

Exploring Media Fandom in the Social Lives of Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

With the rise of the internet, media has become an integral part of young adults' lives. Young adults are actively in search of media objects they enjoy and can relate to. Fans across the world share passion and adoration towards media items, such as movies, TV shows, books and bands. This grouping of enthusiasts can be termed as media fandom (Jenkins, 1992, p.1). Media fans are members of subcultures in the sense that they adopt their own linguistic codes and specialized ways of talk, unique forms of greeting and address, and the use of codenames or titles and symbolic forms, including dressing style in some cases (Sullivan, 2019). Based on in-depth interviews of 20 young adults and an online questionnaire of 70 participants, this study seeks to examine the involvement of young adults in fandom and influences of media fandom in their social lives. The findings highlighted that fans promoted and shared their objects of fandoms frequently with their friends and family. Further, participation in fandom included both consuming and creating new media related to fandom. It was found that the participation in fandom debates and discussions was a fairly common activity amongst the fans.

Keywords: *Fandom, Young Adults, Media Object, Investment, Promote, Object of Fandom*

We come across the term 'fan' every now and then. People can find fans in all areas of entertainment such as a sports team, movies or actors, games, celebrities, etc. Fans are, in fact, the most noticeable and identifiable audiences of a community (Lewis, 1992, p. 1). Fandom can be defined as a cultural community which shares a common mode of reception, as well as a set of social norms, practices and expectations (Jenkins, 1995, p.144). Being a fan normally relates to someone being passionate about a celebrity, sports or media content, etc. However, fandom entails different meanings to individual fans. The level of engagement of various persons in a fandom also differs. One doesn't become a fan by simply engaging in a media content just once. Being a fan indicates an emotional connection between an individual and an object of fandom. According to Henry Jenkins, a prominent fan-scholar, "the difference between watching a series and

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becoming a fan of it lies in the intensity of their emotional and intellectual involvement” (Jenkins, 1992, p.58). Fans seek to collect extensive knowledge and content related to their fandom by closely interpreting the object of fandom and having conversations on it with other fans of the same media text which creates an emotional bond. Fans, therefore, can be called passionate supporters of an object of fandom.

Once associated with mostly negative connotations, the study of fans and fandom has, contrarily, gained recognition in the recent years and has been understood in a positive sense. In the early 1990s, media scholars such as Henry Jenkins (1992) and Camille Bacon-Smith (1992) attempted to correct fandom’s image through their ethnographic researches, which set a path for the onset of fan studies, considering the fandom with a positive approach (Sullivan, 2019). Despite many functions and benefits of fandom, the stereotypical image of fandom still exists. In a study conducted by Stanfill (2013), it was found that despite the speculations by many researches that fans might be mainstream consumers (e.g., Baym, 2007; Gray et al., 2007), participants in his study didn’t feel that fandom as a whole was particularly a mainstream concern. Instead, they felt that the stereotypical representations had undoubtedly affected their psyches. It is often said that fans can’t distinguish fandom life and real life discretely, hence they turn to delusion regarding a fandom object. Certain fandom objects are also considered more under scrutiny of the general public such as fandom concerning an anime (Japanese animated content).

Media Fandom

Media fandom generally comprises of the people who are interested in media objects such as TV shows, movies, music, anime, etc. The fans of a particular person, object, science fiction, etc. are regarded collectively as a community or subculture. This subculture connects people of diverse cultures and cuts across geographic and generational boundaries and is defined through its particular styles of media consumption and forms of cultural preference (Jenkins, 1992, p.1). Media fans discuss and debate regarding their object of fandom, which helps in flourishing the fandom as well as sharing of fan activities with others that value the same object of interest (Bird, 2002).

Technological advancements have, certainly, expanded the resources for fan involvement in a fandom. As a matter of fact, formation of online new-media outlets, and several new methods of communication among fans have emerged along with new media-fandoms which encouraged various fandoms to expand their fan base across the world (Obst et al., 2002 as cited in Groene and Hettinger, 2016).

Media fandoms constitute aspects of one’s social identity with media fans (like that which occurs amongst other social groups), perceiving their fandoms as distinct entities, forming ingroups while simultaneously distinguishing themselves from outgroups (Reysen and Branscombe, 2010; Voci, 2006 as cited in Groene and Hettinger, 2016). Further, the group categorization in media fandoms may lead to psychological consequences similar to those found in other social groups, with members obtaining the benefit of inclusion (such as acceptance, increased self-esteem and affirmation of one’s belongingness to a group) or suffering the penalties of exclusion, including the decrease in self-regulations and negative emotions (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Bushman, 2011 as cited in Groene and Hettinger, 2016).

Significance of Fandom

Discourse on fandom often revolves around the idea that being a fan is the fun-part of life, something in which people get engaged to take their minds off the real issues in life. In his book, 'Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World', Jonathan Gray addresses a question as to how we can justify the focus on entertainment and pleasure in a world driven by rapid social, cultural, economic, and technological change. The simple answer to that he gave is, "*Fandom matters to those who are fans.*" (Gray et al., 2007, p.1)

There are many benefits of being associated with a fandom. It provides a sense of belonging to the fans. As per Dr. Laurel Steinberg, a psychotherapist and professor of psychology at Columbia University (New York, USA) "*Belonging to a fandom group helps the youths connect to other like-minded youths on social media throughout the year, feeling like you are part of a group that can help one define his/her identity and give a sense of purpose to what might be an otherwise routine lifestyle. Connecting with people over shared passions and interests is good for mental and emotional health because it helps to create a fraternity-like or family-like sense of security*" (Wiest, 2017). Fandom also helps fans explore their identity and perspective. Media fans connect across the world through the fandom, forming friendships and sharing their opinions about the media objects they love. Being able to share their ideas also help the fans in improving their self- esteem. It engages the fans to participate in the fandom thus also enhancing their creativity.

Social Aspects of Fandom

For most fans, fandom is a social and public process and not a solitary and private process. Fan reception is always shaped through input from other fans and is motivated by a wish for more interaction within a larger social community (Jenkins, 1992, p. 77). Most of the times, fans want to share their appreciation and passion with other fans for a given media object. This sharing regarding their object of fandom help the fans to discuss their various view-points and critiques that integrate the elements of the media text into their own lives. Fans spread their passion and enthusiasm by interacting with other fans on both online and offline communities in formal and informal social gatherings and groups. The formal gatherings include elaborate fan conventions where fans integrate elements of the media text into their own lives, and critique the text for any perceived deficiencies.

Social hierarchies also exist between and within different fan subcultures, which also lead to judgment regarding their choice of media. Within a subgroup, members usually have an idea about the kind of behaviours that are deemed acceptable or unacceptable. Busse (2006, p.79) explained that too strong an investment is threatening to a fandom and centrally defines the stereotypical fans and geeks" (Grinell College, n.d., para. 3). For example, a fan who wears costumes is considered geekier than the one who makes fan art.

Participation in Fandom

Participation in fandom includes both consuming and creating new media related to fandom. Fandom comes to being because fans interpret and interact with a media object, and engage themselves in the activities such as making fan-art and fan-videos and writing fan-fictions and blogs. Fleming (2007) conducted a qualitative study with DragonCon attendees on participatory fandom in American culture. The study concluded that social interaction was the key objective for attending and participating in DragonCon. Fans enjoy meeting like-minded new people in the fan conventions and also seek the camaraderie offered by the convention's environment.

Fandom during the Period of Covid-19

During the period of Covid-19, people have adopted social distancing and stayed at their homes to avoid exposure to the virus. With more leisure time, many people have explored new media texts to engage in during this time. Due to this, there has been significant growth in many fandoms. For example, anime fandom has expanded substantially. As anime doesn't require actors and crew to expose themselves to virus contagion, it has a big advantage over live-action content. An anime movie "Demon Slayer (Kimetsu no Yaiba- The Movie: Mugen Train)," grossed over \$200 million in Japan in less than a month in the year 2020 (Tsuneoka, 2020). Participation in pre-existing fandoms has also increased. During the lockdown, more fans have indulged in making fan arts, fan videos, memes, etc. Also, the fan conventions were not organized, which triggered the rise in role play between fans on online platforms.

Fandom in India

The expansion of digital media has led to media convergence i.e., the flow of content across multiple media platforms (McCudden, 2011). It has become very easy for fans in India to access a variety of media content. Since Western media contents are idolised by youth these days, many mainstream fandoms in India today are centred on Western pop culture, which also leads to fans adapting cultural norms of the west. Priyanka Shivadas in her book 'Hero and Hero-worship: fandom in modern India' (2020), argues that the discourse on fandom in India should also be analysed through native categories so as to recognize the Indian tradition and beliefs even in the wake of modernization.

On the other hand, fans in India have a stereotypical image of fanatics. In the book, *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World* (Gray et. al., 2007), Aswin Punathambekar, a media scholar, wrote a chapter, 'Between rowdies and rasikas: *rethinking fan activity in Indian film culture*'. In the chapter, he debated against defining fan activity in India in terms of devotional excess which has often dominated the public perception, insisting on the point that there is a need to re-imagine the image of the fans in India, and move away from the binary of fan-as-rowdy versus fan-as-rasika (connoisseurs). He stated, "We need to move away from meanings derived out of experiences based in the cinema hall and/or linkages to political parties, and place the "fan" along a more expansive continuum of participatory culture."

To discuss fandom in India, The Godrej India Culture Lab hosted 'The Great Indian Fandom Conference' in 2019. This conference sought out to explore Indian fandom by bringing together academics, writers, filmmakers and fans. Amlan Das, a media manager, discussed the relationship of football fandom and patriotic nationalism. Film-studies scholar, Dr. S.V. Srinivas's session explored celebrity worship in South Indian fan clubs. Twinkle, a BTS fan, pondered on the transcultural fandom in India. She reflected on the sense of belonging that the BTS fans felt and how the fandom helped them overcome difficult times (Jha, 2019).

Participation in fandom is very common amongst Indian young adults. Just like many fans around the world, there are several Indians fans who engage in fan activities. There are numerous Indian fan pages dedicated to certain fandoms, which help Indian fans to have a transcultural experience as it combines Indian culture and fan culture. Additionally, fans in India portray their fan activity through the social media platforms in the form of fan art, videos, memes, etc. The scope for outdoor fandom activity in India is limited as there are lesser number of offline fan spaces such as fan conventions as compared to the western countries.

METHODS

Participants

This study comprised of 70 participants (45 females and 25 males) from New Delhi and Aligarh in India. The data was collected through in-depth interviews (n=20) and an online questionnaire (n=70). The ages of the participants varied between 20 and 25.

Procedure

The participants for interview were chosen using a purposive sampling process and snowball sampling was used to identify and select young adults in the research. The in-depth interviews were conducted as per the convenience of the participants, both at their homes and in public places. The interviews were audio taped with the verbal permission of the participants and the responses were written when a participant felt uncomfortable with audio taping. Each interview took around 20 to 50 minutes.

For online questionnaire, volunteer-response sampling was used. To collect data online, a questionnaire was developed on Google drive and then shared among friends and acquaintances. The online questionnaire was distributed through the use of social media platforms i.e., WhatsApp and Instagram, and snowball sampling was used for further participation in the research. All responses were recorded.

The data, gathered from in-depth interviews and online questionnaire was qualitatively analysed. The audio recordings were transcribed and written. The themes were generated based on the questions that were part of the interview. All names have been changed to maintain anonymity of participants. The research was screened by the institutional ethics committee and received an ethical clearance.

RESULTS

The data were thoroughly scrutinized to elicit common themes and trends. Five dominant fields were observed as depicted below.

Sense of Belonging

Fandom offers a sense of belonging to the fans. Quite a few times, fans identify themselves with the people of the same fandoms.

The findings extracted from the questionnaire (37/50) as well as from the interviews (18/20) showed that the participants felt a sense of belonging with their fandoms. Elaborate responses were given by some of the participants regarding the same.

“I do feel a connection with anime, definitely. I feel it’s my thing. I feel a connection to the characters that goes without saying. If I come across people who watch anime, I instantly feel a connection to them.”

“I do. Yes, e.g., if I see someone posting about something I like, I feel an immediate connection to that person. I’m never going to meet that person but I automatically feel like I know that person, I once swiped right on Tinder just because his bio mentioned Vance Joy. So, I do feel a sense of belonging to my fandoms because of the loyalty aspect and identification.”

“Fandoms become a part of your life. You live the story line, and you live the character. You want to go back to it in the middle of your daily activities.”

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From the recorded narratives, it was found that fans felt a sense of belonging, mostly to their favourite genre or type of media that is close to their hearts. Finding people who value the fandoms just as much as them creates a bond based around an object of fandom.

Part in Social Life

Most participants (n = 49) claimed that fandom played a significant part in their social lives. Fandom usually becomes a topic of conversation in fans' daily lives. One participant elaborated, *"Fandoms have always been a large part of how I interact with others socially. I also talk, debate and discuss about them at length. Most fandoms end up to be the subject of most of my conversations, so I guess it is a pretty integral part of my life."*

Fans are able to look for common interests upon meeting new people. *"Many a times I speculate people based on their choice of media contents, in the sense whether I'd connect with them or not."*

Fandoms can also be an ice breaker in many conversations.

"It is major part of my life. When I was younger, often it used to be the only topic of conversation with people. Still, fandom remains a significant topic of conversation. It is a very convenient way to get to know someone and bond because it helps in building conversation and it helps you in figuring out how similar I am to people and similarity breeds liking. So, I think finding people who belong to the same fandom is quite beneficial for your social life."

"It connects me with people. Different friends have different fandoms and I gave some fandom connection to everyone. So, it makes a social connection."

"Talking about fandoms give me a great opening to talk to people. I can easily start a conversation on a media content. Many of my friends are in my life because we share the same fandoms."

Promotion

Promoting and sharing of objects of fandom seems to be an integral part of fandom life. Fans tend to influence other people, usually their friends and family to engage in their fandoms. Respondents from the interview (12/20) as well as the questionnaire (20/50) admitted that they promoted their fandoms amongst friends and family on regular basis.

Some participants said that they promoted their fandoms when they thought that the other person would be interested in that particular object of fandom.

One respondent described how she kept certain objects of fandom to herself. She explained, *"There are some things I don't want to promote because I want to keep it to myself. I wouldn't tell someone simply because I feel like it's more sacred if it's just my thing. A little selfish, I know. It feels like it's just something only I know about. It means to me more because others don't know it. Although, I do promote the things that people already know about and I do bring it up very often."*

Another participant said, *"If they are interested in the same fandom as I am, then I remind them quite often in order to engage them in my fandoms"*.

"It depends. When I'm super excited about something, I obviously share. If the person doesn't respond and I realize that the connectivity is not there. Then, I stop."

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At times, fans don't get to share their fandoms with other people. It mostly happens with media objects fairly unknown or not liked by the people close to them. A respondent explained why he rarely ever promotes an object of fandom. He said, *"The people with whom I'm in friendship, don't like the stuff that I like. I did try to promote some things, but was ridiculed for that. So, now I hardly promote my fandoms"*.

Some participants stated that they promoted their fandom regardless of the other persons' interest, assuming that their interest would develop once they could engage in it.

Participation in Fandom

Concerning participation in fandom, two sub-themes were obtained:

Fan-made Contents

Participation in fandom involves fans not just acting as consumers, but also as creators of media contents such as fan fiction, fan art, anime, music videos, games and quizzes. It was found that the majority of participants (49/70) didn't create fan-made content. Whereas, some participants did create fan-made content. Fan art was the most common content amongst both the interview and questionnaire participants. Surprisingly, all fans of anime were engaged in fan-made contents. Making memes, writing fan fiction and managing fan-made pages were also observed as some of the activities that a few participants were engaged in.

Fan Debates and Discussions

Fan discussion and debates help fans to talk about their favorite media and strengthens the communication among the fans. A little more than 50% of the participants (37/70) specified that they were engaged in fan debates and discussions. In the interviews, several participants admitted they were engaged in fan debates, but they respected others' perspective as well and didn't impose their ideas on them. For instance, one participant stated, *"When someone discusses my fandoms, I tend to restrain myself from sharing my opinions, because I don't feel the need to influence them. But if someone likes something that I like, I happily join the discussion."* On the other hand, some fandoms mean a lot to the fans and have made a profound impact on their lives. Hence, there is a sense of loyalty to the fandom, which provokes them to start a debate if someone tries to badmouth it. A participant explained, *"I take some fandoms very seriously. I know how good it is. And if someone tries to defame them in front of me, I lose my patience, and it turns into a debate. For fandoms I don't feel strongly inclined to, I don't take the discussions too far."*

Cosplay and Fan Conventions

Attending fan conventions and cosplay are some of the common forms of participation in fandom across the world. Several Western studies have explained fan activities in fan Conventions (e.g., Fleming, 2007; McCudden, 2011), which is considered a big part of fandom life. However, the present study did not have any participants, who attended a fan convention or were engaged into cosplay. While, several participants did point out that they wanted to attend the fan conventions such as Comic-Con in the future. Cosplay was only sought by five participants, four of which were anime fans. One reason that emerged through the participants' responses for not being engaged into cosplay ascertained that it might cause one to stand out from the crowd, and people could make fun of them if they went out in the full costume of a particular character.

Stigmas of Fandom

The choice of fandoms-fans has often reflected the pull of fans towards a genre or theme. Fandoms that are popular in culture tend to be more widely accepted by young adults. Many fans take pride in their choice of media. As per our research, forty two of the 70 participants said that they lived their fandom lives openly, which, however, seems to be difficult to some fans. One participant explained, “*There are certain media sources that are frowned upon by most people. Therefore, living your fandom openly proves to be difficult for some fans as they get judged for it.*”

From the responses of the participants, it could be seen that there might be a hierarchy between certain fandoms, which compels the fans to hide the fact that they’re fans of a particular object of a fandom. In this study, Western media-fandoms seem to be more widely appreciated by the youth. Participants, who are also fans of anime, explained that they often face discrimination since people compare anime with cartoons and ridicule them for watching cartoons in their adulthood.

CONCLUSION

Fandoms play a significant role in the lives of young adults, who consider themselves fans of a particular media object. Through the media content that we are engaged in, we analyse cultural norms across the world which help us in setting our world view. The digital revolution has transformed the whole experience of being a fan. It has greatly expanded the opportunities for the fans to be engaged in their fandoms. There are various online communities and forums dedicated to various objects of fandom, which provide tremendous opportunities to the fans to express their love for their fandoms.

There are many ways listed by the participants through which fans participate in fandoms. Discussions and debates related to their fandoms are fairly common amongst the fans, be it with friends or with others on online platforms. But many participants stressed that they respected other people’s perspectives and they didn’t assert their opinions on them. Fandom gives fans a chance to share their creativity for what they are passionate about. It was found that many fans, especially anime fans, make fan art.

The findings of the present study demonstrated that some Western media-fandoms seemed to be more widely appreciated among young adults. The participants stated that they watched both Indian media-content and Western media-content, but when asked about their fandoms, most of them named Western contents. To get engaged in Western media contents is also sought out by many young adults because there seems to be a charm in watching the media content in English language and is considered popular culture at present.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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