The Darker Elements of Fandom

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Abstract: *Fandoms are an intrinsic part of the media. This article challenges the popular perception of fandoms as harmonious and inclusive by engaging in a critical discussion on the darker elements of fan subculture. It argues that range from anti-fandom, characterized by strong dislike and disappointment, to toxic fandom, marked by obstructionist behaviour, are commonly overlooked in discussions on the topic. Additionally, the essay highlights how media companies exploit fan labour for cheap advertising and idea generation. Through case studies of The Simpsons, Ghostbusters, and LEGO fandoms, the essay draws heavily upon the work of scholars like Sandvoss (2005), Busse and Gray (2011), and Hills (2002), ultimately rejecting the notion that 'fandom is beautiful'.*

Keywords: *fandom, toxic fandom, media audiences, fan labour*

Introduction

The inclusive narrative of fan studies suggests that fans and fandoms are entirely positive communities. It ignores the reality of the definition, structure and purpose of fandom. The darker elements of fandom can range from a strong dislike and disappointment in media text which creates an anti-fandom to a more dangerous and obstructionist approach that can lead to a toxic fandom (Gray,2003; Arouh,2020). However, it is also important to note that not all dark elements of fandom come from the fans themselves, fan labour originates from media companies exploiting their creative and productive fans for cheap labour such as advertising and new ideas (Brown,2003). For the purpose of this essay, the fans of *The Simpsons, Ghostbusters and LEGO* have been selected and the darker elements of each of these fandoms have been examined. These elements align with cultural and media scholars' works such as Sandvoss, Busse and Gray, and Hills and their discussions on fandoms. This essay rejects the inclusive narrative that 'fandom is beautiful' and argues that darker elements of anti-fandom, toxic fandom and fan labour are much more powerful than a harmonised fandom.

Critically examining the darker aspects of fan subculture

Most people can identify as a fan of something. The type of fan we are can communicate our identity and our self-interests (Sandvoss, 2005). In the 21st century, media-rich world, fandoms are more widely accepted and normalised in mainstream society (Brown, 2004; Gray, et al, 2017). Some media scholars have viewed fans as the freaks of society, conceptualising them as 'losers' (Busse and Gray, 2011, p.12). While others such as Brown see being a fan as a positive way of expressing yourself in a complicated society (Brown,2004). Despite the conflict defining fans, fans and fandoms are an important part of understanding media culture. The concept of fandom mirrors the layout of popular culture and consumption (Sandvoss,2005). One cannot study a media text without mention of the fandom behind it. Fans hold a distinct power in being responsible for the rise and consistent popularity of media texts or people. However, with this power comes harmful abuses. Just as much as fans can support and devote themselves to a text, they can become toxic, dangerous and ruthless towards it. The idea that 'fandom is beautiful' ignores the consequences and darker elements of fandoms. Anti-fandom, toxic fan culture and exploitation of fan labour can all arise from the concept of fandom. The depiction of a fandom in a negative light began with studies done by Fiske and Jenkins on a fandom being a creation from psychological and cultural dysfunctions in society (ibid.). This depiction remained through the late 20th century and was further supported when rapper Marshall Mathers played an obsessed fanatic in one of his music videos, depicting the "Stan" as a dangerously obsessed freak who would go to dark measures to receive attention from his idol, Eminem (ibid.). The portrayal

of obsessive fans goes further back in history, particularly in film. Martin Scorsese's 1982 film *King of Comedy* provides a humorous narrative on obsessive fans and the lengths they may go to (Sikov ,1983). Both cultural scholars Fiske and Jenkins and rapper Eminem have the same notion that not all fandoms are positive and supporting environments. Sandvoss (2005) supports this by arguing that fandoms act as a transitional object for people as their fandom becomes an outlet where they can express themselves. Fans are not just individuals who like a certain text, they are attached to it which can create a bond that is more dangerous than beneficial to media companies and creators. The emotional experience a fan engages in with a media text is partially responsible for the creation of fan culture (Hills, 2002). This emotional attachment can cause the darker elements of fandom to arise when their emotional attachment is disrupted. These elements are typically ignored by media companies who see fans as passive and a burden if they do not perceive the text as intended.

The terms 'fandom' and 'fans' are usually associated with people feeling positive and admirable about a specific media text. However, anti-fandoms introduce negativity and disharmony into fandom culture. Principally, anti-fans describe people who strongly object to a or take issue with a particular text or genre. The concept of the anti-fan was developed in Gray's (2003) study of *The Simpsons* (see also Philips, 2022 for a critique of same). Gray's study introduces a new perspective on understanding textuality and how audiences engage with texts. In order to be considered an anti-fan, one must have engaged with a text to a certain degree. Gray argues that behind every anti-fan, an expectation of a text or genre was not met, which therefore creates an anti-fan. From completing his study on fans of *The Simpsons*, Gray discovered that anti-fans are somewhat ignored and considered unimportant to media scholars, seeing them as having no function and a burden (Gray, 2003) However, anti-fans can be just as socially organized and present as harmonised fandoms. Philip's discussion on anti-fandom supports Gray's anti-fan conception and argues that both fans and anti-fans can be considered a fan of the text (Philips, 2022). As the term 'fan' comes from fanatic (Jenkins, 2013) it does not necessarily have to describe someone who likes the text, more so that they place a lot of attention on it. Anti-fans are a type of fans that media producers do not want (Philips, 2022). However, they do hold a place in understanding textuality and how the audience perceives the text. The anti-fandom perception is just as significant as hegemonic fandom as it shows different takes on the text. Philips's discussion on the differences between anti-fans and online trolls is aligned with the argument that anti-fans do hold significance in understanding the undesired reception of a text. As anti-fans can do this without the crude and inappropriate behaviour, online trolls typically engage in.

Although the anti-fan is not desired by media companies, they have not been proven in previous studies to be dangerous and only scratches the surface of darker elements of fandom. The same cannot be said for toxic fans. In comparison to anti-fans who just dislike the text or genre itself, the toxic fandom can take a racist and misogynistic tone to their hatred (Arouh, 2020). An example of toxic fandom and how they work is when the trailer for the *Ghostbusters* reboot was released in 2016 (Proctor,2017) Fans of the original film claimed the reboot had ruined their entire childhood and joined together to set the record for the most disliked video on YouTube (Proctor, 2017). This type of reaction links back to Busse and Gray's (2011) definition of a fan being a loser not connected to reality and being offended by the reboot. As the fans are emotionally attached to the original movie, any changes can feel like an attack on their personality and self-expression (Hills, 2002; Brown, 2004). As Arouh (2020) discusses, the toxic fan is a poisonous trait rather than a poisonous person. Therefore, the toxic fandom of the *Ghostbusters* reboot is largely accounted for by fans of the original film who began practising poisonous methods to undermine the reboot. In this case, creating a record of dislikes to attract the attention of the creators (Arouh,2020). Toxic fandom grows and survives online due to web 2.0 advancements such as anonymity and the ability to access wide audiences (Boyd, 2010). In Proctor's article on toxic fandom in *Ghostbusters,* he argues that the toxicity comes from the nostalgia of being attached and devoted to the original film and how the reboot is disrupting this (Proctor, 2017). Although Proctor argues that possessive nostalgia is not toxic, the practices it provokes are

considered toxic behaviour (Proctor, 2017). An example of this toxic behaviour that is darker than disking the trailer is the racist and misogynistic comments star of the film Lesli Mann received from toxic 'Ghostheads' online (Arouh, 2020). These two reactions to the reboot of creating disruption online and engaging in digital hate demonstrate the power toxic fandoms can hold when active. Although disliking the trailer does not seem as toxic as misogynistic comments, it proves how easy it is for fandoms to turn dark and join together at any moment, which in this case was 32 years after the original film was released.

It is important to acknowledge that not all negative aspects of fandoms are due to the behaviour of the fans, media companies also cause these darker elements to arise. The cultural economy of fandoms can cause both a sense of connection, contributing to their devoted media text and tension, with fans being exploited to cheap labour by large media companies (Brown,2003). This labour is often disguised as competitions and a chance for a fan to be in control of their fandom media text. An example of this is the creation of the 2014 *LEGO* movie. From the late 20th century, *LEGO* fans began creating amateur film animations called 'brickfilms' (Goggins,2018). These brickfilms were officially commissioned by the *LEGO* group in 1987. With the aid of digital cameras in the 1990s, they could be distributed to wide audiences and through their fandom (Goggin,2018). These brickfilms helped advertise new *LEGO* products for a low cost, as the *LEGO* fandom began to circulate new product content themselves (Goggins,2018) When the film was in production, the *LEGO* group took advantage of these brickfilms enthusiasts and promoted a competition to create a vehicle for the upcoming film (Goggins, 2018). Although it may not seem harmful, it was masked as an opportunity for a *LEGO* fan to be part of their fandom, this competition exploited the contestants for cheap labour (Brown,2003). Not only did *LEGO* receive free labour and creations from the contestants who did not win, the winner was only rewarded 1,000 dollars which is a huge comparison to the 69 million dollars the film made in its premiere weekend in cinemas (Goggins, 2018). This exploitation of *LEGO* fans shows that fans are not simply passive consumers of media, rather, they are producers of their media text. Stanfill and Condis (2018) acknowledge that fan labour can have good and bad sides, however, it is clear that many media companies use fan labour for 'bad' reasons such as exploitation of labour and ideas. The LEGO brickfilms and vehicle competition examples show how video game companies attempt to mask free labour as an opportunity to play unreleased games. Although fans are made to believe they are a part of the production of the film, LEGO was able to use the entries to the competition and brickfilms to create the film, instead of starting from scratch and using original materials (Goggins, 2018). It is only reported publicly that one man felt used by the company for using his work in the movie but as the competition was mainly targeted at children, this raises the question that the exploitation was strategically planned to go unnoticed by an age group completely unaware of labour exploitation (ibid.).

Conclusion
Fandom culture is a unique element of media audiences. Fandoms provide critical insight into understanding the audience's reception of a media text. However, many studies of fandoms have been anchored towards the positive aspects of a harmonised fandom and ignore the darker elements fandoms suffer with. Anti-fandoms are considered the least direful with Gray's study on *The Simpsons* proving that anti-fans are a different type of fan as their expectations on the text were not met, yet they place a lot of their attention on disliking it and looking for more reasons to dislike it (Gray, 2004) Toxic fandoms are at the other end of the darker elements with woeful behaviours rooted in racist and misogynistic beliefs used to undermine a media text (Arouh,2020) This toxic fandom behaviour is seen in the fandom reaction to *The Ghostbusters* reboot where fans used web 2.0 to their advantage and joined together to destroy the reputation of the film before it was even released. This reasoning behind their actions aligns with Hills and Brown's theories on fans using their preferred media text as an outlet for their identity and method of self-expression (Hills, 2002; Brown, 2003). As discussed, dark fandom is not always caused by the fans themselves, but media companies also cause darker elements

to arise by exploiting the fans of their creations. This is seen in the creation of the *LEGO* film as fans' creations using *LEGO* were used for cheap labour to create and promote the film, masked as giving fans the opportunity to be a part of the production (Stanfill and Condis,2014). These three elements of fandom demonstrate the darker side of fandoms which tends to be ignored by media companies and scholars. These elements reject the idea that all 'fandoms are beautiful' and prove that when these elements are present within a fandom, they can be more powerful than a positive fandom.

Word count: 2,144 words (excluding abstract, keywords and references)

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