

THE DIVERSITY OF FANDOM PRACTICES AND THEIR CONNECTIONS TO SOCIAL MEDIA

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ABSTRACT AND INTRODUCTION

Fans are powerful, and they are everywhere. Throughout many platforms, such as Twitter, Tumblr, Reddit and Facebook, fans always find ways to express their love for something. Fandom culture is tightly woven through the world, touching even those who don't think they're a part of it. The differences between these sources is stark, and many of them do not claim fandom as their main purpose. Everyone who is a fan of something has their own way of expressing that. People who are Generation X or Baby Boomers are likely to find that home on Facebook, in Facebook pages dedicated to certain shows. Similarly, the large majority of millennials and Gen Z people find their fandom space on Twitter or Tumblr. No matter what, fandom will find a home wherever there are people to chat with, wherever they can explore a conversation that can escape the outside world.

DEFINING TERMS AND BASE FANDOM CULTURE

There will be many terms in this essay for which the uninitiated reader might need clarification. This paragraph is meant to act as a form of background knowledge as well as to assuage any confusion the reader might experience later in the paper. The first term is, of course, *fandom*. Fandom is a community of people gathered on the basis of their mutual enjoyment of a piece of media, usually online, but not necessarily. This is often considered nerdy, although being a sports fan is just the same as being a *Harry Potter* fan. Next are the terms *canon* and *headcanon*. The term *canon* is often referred to as meaning true to the source material, while a *headcanon* is the version of the story that doesn't necessarily align with the original work, but a fan believes to be true nonetheless, as in, a canon in the mind alone. Sometimes a headcanon may be something simply never referred to as true in canon, although often it is a belief that conflicts with the truth of canon.

Next is *ship* or *shipping*. Shipping refers to fans who believe that two characters ought to be in a romantic relationship in canon. Shipping is another form of headcanon, although some ships do have canon confirmation, or were based in an actual relationship featured in canon. In various fan spaces a slash or an x between the two names can be used to denote a ship. There are also *ship names* in which a name is made out of something remarkable about the pairing, or often just two names put together. This is used to make it simpler to refer to a ship, especially in online spaces. Examples include: Lokius (Loki/Mobius, *Loki TV*), Destiel (Dean/Castiel, *Supernatural*), Ineffable Husbands (Crowley/Aziraphale, *Good Omens*), BlackBonnet (Stede Bonnet/Edward "Blackbeard" Teach, *Our Flag Means Death*).

TUMBLR AS A HOME FOR FANDOM

It is easy to say that Tumblr.com is the most fitting website for fandom culture, and it is described that way for a reason. Tumblr has long provided a sort of hideaway for those belonging to various fandoms, from Marvel to Britney Spears to *My Little Pony*. Tumblr has had a long history in being the place for fandom. Not too long ago, it housed the fandom-coined *SuperWhoLock*, a name given to the three largest fandoms on the platform (Those being *Supernatural*, *Doctor Who* and BBC's *Sherlock*¹). This fan-coined term

¹ Certain pieces of media have been referred to as "BBC's" for various different reasons, but most often simply to differentiate a title character from their show. This is also used for character names who appear

represents what had historically been the root of the popularity of Tumblr. Today, those fandoms have since broken up, following the conclusion of two of the three shows. Many people on the site have interest in defining a new “Big Three²” fandoms on the site. The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) Fandom has historically been one of the largest on the platform, although its popularity has declined following the climactic release of *Avengers: Endgame*.

The fans on Tumblr have their own private culture. “Many fandoms create their own subcultures surrounding the object of their fannish activities. In those discussions and activities, metaculture is created and becomes a central aspect of what makes a fandom” (Bliss, 2023). By being its own corner of the internet, new terms for things can grow and exist without the rest of the world having any idea what is being talked about. Ship names, fandom jokes, media specific references that only fans know of, it is all a trademark of Tumblr as a website for the fans.

ARCHIVE OF OUR OWN (Ao3) OR THE GREAT FANFICTION ARCHIVE

A major facet in fandom is fanfiction. One such home for that work is Archive Of Our Own (Ao3) a fan-run website dedicated entirely to housing fanfiction and making it easier to access and publish. Ao3 “is an astonishingly well created platform, which is completely user funded. Every few months the Archive asks for people to donate in order to keep the site running, and historically receives more than it asks for near instantly. People love the site, and it loves them in return” (Dolson, 2023). The platform has built itself to be a perfect home for fanfiction readers and writers alike. Ao3 stands out as a massively well-designed platform, featuring tags and filtering, allowing a reader to include and exclude to find exactly what they want to read. There are people writing works as long as books on this website, all for free, for the love of creation. A space so dedicated to fanfiction is predicated on the fact that fans “do not uncritically accept the meanings offered by content producers but instead collectively engage in a range of interpretative and creative practices” (Bury, 2017). And that is what fandom spaces create. In making a system by which it is easy to express this love for creation, people are eager to participate. As the growing online presence of these websites spreads, “the audience is becoming interactive, blurring the line between consumers and producers,” according to Lacelle and Similio (2017). Archive of Our Own demonstrates clearly being a force by the fans, for the fans, is what allows the site to provide exactly what the fans want.

TWITTER AS A SOURCE OF LIVE FANDOM UNITY AND MAINSTREAM CONNECTION

Fandom space online often takes place long after a show or episode has been released. The fandom for *BBC’s Merlin*, a show that ended in 2012, is still going strong on Tumblr, so much so that a revival had been discussed. However, when it comes to more newly released products, Twitter³ is often used as a more up-to-date resource for reactions and excitement. In their essay “Twitter as a technology for audiencing and fandom: The Eurovision phenomenon”, the various authors explain how “Twitter allows users a space for ‘live’ (that is, real-time), relatively unmediated, communal discussion of television programs” (Highfield et. al. 2013). This particular use of the platform is instrumental in the developments in modern fandom space. The drawbacks of Twitter as a fandom platform are what quite evidently sets it apart from Tumblr. The reason Twitter is so useful as a live, in-the-moment platform, is because of its limitations. While a fan can post music, photos, text, gifs, or links on Tumblr, Twitter is limited to only text and four images, including a limit of characters in text. However, these drawbacks are actually helpful in the pursuit of quick, emotional content.

in other adaptations. BBC’s *Sherlock* and BBC’s *Merlin* are both examples of this phenomenon. As this is how fandom culture refers to these shows, so too will this essay.

² The term “Big Three” was originally made to refer to the three characters, Iron Man, Thor and Captain America as the most important characters when referring to *The Avengers*. Among current fandom it is often merely used to denote a highly popular trio, such as a trio of shows or a trio of ships.

³ It should be noted that despite the recent rebrand, Twitter will not be referred to as “X” for the duration of this essay, partially to dissuade confusion and partly because the name Twitter is more recognisable to readers.

There are other websites better suited to house fandom culture. Twitter is not intended as a home for fandom discourse. However, Twitter's importance lies in its connection to the masses. Fandom space, especially that which is housed on Tumblr, is often cordoned off as its own corner of the internet, not to be touched by outsiders. Twitter does not have this issue. Because Twitter is a multipurpose website, housing everyone from comedians to presidents, the posts by those in fandoms and those without can be interspersed. This allows for the current moving of fandom space into the mainstream. Fans are able to use Twitter to make points less easily made on other platforms, simply because people are actually looking there. Twitter itself is a bridge between fandom space and outside culture.

Twitter as a bridge has led to both positive and negative outcomes. The evidence of community can be blatantly clear because of the trending page on Twitter. Live-tweeting about a new episode allows for a communal conversation, one that prides itself on having interesting things to say. Fandom-sparked cultural movements are able to run free on a single platform like Twitter.

REDDIT AS LAND OF THE NERDS

Nowhere does fandom more clearly meet nerdism, than on Reddit. The fandoms are different on Reddit. The way Reddit itself functions requires it. On Reddit, one joins a fandom by literally subscribing to a *subreddit*, a more precise page dedicated to whatever they want. Many subreddits are based on shows, movies or books, but even more are based on other things, like Dungeons and Dragons and the Role-Playing Games (RPGs) community, or subreddits to follow Youtubers. Fandom is more neatly segregated on Reddit than on Tumblr or Twitter. On Tumblr and Twitter users can simply scroll through a feed of accounts who post whatever they please, while Reddit requires users to pick things they're interested in. Despite this, Reddit manages to fit into more of the mainstream lens, because of the variety of other subreddits unrelated to fandom. Story subreddits like *r/AmITheAsshole* and *r/RelationshipAdvice* are also majorly popular, often leading Youtubers and TikTokers to read them and react as a means of content. This combination also pushes Reddit into the mainstream.

Reddit, however, has historically leaned unfortunately into the realm of toxic male fans. Toxic fans pushing others out of spaces and being misogynistic is just one of the problems facing Reddit. This is especially common in gaming spaces. Many men believe that these spaces are for them alone, and that a girl must only want to play to "get a guy." This foolish concept runs rampant in many of the gaming communities on Reddit, with Reddit unfortunately being an ideal breeding ground. Individual subreddits have individual rules, and punishing misogyny is often not one of them. This unfortunate reality often sees women not using Reddit as a primary choice for fandom content. The fear of being faced with the hatred and misogyny that run rampant there is a suitable deterrent for would-be redditors.

FACEBOOK AS UNLIKELY CONTENDER

Everyone who is a fan of something has their own way of expressing that. The large majority of millennials and Gen Z people find their fandom space on Twitter. Similarly, people who are Generation X or Baby Boomers are likely to find that home on Facebook, in Facebook pages dedicated to certain shows. Facebook has found itself a space for quite a specific demographic of fans: Gen X and Baby Boomer women. Women in nerd spaces have often been pushed to the side by the men around them. However, women persevere nonetheless. According to Lacelle and Similio (2017), "Television fiction and online communities: an analysis of comments on social networks and forums made by female viewers." They argue that, "nevertheless, fandom has also allowed women to express their sexuality and emotions, to create groups based on their interests, and to appropriate many storylines created from a male perspective despite the generalized tendency to consider their tastes as banal and to ridicule their expressions" (p. 452). Women have had to fight for room at tables like this for millennia. Many topics enjoyed by women have been ridiculed and much of the female fandom space has been degraded by the word *fangirl*. Back when One Direction was popular, the women and girls who cared were endlessly mocked. It has become a modern consensus that teenage girls simply are not allowed to enjoy anything without ridicule. Therefore, these Facebook groups house fandom for these women; because they often did not have the chance to participate when they were younger. And these women are not into the same

things as men their age. Men find themselves interested in “cult classics,” while women enjoy the newer things, because it's harder for them to be pushed out of the space.

GATEKEEPING AND FANDOM ELITISM

Wherever there is joy and creativity, there must also be strife. Toxic occurrences in fandom spaces are, unfortunately, not particularly uncommon. Whether it's gatekeeping, bullying, or just flat-out rude behavior, people will be people, horrible as ever. Gatekeeping has become more of a hot topic recently, placed alongside fandom elitism (Plante et al., 2020). One group's paper noted that “elitism was found to include both self-inflation and other-derogation and is predicted by two components of fan identity (fanship and fandom). Elitism was also significantly associated with pro-gatekeeping attitudes and behaviours” (Plante et al., 2020). These unhealthy fan behaviors are an unfortunate fact that often keeps certain fandoms from growing as they should. Gatekeeping and elitism is most often leveled against women in any given space, leading to a false narrative that women are simply not interested in fandom space. Women are perfectly interested, but interacting with men in person, who often attempt to quiz women on their knowledge, leads to an unsatisfying fandom experience. The fandom space is a strong one, but a few bad eggs often run it for others. The only thing that really matters in the realm of fandom is community and finding a place to belong.

CONCLUSION

Fandom space is an integral part of a successfully built community. It is clear that people from all walks of life find themselves engaging in fandom, because of the many places that have been carved out by those who came before. Fandom is so special because it is by the fans for the fans. These companies made their platforms, but the fans made it their own. By being creative they express themselves and find community amongst other like-minded people. Social media platforms are the only way modern fandoms could exist in all their glory today. The connections between the media and the people who adore it is the best possible demonstration of convergence. The audience participation convergence among the fandom space leaves little room for argument.

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