

## Chapter 72

# Charging Fandom in the Digital Age: The Rise of Social Media

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In the digital age, the proliferation of fan-generated content on social media platforms is making the fan culture transitioning from the “static” online consumption to “dynamic” interaction. This is not only a result of the advancement of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), but also a cultural phenomenon driving by participatory fandom in cyberspace. The rise of social media has dramatically altered the dynamics of fan practices and spectatorship hence increased vocality and visibility within the fan community as well as the formation and facilitation of fan roles. In this chapter, we will explore why social media have such a profound impact upon fandom. In particular, what is new with these fan communities that social media has done so much to enable. Why there is a blurring in the lines between fandom producers and consumers in the participatory fandom. Given the new forms of cultural production, how fan culture enabled by social media is more powerful than it was ever before.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

One debate persists in mass communication research centers on the question, that is, “Is the audience active or passive” (Biocca, 1988)? In other words, is audience capable of making their own meaning out of media content or they are just helpless victims of mass media productions? Critical theorists who focus on how culture is produced and consumed, especially the economic and social implications of the process, have also raised questions about the nature of the audience. What we often forgot to realize beyond the dichotomy of active or passive consumers of popular culture, however, was the fact that they are contained within the sometimes loose, sometimes strict borders of fandom.

To some extent, we are all fans of something. Rather than a marginal subcultural phenomenon once populated by “fanatics”, the status of fandom and fan culture are far more pervasive than it was in the

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past. Focusing on the triviality of what some accused fandom, Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington (2007) questioned about the relevance of fan scholarship and wrote:

*How can a focus on pleasure and entertainment be justified at the end of what will enter history books as a century of violence, driven by rapid social, cultural, economic and technological change, and with the twenty-first century set to follow the same trajectory? What contribution can the study of fandom make to a world faced with war, ethnic conflicts, widening inequality, political and religious violence, and irreversible climate change, among other disasters? -Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*

Those are important questions to fan scholars and cultural researchers. The answer, ultimately, is a simple one: *because it matters to those who are fans*. While critics ask questions about our world and ourselves, fandom offers us a venue into that questioning. What studying fandom can give us is a deeper understanding about the way in which people relate to others as well as the way they read the mediated texts that make up the world. Fandom studies offer insights into the relationships between fandom phenomenon and the overarching social and cultural transformations in the world.

Overall, there has been three distinct “waves” of pervasive fandom studies since the 1980s. The first wave that automatically considered as a “worthy cause” focused on taking what was sometimes viewed as a derogatory practice and status and turning it into a positive one, celebrating it as the resistant movement of the disempowered. The second wave followed a more sociological optic that explored how fan hierarchies mirrored those in the larger social and cultural world. The third wave of studies now emerges to examine fandom as “part of the fabric of our everyday lives” in order to capture “fundamental insights into modern life”.

Fandom is becoming an integral part of our modern life, and it directly or indirectly affects global patterns of consumption, communication, identification and creation. The importance of fandom has reached an apex in cultural currency with the proliferation of social media and the expanding scope of the culture industry. Social media has positively affected fandom by allowing the interaction between fans as well as with producers, and aspects of fan culture to increase. As noted by the authors,

*As we have moved from an era of broadcasting to one of narrowcasting, a process fueled by deregulation of media markets and reflected in the rise of new media technologies, the fan as a specialized yet dedicated consumer has become a centerpiece of media industries’ marketing strategies... Rather than ridiculed, fan audiences are now wooed and championed by cultural industries, at least as long as their activities do not divert from principles of capitalist exchange and recognize industries’ legal ownership of the object of fandom. -Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*

So, we hope to contribute to the third wave of fandom studies by examining fandom through the lens of modernity reflected in the rise social media technologies. It is the power rebalance between conglomerates and audiences, the blurred lines between fans and nonfans, the altered dynamics between cultural producers and consumers we want to explore in this chapter.

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