

Girls Can't Like *Star Wars*:

An Analysis of Feminism Within Fandoms

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Part I: *Theory*

I. Introduction to Fandom Theory

A. What is Fandom Theory?

In the 21st century within the youngest generations, a person is almost solely perceived as their interests. Between the rising popularization of aesthetics, social media trends, and personal branding we have become completely consumed by what we are fans of. This devotion can be represented in a materialistic way: football fans wear hats with team logos, music lovers are devoted to their band t-shirts, a *The Office* fan puts stickers of scenes from the show on their laptop. It can also be a visible group: communities that are built around the media text that they love (Jenkins). With the rise in social media, “the culture industries “fan” to describe anyone who clicks a like button on social media, as they seek to intensify fan engagement as a mechanism for ensuring loyal attention within a cluttered media environment” (Jenkins) Thus, the fandom theory is born.

Prosumers & Participatory Culture

With the addition of the internet, modern culture thrives on fandoms as “following continued technological, social, and cultural changes, fandom is an even more commonplace experience” (Jenkins). Fandom culture- whether sport, music, television

show, movie, book, or video game centered- becomes a thriving community of “prosumers” and a part of a participatory culture. The term prosumers was coined by Alvin Toffler to describe someone who consumes content while also creating it (Ahluwalia). Participatory culture is “fans acting not only as consumers but also as producers and creators of some form of creative media (Subcultures)”.

Internet fandoms are fantastic examples of this concept, as the only way to communicate is through creating some sort of post about the item they are consuming. Fandoms are a way for a person to utilize different facets to pay tribute to their favorite thing- fanart, fanfiction, fanedits, etc. and grow into a community based around the content that they’re creating. Being imaginative is a part of being in a fandom, which gives fans a chance to “represent a creative extension of the reading process, a way readers take media content and make it their own” (Jenkins). It’s an extraordinary practice that often gets discredited or mocked purely because fandoms have the stereotype of being “geeky” or “weird”. In actuality, no matter the subject of the fandom, culture is formed from the artistic aspects of a fandom community.

Another incredible practice that comes from fandom culture is the language that is created. Words like “headcanon”, “stanning”, “shipping”, “OTPs”, etc. are now used in everyday language. Overtime, internet slang has rapidly increased in creating new vernacular that is exclusively understood by fandoms and those who see it in passing. With its own language, internet fandom culture then proves itself to be an actual living culture, just as one would if it were in a real world context.

One facet of fandoms that has been around for a few decades is fanfiction. Fanfiction is where a fan takes what they are a fan of and create their own written works based upon

it (which is a form of prosuming). These fanfictions create a subculture or micro-fandom within the community, as fans of the subject in turn become fans of another fan's work. Deriving from fanfiction, words such as "shipping" (wanting two characters to fall in love) and "headcanon" (an idea that isn't in the media text itself but is believed by the fanfiction's audience) then becomes embedded into the culture.

B. History

Fandom's Father

Henry Jenkins is an American Media Scholar majorly credited to the majority of the studies of fandom theory and is a large public advocate for fans.

On Jenkin's *About Me* page on his website he talks about how his first work of fandom studies was done when fans were purely seen as "average consumers". Though, after his book *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* was released, he mentions that "what most people took from that book was my concept of "poaching," the idea that fans construct their own culture – fan fiction, artwork, costumes, music and videos – from content appropriated from mass media, reshaping it to serve their own needs and interests" (Jenkins). This analysis brought forth a newer perspective about fanbases and the culture that it can create.

Jenkins has released over 20 books about different facets of media studies, but was one of the first to take fandoms seriously as an entity worth analyzing. With this, he continually pushes other media scholars to realize the importance of fandom studies within the media industry while still analyzing the greatness and the flaws of fandoms as a whole.

A Short Description of the Birth of Fandom

According to Francesca Coppe's excerpt in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, the term "fandom" did not become related to media until the late 1960s, and the late 1900s being the time period where the word really gained traction and meaning. Previously to this, the word was used to describe fans of theater, music, and sports. The application of the word to media studies was born when a revolutionary piece of media was released. The science-fiction series *Star Trek* is considered to be the first to create a culture around a media context. It was the first film that fans had a creative response to, resulting in fan-art and a subculture of "Trekkies" (Coppe).

The science-fiction community are the ones to credit for this growth as we move through the late 1900s. Between *The Fantastic Four* and *Star Wars*, the fandom community began to blossom, becoming accessible and visible to the general public. As Disney started to mass-produce their animated films, the Disney fandom also started to gain traction as an identifiable community to align yourself with.

Creative responses to fandom started bursting at the seams: poems, letters, conventions, cosplay, and more starred inside a whirlwind of media fandoms as more blockbusters came out. This movement started community based areas around the world, giving the term "fandom" a rebirth (Coppe).

The Internet Changes Everything

Contrary to the beginning of media fandoms, fans in the 1990s created a new form of fandom: online communities. The internet gave fandoms access to the ability to create online archives for fan fiction, email based mailing lists, and databases of facts about their favorite show/movie. Because of this "fans, as a group, were technologically ahead of the

curve” by using university computer labs or their own computer equipment. These hings were

Social Media Fandoms

Finally we reach the late 2010s, when social media became the hub of fandoms. MySpace, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, Facebook became the central mode of communication for fans. With this accessibility and public display online, fandoms are now an unhidden sector of the internet that is proud to claim themselves (on a usually anonymous page). Before, it took a certain set of characteristics to be involved within a fandom. Now social media gives instant access to *anything* a person can be interested in. Online fandoms shifted the meaning of the word forever, as a fan has access to an unlimited amount of things they can do. Social media gives a space to create your own personalized fan page, instant discourse among the fandom, and the chance to connect with people around the world.

C. Other Aspects

Creation of Community

Whether a casual viewer of a piece of media or a hardcore stan, the elation you feel when you see someone wearing something with a reference you understand creates an electrifying moment of community that cannot compare.

Specifically focusing on internet fandoms, usually anonymous accounts formed through social media, the community is omnipresent. When the fans receive new content from their item of interest, it’s less about their own reaction to whatever it is. Seeing what everyone else is talking about and noticing how the other fans react is priority.

Although, fandoms are becoming increasingly politicized amongst themselves. “So within an increasingly interconnected internet culture where personalization and self-identity are more important than anonymity, the personal becomes increasingly political even within fandom circles. Fandom disagreements, too, have shifted into a more political and academic tone” (Symposium). This shift in fandom balance has shown just how much of a culture fandom can create. There are hierarchies based on followers, there are fandom do’s and don’ts, and the pressure to be on one side or another when fandom is in conflict.

Another interesting aspect that Winterwood notes in the quote above is that “self-identity is more important than anonymity”. Being a fan page isn’t enough. Personalization lays a heavy hand on the inner workings of fandom culture, which in turn puts pressure on the individual to showcase their “real selves” instead of staying behind the scenes and purely a supporter for the fan item- with intent to take focus off of the object of appreciation. In 2021, this facet of fandom theory is extremely relevant due to the rise in TikTok, which is a video sharing platform, and the constant stream of video content from a fan page. Before this type of fanpage, whether it be on Tumblr or Instagram, was exclusively about anonymity as a photo-sharing app. Fans would only post photos and edits of what they were interested in, and not photos of themselves.

The fan pages that are on TikTok, however usually *have* to show their faces in order to create content due to the nature of the app, and the fandoms that are present on it. Because of this, the wall of anonymity is torn down, as the fan can be identifiable outside of their account. In turn, fans that have a high following become a “micro-celebrity” within their own fandom (Hamad). They become recognizable people due to their content and can

be noticed outside of the internet. They grow a micro-fanbase that started from being a fan themselves. This then adds another layer to the ever changing fandom theory.

Fictional vs Celebrity

It is important to note the different types of fandoms and how there are different cultures within them. Fandom theory is an umbrella term, as all fandoms have core foundations to be considered a fandom.

One of the largest draws to being in a fandom is the sense of community, and the ability to customize yourself to the experience and culture based off of what you are a fan of. Since there is such a heavy culture implied within fandoms, the lines between one fandom and another are very distinguished. The K-Pop community communicates differently than *Dr. Who* viewers. *Dungeons & Dragons* discourses interact in a different way.

I. Overview of Feminist Theory

The Difficulty of a Definition

In a straightforward definition, the word feminism encapsulates the desire for equality between the sexes. Feminist theory is a political and social movement, focused on campaigning for equality. The true meaning of the term focuses on equality for male and female identifying individuals. The only way to achieve this equality in a patriarchal society is to be a society that is uplifting, educating, and empowering women to acquire the “rights” aspect of the definition. Because of the focus on specifically women, the term feminism has a different perspective depending on the context, which skews the meaning.

By default, those who identify as feminists tend to not define themselves at all. The word “feminist” has been taken and rewritten multiple times with different contexts and is often met with the wrong definition due to stereotypes, misunderstood history, and preconceived notions. There’s a reluctance to define the term, because of “feminism’s ‘multiplicity’ and ‘diversity’...the necessity for avoiding ‘universalism’ (whereby the stories of some are taken as the stories of all), the desire to recognise that the source of feminism lies in women’s lives and experiences which are as various as women ourselves, and so on” (Busse). Advocates see feminism an aspect of society that needs reformation, and the definition is only dictated by those who have experienced that side of it.

Early Feminism

Early feminist movements began in the 19th century, where the first women’s rights convention was organized in New York. The Seneca Falls Convention avalanches activism around the world, and ended up “leading to the passage of the 19th Amendment granting [white, wealthy] women the right to vote”. For ears to come, Women’s Rights Conventions are sparking around the country

Moving into the late 18th century and early 1900s, Susan B. Anthony becomes a key player in the push for women’s rights. Along with Elizabeth Cady Stanton, she led the National American Woman Suffrage Association that advocated for the ratification of the 19th Amendment. In 1963 the Equal Pay Act was signed by President John F. Kennedy to prohibit discrimination in wages (History). Following these key events comes a long line of political fire that define the early works of feminism. Eventually, we lead to modern feminism.

Modern Feminism

The Women's Suffrage Movement owned the political spectrum of feminism. In the 21st century, even though American society still falls short in political aspects, modern feminism lays a heavy focus on societal feminism. A spark in the 2010s ignited conversations about women's representation, implicit biases, ingrained stereotypes, and blatant misogyny that pushed these issues to the forefront of the feminist movement. There is now a drive towards equal visibility between the genders, which leads to the understanding that Busse discussed in the early paragraph.

Social media began a new generation of feminists, with advocacy across all platforms. Women's voices are now amplified by the instant access to an online world to discuss everyday stereotypes and experiences. Hashtags and trends revolve around the equality of women, both politically and socially, and create a conversation that was not as easy to have in the 18th century. Modern feminism is on display for all, and for all to claim the belief of.

Part II: *Analysis*

I. **Foreword**

For the sake of this essay I will be focusing on male identifying vs female identifying audiences and my analysis of their experiences in fandoms. This is not meant to exclude those that do not identify that way, but simply meant to highlight the inequalities female identifying fans face within a patriarchal society.

II. **Intersection between Feminism & Fandom**

A. *The "Passionate" versus the "hysterical"*

The words we use to describe someone's behaviour has a lasting effect on their group. In everyday conversations, we use words like "hysterical", "obsessed", "boy-crazed", or "insane" to characterize female-identifying fans. Though, even though the practices are generally the same, these adjectives seem to not apply to male audiences.

Those who are fans of a sport, by definition, are considered to be in a fandom. Because the word "fandom" is societally connotated to be either nerdy or for teenagers, while sports fans are very masculine and of the "macho man" variety, many would shudder and shy away from the title. Though, even without being described like the one above, sports fans are inherently a fandom.

The parallel lies within the boy band category of fandoms. The hysteria that revolves around boy bands is unstoppable. Between the Beatles (circa 1960s), NSync/the Backstreet Boys (circa late 1990s-2000), One Direction (circa 2010), and BTS (circa 2020)- all of the rave is responsible for a main demographic: teenage girls. This is no secret. When walking

into a NSync concert, you should expect to find mostly young girls who have dedicated a huge part of their lives to being followers of the band. These boy band fandoms are extremely impressive, and hold many distinctive characteristics.

Analyzing the One Direction fandom in particular, one that I have been watching my entire life, they have single handedly created a massive online community to produce different forms of art. With the focus on fanfics, fan art, fan projects, fan forums, streaming events, Directioners adapted to create a family within participatory culture. Creating merchandise of their own, whether for an Etsy business or with ModPodge for a concert. This online community gives young girls the opportunity to express themselves and find a safe space to hold discourse over their interests. These artistic and social skills can translate to professional attributes as they grow up, so the experience of being in a fandom is beneficial.

These same qualities link back to sports fans. Wearing a football jersey is the same as concert merchandise. Community hype and buzz about game day is similar to the day of a concert. Having a favorite player on a soccer team, who you believe can do no wrong and will defend, is the same as having a band member you attach yourself to. Fantasy football leagues are essentially the same thing as fanfiction, Penn State's notorious White Out game is the same as One Direction's fan projects at concerts (coordinating between attendees to hold up different colored papers to create a rainbow around the arena). Though the actions are unequivocal, the riots after the Eagles won Super Bowl LII supposedly hold the same passion that fans had when One Direction received third place on the XFactor in 2010.

Even though these characteristics are directly parallel to each other, there is a clear difference in how society views young teenage girls and male sports fans. This is because of

the sexism and stereotypes placed onto young girls. It is deemed socially acceptable to wear your favorite Steelers jersey to work, but if a woman was to have on her Justin Timberlake shirt she would be dismissed for acting “childish” and considered obsessive.

Time after time again sports fans riot and destroy their cities, no matter if the outcome of the game is positive or negative. These, generally white and male, fans storm the streets to light cars on fire, tear down street signs, and loot stores. As a patriarchal society, we’ve come to accept that this phenomenon is inevitable and that “it’s just the fans being passionate” and “college kids blowing off steam”. This is an unacceptable approach, and these men should be held accountable for their violent actions. In comparison to a One Direction concert, the most that is left behind is piles of confetti; yet the teenage girls are the ones considered hysterical with a negative connotation. There is inequity in the standards between these two groups, which is where feminism holds root.

This example can carry into other fandom areas. *Twilight* fans on opening night versus ACDC concerts. Even shows meant for younger audiences can have the same double standard, with *My Little Pony* versus *Transformers*. People should be allowed to like what they like without a cast of judgement or belittlement based on their gender.

B. How Female fans are treated within male-dominated fandoms

To focus on a more traditional definition of fandoms, we must analyze a certain genre of people. Fandoms such as the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Star Wars, Dungeons & Dragons, or any sort of fantasy worlds can be considered male-dominated, and there is a lot to be said about the female fan in those areas. Although they do not get dismissed for their

quirks, a female-identifying person is usually unwelcome. In all aspects of life women's voices are spoken over and it is especially true within a fandom.

In the Francesca Coppa expert from earlier, in reference to the *Star Trek* fandom, she mentions that "the show attracted the many female fans who have been present in science fiction fandoms since the beginning but were underrepresented on the letter pages that were the public face of fandom". Even before fandom was considered a word, women were being erased in the narrative of history. To be the reason a franchise is so popular and successful, yet swept under the rug, is how women tend to be treated within a fandom. *This* is why feminism needs to be prevalent in every part of society.

C. Analysis of a Post Feminist Fandom

After his 5 years with One Direction, Harry Styles has branched off on his own solo career. In this time he created a new personal brand: one that cultivates kindness, femininity, queerness, and feminism. Styles is not one of the first to do so, but his brand reflects onto the fandom and creates a discourse of these topics within a fandom. It is well known within the community that most "diehard" fans understand his values and apply them themselves. If you are a fan of Styles, it is understood that you are a feminist.

There are plentiful examples of Styles displaying this ideology, but one significant event that he did was at his San Antonio show in 2021, where a 6-week abortion ban became a law. He shouted, "don't let anyone tell you who you're supposed to be. Don't let anyone tell you what to do with your body". The fans, who were Texas locals, in the audience screamed in approval. Instantly, many created fan art and merchandise to celebrate the proclamation. This shows that Styles' feminist values are integrated greatly into the fandom and are a perfect illustration of a post feminism fandom.

III. The Importance of Feminism within Fandoms

Fandoms are being coded into everyday life. From anime lovers to Harry Potter fans, with the assistance of TikTok and aesthetics, the rising generation defines themselves to be within certain categories. These categories translate into fandom in which they then become part of a bigger community. With instant accessibility to these categories- being a part of a fandom, whether you participate actively or watch passively, is slowly defining youth's identity. The experiences within a fandom community shape In turn, the importance of feminism is pronounced.

In order for a balanced society, feminism needs to run through every aspect of any community. There are many fandoms that claim to support women's rights and the *idea* of feminism. Though, as we've seen, there are plenty of others that have proven to show hostility and misogyny towards women within their own communities. An oppressed group can never fully become equal until their own culture sees them that way.

Women, of all ages, have the right to not be stereotyped and not be held to a double standard. Women have the right to have interests that aren't belittled and mocked. Women have the right to be a fan of something a male is a fan of, and be allowed to express that openly.

IV. My Personal Experience

A. Once a Fangirl, Always a Fangirl

My first Instagram account was made on November 9th, 2011, back when posting a picture of your face using your real name meant strangers could track you and having 100

followers meant you were famous. The popularity of Instagram started to pick up around 2013, where it slowly started to become what we know of as the social media platform now- one filled with influencers, personal accounts, and fanpages. From here on in this essay is where I leave no reservations of my past and my fan accounts, so please spare me your judgements. I was thirteen when I made my first Instagram fan account, where I posted about the Lifetime series *Dance Moms* that I was a huge fan of.

Liking *Dance Moms* was my first baby step into the world of internet fandoms, where I slowly started to realize that there was a community for anything I was a fan of. I grew up in the height of popularity of One Direction, British YouTubers, Taylor Swift, the Hunger Games, Harry Potter, etc. I never directly interacted with the fanpages of these pieces of media, but I would observe the fandoms from the outside. Even though I didn't have individual fanpages for each interest, I have a knowledge of the behaviours, culture, and language of different popular internet fandoms from 2013 to the present.

B. Double Standards within Fan Communities

As a teenage girl, I was used to hearing comments about my interests. In the past my younger cousin, who is a boy, would mock me for liking One Direction. The middle school boys would make fun of Justin Bieber's music and his bowl headed haircut whenever my friend wore her shirt with his name on it. My uncles would roll their eyes when I told them my first concert was going to be Selena Gomez & the Scene (back before the Scene broke up) and that I was incredibly excited about it.

As an adolescent, I started increasingly being made aware of the treatment I was receiving for conveying what I liked- whether that be my books, tv shows, music, or movie

choices. There was a stigma attached to being a young girl as a fan of something and I felt it in the room anytime I would express the slightest interest in. To the men and women I was around, I was an obsessive teenager who liked silly things. Though, this judgement never sat right with me.

My cousin, the one who ridiculed me for my heart for One Direction, *loved* the Star Wars movies and even had all of the action figures that he displayed on shelves in his room. I would see when the boys from school would freak out over the new Drake album dropping that night, without a whisper of the word “obsessed” from anyone. My mom and I would spend almost every Sunday at my grandparents’ house, where my uncles would be found yelling at their favorite football players on a television screen. It was clear to see that there was a double standard at play.

The experience I grew up in is not unique. The sexism and misogyny that is at work within and about fan communities is transparent. There are numerous examples of this, whether it be from society looking down on teenage fans, between fandoms themselves (a masculine audience vs a feminine one) or inside the fandom (a male fan rejecting a female one). Because of this, as a media scholar, it is incredibly important to analyze different forms of fandoms (fictional, movie, music artists, etc.) and the effects of feminism, sexism, and misogyny on the fans of these various pieces of media.

C. Conclusion

Countless individuals have had experiences similar to mine. As shown through history, women in fandoms need to hold representation. From liking *The Office*, to being a fan of Broadway musicals, to being devoted to *Dungeons and Dragons*, any community that discourses a media text deserves to have all members treated equally and fairly.

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