines. What looks like harmless fascination is more than an accidental habit of the public. It is also a system that profits from attention, and subtly encourages the audience to keep watching, speculating, and participating.

### **Privacy is Collapsing**

In the past, celebrities maintained some control over access to their lives. Interviews happened on their own terms, photo shoots and press appearances were scheduled events, and the public's understanding of their private world was limited to carefully chosen moments.

Today, that boundary has nearly disappeared. In an era of permanent cameras, fan footage, and livestreams, privacy dissolves almost instantly. The internet tracks dates, analyzes arguments, decodes cryptic posts, and even turns unfollowed accounts into headline news. What might once have been an inconsequential gesture now becomes “evidence” in a public trial conducted by millions of spectators.



Credit: Shutterstock

### **The Ethical Question**

There is a long-standing assumption that fame comes with a cost. Public figures, people argue, surrender a portion of their private lives the moment they step into the spotlight. Intrusion, in this view, is simply part of the bargain.

But the scale has moved far beyond cultural curiosity into constant intrusion. The speculation, judgement, and assignment of blame very often forgets that there are real people, with real emotions behind the headlines. What becomes a few weeks of entertainment and dopamine rush for the internet, can translate into guilt, harassment, and public humiliation for those involved. The backlash directed at Hailey Bieber after Selena Gomez and Justin Bieber's breakup offers one vivid example of how quickly public fascination can turn hostile.

Celebrity romance comes off as modern mythology. It gives the public sweeping love stories, moral dramas, heroes to celebrate, villains to condemn, and narratives to emotionally invest in. In many ways, celebrity couples replace the fairy tales and royal romances that societies once followed from a distance.

But there is a crucial difference. The characters in these stories are not fictional — they are real people living ordinary human lives under extraordinary scrutiny. The public projects hope, ideals, and fantasies on them, and the eventual collapse of these relationships can feel like the fall of a perfectly scripted happy ending.

That is where the illusion becomes clear. The public has never truly owned celebrity relationships. The internet and cult celebrity culture has simply created a powerful impression that it does. As long as millions of people keep watching, speculating, and choosing sides, love in the celebrity world will continue to exist not just between two people — but between two people and the entire audience watching them.