

Chapter 25

Fanship and Fandom in Cyber Space

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ABSTRACT

Fans of various interests (e.g., music, sport, media, hobbies) construct virtual communities to interact, share fan experiences, and produce fan content (e.g., fanzines). The authors review the meaning of the term “fan,” the distinction between fanship and fandom, and the history of fandom leading to the move to virtual meeting spaces. Past theorizing and research concerning motivations to be a fan, as well as theoretical frameworks used to explore fan behavior and experience (e.g., social identity theory, social presence theory) are reviewed. Throughout this entry, the authors review past research examining fans, and provide future directions for fan research.

INTRODUCTION

The term “fan” is an abbreviation of “fanatic,” which has traditionally been associated with religious zealotry. Given the negative association with the label of fanatic as someone who is unstable, violent, or abnormal, the usage of the less condemning term “fan” has become commonplace, particularly given the widespread social acceptance of being a sport fan. A fan is an individual who is a loyal, enthusiastic, and an ardent admirer

of any “interest.” Fans can value and show devotion to a myriad of interests such as sport teams, musical groups, television shows, actors, specific hobbies, art, etc. The terms fanship and fandom are used to distinguish between the degree of connection or attachment with the object of interest (e.g., product, sport team, actor), and the degree of connection with other fans that share the same fan interest. Fanship can be conceptualized as a component of one’s personal identity and drawn upon when making interpersonal comparisons

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-0315-8.ch025

(e.g., “I love this band”). Fandom is a social, or collective, identity that can be conceptualized as a sense of psychological connection with other fans as sharing a common ingroup identity (e.g., “We love this band”). In this article we describe the history of fandom, motivations to be a fan, theoretical frameworks used to explain fan behavior and experience, and psychological research examining fanship, fandom, and online communities.

History of Fandom

Long before the Internet, science fiction fans were exploring methods to meet with one another and share their common interest. Conventions began appearing in the late 1930’s as a means for fans to interact with one another, culminating in the first annual World Science Fiction Convention (later to be called Worldcon) in New York. However, fans still debate when the first official Worldcon occurred. Decades later, fans would find a much more convenient medium by which to interact. Online fan groups originated as a means for providing a niche group of fans of similar interests a supportive environment to interact. Fans of interests such as *Star Trek* and the Grateful Dead were among the first to promote the use of the Internet to converse. These fans used fanzines and ethnographic essays to journal their participation as a fan and communicate with other like-minded individuals.

Fans were now able to establish Usenet groups for discussions related to specific fan interests or distributing fan created fan fiction. Also, it was then possible to create online mailing lists that could be used to communicate with other fans through online messages. While most home computers were not able to access the Internet during the early 1990’s, fans were far ahead of the technology curve. They were able to utilize early computers on college campuses, or were progressive in purchasing the newest home computing

equipment. In the mid-1990’s, music fans were pioneers in developing online websites to foster community interaction. Today, geographically disparate fans interact using web technologies available online to consume, communicate, and produce fan material (e.g., video mash-ups, fan fiction).

Fandom has traditionally been examined from a variety of disciplines such as communication, sociology, history, and psychology. Researchers from communications (e.g., Nancy Baym, 2000; Matt Hills, 2002; Henry Jenkins, 2006) typically conduct ethnographic analyses of fan essays and relate their content to sociological theories, while researchers in psychology (e.g., Christian End, 2002; Bob Heere, 2007; Daniel Wann, 2006) have examined fan responses on surveys and language use online to relate their content to past social psychological theories (e.g., social identity theory). Interestingly, the focus of each area of research has also differed with communication and media researchers (Schimmel, Harrington, & Bielby, 2007) examining pop culture fandoms (e.g., television, film, literature) and sociologists and psychologists primarily examining sport fans. There appears to be two separate disciplines and trajectories of research for pop culture research and sport fan research split along disciplinary lines (Schimmel et al., 2007). Recently, Reysen and Branscombe (2010) have called for greater examination of all fan groups rather than restricting research to one fandom (sport). In a series of studies they found greater similarities among fans of various interests (sport, media, hobby, music) than differences between them. They suggest that fans are similar, regardless of type of interest. All fans, as members of groups, should experience similar underlying psychological mechanisms of identity formation, intra and intergroup processes regardless of type of fan interest. The researchers suggest extending and generalizing past group and sport fan research to fans of all interests.

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