

A Literature Review on Fans' Identity Construction

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the development of mobile Internet and digital technology has produced a “warm house” for fandom. This paper reviews previous literature of fandom studies from three aspects, namely interaction with idols, identity construction through the performance of the self, and the relationship between gender identification and fandom. Fans build a connection with their idols mainly through gift exchange and consumption while they further create “ideal” selves by performing on the Internet. Moreover, they take fans communities as a platform to explore their gender identity. This paper suggests that future research could adopt more quantitative methods to unearth the diversity of fandom.

Keywords: *Fandom, Identity construction, Performance, Gender identity*

1. INTRODUCTION

Fandom is a group of fans gradually formed in the Internet environment. It has shown the characteristics of being born for online public opinion wars since its birth. It has a distinct class, a rigorous organizational structure, a strong self-driving force and reckless aggressiveness at all costs. Hence fans were once considered a group that deviated from the mainstream culture. Therefore, how the fans construct their own identity is a problem worthy of our attention and consideration.

This phenomenon has attracted scholars' attention for a long time. This paper is to review relevant research on fandom and identity construction. Generally, current literature can be divided into three categories, namely the identity constructed through interaction with their idols, self-performance, and gendered fans communities.

First, a couple of studies focused on the interaction between fans and their idols. They build their identity by giving gifts, participating in their idols' life in different forms. Second, fans construct an idealized self in fans communities through self-performance and it can gradually integrate into fans' self-identity. Third, regarding gender identity, fans feel easier to explore and express their gender identities in fans' communities.

2. FANS AND IDOLS

One existing opinion is that fans usually construct themselves through their connection with their idols. The time lag created when gifts are exchanged between fans and idols opens up the possibility of fans self-deception. When a fan is thanked by an idol in public area, he believes that he has received a response from the idol, creating a sense of satisfaction and pride, and thus a sense of superiority that he is needed by the idol [1]. This assertion has been challenged, most notably by the fact that there is no reasonable way of knowing whether this feeling of superiority has been generated and whether they are an important part of their construction, through the connection between them and idols, of themselves.

2.1. Fans, group and market

Hong suggested that fans do not construct identity through the exchange of gifts, but rather by establishing a mimetic intimacy with their idols and becoming opinion leaders of their fandom groups [2]. However, in this view, the idol is not the aim; it becomes the means. Fans do not construct their identity through their idols, but define themselves by establishing a position within the groups, which is outside the realm of the relationship between fans and idols.

The relationship between idols and fans might be thought of as one of pure devotion, with fans not only buying the products endorsed by their idols, but also becoming enthusiastic producers of videos and photographs about their idols to increase their popularity [3]. In this sense, fans gain more agency in fandom. They are transforming from passive acceptors of their idols' attention to active participants who have the ability to create their favourite idols through consumption. They construct and adjust their identity through this role shift. [4]. Therefore, there is no ideal direct relationship between the fans and their idols. A third factor must be included to guide them. It can be a fans base, the market, something else.

2.2. Fans and media

There is a third factor noticed by academics, media. The internet also assigns specific labels to its backstage characters. Fans are united by the virtual label as a demand for independent individuality and a need to seek community identity. This label distinguishes fans from the general audiences, allowing them to construct themselves through the recognition of the online community for their sense of identity [5]. The presence of this label as a small narrative in online media does influence the construction of fans' virtual identities, but the discourse of the small narrative is usually regulated by the grand narrative, making a preliminary exploration of the grand narrative a necessary option. However, it must not be forgotten that this grand narrative is also regulated by the media in order to regulate the fans base.

The change of the fans base from its initial "barbaric form" to its "positive form" is due to "a set of rules, obedience procedures and institutions such as moral and ethical codes of conduct" that have been developed [6].

On the one hand, Chen pointed out that regulation have been proposed to rule the society as a whole and gradually penetrated into the organizational field of fans groups through interactive communication and information flow, and fans groups have thus formed new cognitive structures and action strategies [7]; on the other hand, in the process of concrete implementation of compulsory institutions, the official has flexibly absorbed and accommodated informal organizations like fans groups, and by borrowing the energy of fans groups, to create an effective interface between official positions and private forces in certain areas. It further formed a new "structure of domination and mode of complicity" between the authorities and fans groups [8].

Although Chen mentioned that the mandatory rules and deliberate guidance of the official authorities have led the fans community to abandon its "barbarism" and to follow the official discourse and social norms, thus forming a new cognitive structure and action strategy [7]. Unfortunately, however, he did not go further to identify

the changes in self-perception and self-construction of the fans' community in the process of compliance with the rules and changes caused by the infiltration of the dominant discourse.

To sum up, fans cannot construct themselves by forming a direct link with their idols; they directly need a third party to intervene and form a bridge (media, market, community) so that the two things, fans and idols, can be connected.

3. CONSTRUCTION THROUGH THE SELF-PERFORMANCE

Fans portray themselves in different, usually "ideal," ways which are further facilitated by the virtual spaces of the internet. Online identity is then constructed to affect the "real" self through exploration, performance, and confirmation. As a part of a fandom, a fans' interaction with other fans is imposed and cannot be completely separated.

Concerning the role of the internet, Costa Pinto et al. employed Belk's "Extended Self in the Digital" stating that people develop a sense of attachment to the possession, experiences, body parts, and ideas, which develops the "extended" self. Although Belk's own research focused on online communities interacting with "real" identities whilst Costa Pinto et al. used Belk's theory to study the identity affected by the performance of "constructed" characters. They [9] provided an extension of Belk's theory, claiming that online fandom offers an opportunity for fans to develop their identities. By combining their identities with an idealized self, they explore different personal possibilities of the ideal self and facilitate identity development.

A majority of studies on online fandom used Goffman's "Front and backstage" and "Mask" theory. The "front" is the self that individuals present and construct for social interactions which is often the "ideal" self. The "back" refers to the aspects that one wishes to hide. In this case, the online identity is the front stage, presenting and constructing only what fans want others to see. The backstage remains the fans' identity in reality [10, 11]. Under this theoretical framework Ezani reached a similar conclusion that the online persona eventually becomes the fans' "real" identity through the performance of their online identity [11]. Media are an important tool for effective presentation and self-creation. Online communities create a "safe space" that allows experimentation of identity without real-life consequences. Fowler added an extra layer, arguing a fan shares a collective performance in their multiple online characters [12]. They add layers to their self-identity by constructing narrative identities, which results in exploration and self-reflection although the effect of exploration on the self is not explicitly stated.

Dunn used part of the “frontstage and backstage” theory [10]. The mask is a more specific tool of performance. Through multiple identity masks, people enact to play the role of the “ideal” self. More importantly, the mask will eventually become part of the “real” self as the second nature. Fans put on the masks of performance to present or represent themselves and the performed self will eventually be integrated into their personality. The mask theory is more specifically related to the topic than “frontstage and backstage.” It incorporates the effects of the frontstage on true selves and outlines that fans put up multiple masks. This is especially relevant to the fandoms where the creation of personas and characters is explicit.

Concerning offline fandom, Lamerichs and Lehtonen used Judith Butler’s concept of performativity wherein identity is not invented but is the temporary result of imitation. Furthermore, the act of performing identity is constraint by the discursive practice of certain communities [13, 14]. Butler’s theory is most fitting for research involving text as Butler states that identity is at least partly constructed through language and other semiotic resources.

Lamerichs and Fowler, argued that identity is actualized within the narrative of the fictional characters whom they embody [13, 11]. However, the fans embody the character which integrates into their “real” self instead of engaging in self-reflection. Lehtonen focused specifically on fans’ self-insertion into their fans’ fictions [14]. By writing themselves into fiction, the fans engage in a speculative life and get feedback from other members of the fandom. More generally, by constructing a self through self-produced fiction, fans absorb gendered representation, norms, and ideas actively. As fandom is a community, the creation of identity is never an isolated phenomenon and has to receive the confirmation of other fans to be established fully. The theme of self-reflection was repeated in Turkle’s study which found that online communities are a new opportunity for the fans to work through their real-life issues [15]. It is a channel through which the self can reflect their nature and explore social context. The fans explore, constructs, reconstructs, and becomes the character they play.

4. GENDER IDENTIFICATION AND FANDOM

Fandom is a field with clear and few types of cultural capital [16]. By engaging with fandom in different ways, individuals are capable to acquire the skills of identifying and gaining relevant cultural capital; in this process, the individuals’ gender identities are influenced by the online fandom. Through online communication, individuals find a common ground to express their gender identities. fandom is highly associated with LGBTQ+ communities. Most studies used a qualitative, quantitative, or a mixed

method. The common strategies include interviews, and online inquires.

Coppa and Francesca claimed that gender identity is shaped through fandom culture in 2006; they brought up several crucial insights to the relationship between gender identification and fandom and nurtured the scholarly conversation in this area to a large extent [17]. Their book argues that online fandom is distancing itself from a homogenous gender identity and favours diversity, which is LGBTQ+ identifications.

The insight of Coppa and Francesca inspired more carefully planned research. Several studies have come up with a conclusion that gender identification is related to the fandom, and gender minority tend to develop within online fandom. According to Rosenbelt and Tushnet, information and communication technologies stimulate the communication and management of digital information, and facilitate the development of individual’s gender identification among all ages [17, 18]. The researchers reached out to the participants in a fandom community for their own experiences regarding why they engage in fandom culture and how they established an organization called OTW, which is a non-profit organization established in 2007 with aiming to promote the acceptance of non-commercial fans works. It tries to raise the acceptance of creative works through the news blog in this community and other social media outlets, including Twitter and Tumblr.

Meanwhile, McInroy L. B. and Craig S. L. have dived into a more specific field. They were interested in teenage participants [19]. They applied a mixed method. Their participants were selected from online across the United States and Canada. The questionnaire included questions on demographics, identity development, and fandom, and it included both quantitative and qualitative questions. His method exhibited that youth who engaged in fandom may begin the sexual identity development earlier and progress through several signs more quickly than their peers. Their work also showed that many participants perceived fandom as an expedited identity development. Fandom participants were also more likely to identify with ‘non-traditional’ gender labels.

Coppa and Fransceca’s provided another insight that fans explore celebrity culture as a metaphor for gender identity, which led to further examinations on it Zhao conducted a case study about a K-Pop band, BlackPink [20]. Through their fans’ recreation of artwork and their reaction toward relevant news they discovered that their idols; sexual desirability results in the recreation of fans’ gender identity. The global K-pop industry facilitates a kind of queer fantasy that contributes to a global LGBTQ visibility and the social policing of their idols’ sexual innocence and desirability. Alexis Lothian et al. also attempted to prove online fandom as a “safe space” for queer identities, but failed to provide a wholistic analysis on the data [21].

Besides, Ian Borer is one of the earliest scholars who focused on a different fandom from the studies above – the sport fandom. He found a predominance of masculinity among sports fans. [22].

To extend Borer’s finding, Jones considered women’s relationship to football culture. He carried out in-depth interviews with football fans and used participant observation, which is an ethnographic strategy, at football matches in England between 2001 and 2006 [23]. Jones pointed out that in deciding with the relationship between fans identities and female fandom, a portion of interviewees felt compelled towards masculine fans practices and even defined exceptional versions of these practices as inauthentic. They expressed abhor at abuse and drew on their own femininity practices to critique it.

Jones also looked into to masculinity practices among male fans, which are usually displayed as “complicit masculinities,” in which men practice a masculinity that is the same with hegemonic masculinity but “compromise with women rather than naked[ly] dominating them.” Thus, these men benefit from the “patriarchal dividend, without the risks of being the frontline troops of patriarchy.”

5. CONCLUSION

This paper reviews relevant research on how fans construct their own identity. Fans groups conduct social interactions under new media, establish the meaning of self-identification in network interactions and practical activities, and use this as a standard to continuously output idol behaviours, thereby continuously consolidating the identification standards. In this way, a circulatory system is formed, and it has also become a way to build the identity of the fans community. In the process of fans constructing their identities, researchers have given many interpretations from different dimensions. The appearance and development of fans is not only an entertainment phenomenon, but also a symbol of a new social identity and a new state of life. In the era of new media, fans groups are more proactive. In the process of chasing stars, they project their emotions onto their idols, thereby obtaining a sense of satisfaction and identity in the virtual community. At the same time, the fans club received praise, recognition and other rewards during the process of interacting with the members, thereby enhancing the individual fans’ sense of self-identity. This group is breaking the boundaries with the public and being accepted by more outsiders; it is changing its original passive role and gaining more voice in the dialogue with idols, also tries to influence other cultural circles and has also made great progress. Fans participate in more mainstream community interactions and become direct participants in certain public activities. Finally, gender minorities can establish their own identities with the support of online platforms and Internet technology, which may be different from the

original, but this can promote gender awareness and help gender minorities of all ages.

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