

The Misunderstanding and Miseducation of Social Media Fandoms (and How Fans Deserve
Better)

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Introduction

Movies, television shows, video games, literature, music, animation, webcomics, and celebrity culture are the media the entertainment industry uses to grab the attention and tell stories the general public has never seen or heard of in their lifetimes. The engine that drives this machine is the fans that consume this entertainment. To be successful in obtaining popularity and fame, having a group of supporters—no matter how devoted or committed they are to the things they are passionate about—is an absolute must. This group is also known as fandom or fanbase. Since the inception of mass communication, fandom culture has been extraordinarily significant in making any form of entertainment popular or even well-known via fanzines, attending meetings, buying merchandise, and sharing enthusiasm with others. Within the past two decades, the Internet, specifically social media, has become a hotspot for fans to gather in celebration and community and deepen their love for what they watch or listen to.

Fandom has made an impact on everyone and modern society worldwide. Nearly everyone is committed to or engaged in some type of fandom, even if it is loosely. However, there are issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion packed into fandom culture in general, some from the outside (corporate world), and some from within (the fans themselves). The dynamic of fans and corporations is symbiotic and relies on one another. The corporations create the entertainment that the fandoms consume, but the fans must exist and be relatively happy so that the corporations are successful.

Issues that are prevalent but tend to not be taken as seriously in mainstream fandom are racism, misogyny, and the treatment of the LGBTQ+ community. Racism arises when most fandom mocks and suppresses the issues of addressing harmful stereotypes in various media.

Misogyny scapegoats female fans and accuses them of being the downfall of fandom culture, although they are the driving force of it. The overall treatment of the LGBTQ+ community via “queerbaiting,” hypersexualization, and demonization stems from homophobia and dehumanizes those within these groups.

With an emphasis on demanding that corporations do better when it comes to treating and listening to fans and the push to support independent media, this project aims to make suggestions on how to bring these power imbalances to light, and recommendations for how both fans and corporations can behave differently to shift this structure. This is also a call to attention and action that marginalized fans deserve the respect, recognition, and appreciation that are long overdue. Although it is realistically impossible to satisfy everyone, it is still imperative that it is heard, seen, and taken seriously by both fans who are heterosexual, white, male, and middle/upper class, and by fans in minority groups, who unfortunately tend to be hostile to each other. Culture and society have gone through multiple political, social, and economic changes in the past decade, and fandom has not been immune to these rapid shifts in culture, for better and worse.

The history of fandoms will be introduced first to give the reader an idea of what to expect from fandom and why it comes with power for specific media. Social media fandoms will follow, setting the stage for how fanbases operate online and how they have impacted contemporary life. After fandom is introduced, this paper will explore how corporations and companies who do not see fans as a priority take advantage of fans; it will also discuss complicated legal battles related to copyright laws, fan labor, and how they are portrayed in mainstream media. The issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion within fandom spaces will be

addressed. The last section will conclude with recommendations for establishing better relationships between fans and corporations, along with supporting independent media.

Similar to what is used by assistant professor of the University of Central Florida Mel Stanfill, the author of *Exploiting Fandom: How the Media Industry Seeks to Manipulate Fans*, the method of “big reading” will be used to expound on what fandom is, its relationship with corporations, its benefits and costs from a legal and ethical perspective involving today’s political and social climate, and its possible future.

Coined by Stanfill herself, “big reading” is “close reading on a large scale,” (Stanfill, 11-12), provided by comprehension of data via examples from multiple source types over a long period. The qualitative procedure is also crucial to asking “not only whether or with what frequency fans or specific fan practices appear in the archive [ranging from 1994-2009, and onwards], but also how they appear (Stanfill, 12).

History of Fandoms

According to Henry Jenkins, Provost Professor of Communication, Journalism, Cinematic Arts, and Education at the University of Southern California, “fans” are defined as “anyone who forms an intensive affective bond with a particular property, whether they share these feelings with anyone else.” He defines “fandom” as “those who claim a common identity and a shared culture with other fans” (Jenkins, 16). Participatory culture also plays a vital role in why fandom has had social prevalence, as it describes “how media fandom operates” (Jenkins, 18). “Fans” are also defined by Reysen and Branscombe in 2010 as “fanatics whose passion and enthusiasm can go beyond rational and normal levels of behavior” (Kottasz and Bennett, 16).

Although fans generally do not own the intellectual property of the media they consume and are passionate about, they often show active engagement in participatory fandoms, such as creating fan art, fan fiction, cosplay, heavily edited/remixed videos, etc. This is not to state that one must engage in those areas to be considered a “fan,” but creating and interpreting outside of formal channels of content production is a hallmark of fandom.

The concept of fandom is nothing new, and it has been around for centuries. Kathryn Fuller-Seely, professor of the Moody College of Communication at the University of Texas at Austin, states that the printing press helped 16th-century figures like Erasmus mass produce his work, which allowed it to be read widely and create a fandom (Brennan and Large, 27).

Fanfiction, which is fiction written by a fan of a show, movie, literature, or any type of media, also had a significant role in the history of fandoms, specifically in the literature world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Early fanfiction in history consisted of books like Joyce’s *Ulysses*, based on Homer’s *Odyssey* (Brennan and Large, 27).

By the time the 1850s arrived, fandom had evolved to book clubs, fan meetings, live concerts, and the creation of scrapbooks. The later technology in the early 20th century, however, permanently altered the way society engages with celebrity culture; this change is what catapulted and centralized United States film culture, globally known as Hollywood. While celebrity culture in Hollywood was in its early stages during this period, it expanded rapidly in large part because of the fans actively sharing a passion for their favorite actor or actress. One example is 1920s actress Clara Bow, whose career was backed by many female fans with the creation of fan magazines, serving as “cultural repositories of information about a celebrity

making and unmasking in the 1920s notions of female consumptions – of images, products, and films,” as well as showing the “ ‘real’ side of Bow and what she does outside of her career” (Oregon, 77).

One of the biggest breakthroughs for fandom happened between the 1960s-80s when major revolutions and counterculture began to surface in response to social, political, and class injustice and a desire to rebel against restricted standards and collectivism. This is also a time when Hollywood fandom and the silver screen expanded to less mainstream media; the rise of science fiction and fantasy movies like *Star Wars*, *Back to the Future*, and *The Goonies* are examples of this phenomenon. Comic books like Marvel and DC, science fiction/fantasy-centric movies, television shows (i.e.: *Doctor Who*, *Star Trek*, *Battlestar Galactica*), music, video games, manga, and anime started to attract many people through word of mouth, gatherings at niche place like bookstores, or conventions designed to convene fandom in one place to share and celebrate their passions. The growth of fan zines, shipping culture (when two people in media are seen as a potential couple by fans), and fan clubs exploded during that period, which eventually ushered in the age of the Internet, blogs, and social media.

Social Media and the Rise of Emotional Attachment in Fandom

As technology began to evolve, so did communication and expressions of adoration within fandom. The Internet became a primary source for fans of different avenues to congregate, allowing easier access to meet with others and engage in common interests. This was also the emergence of the democratization of culture in which anyone can be a creator; not only were spaces for gathering created, but the autonomy to generate fan content and be a part of creation became a ubiquitous part of fandom. Because of this, there are now multiple ways that

fans can easily show their support for the things they enjoy, which include, but are not limited to fan-made material such as fan art, fan fiction, cosplay, online roleplay, Graphic Interchange Formats (GIFs), and edits of videos (i.e.: fan cams, Anime/Game Music Videos (AMV/GMV)), and pictures; these are the centerpieces of the average online fan space.

One of the critical factors of fandom is the concept of consumption, as it is “so essential to ideas about who fans are and what they want [...] after all, the most basic act of being a fan is consuming the object of fandom” (Stanfill, 77). Consumption in fandom is usually seen from an emotional perspective, but it can also intersect with consumerism and investing time and energy in online spaces and conventions. Emotional attachment to media presented to fans is evident through the reactions expressed online and through first-hand experience. The purchasing of memorabilia connected with a beloved arts and leisure series is an example, as “purchasing that can help a fan ‘bring together the fragments of a relationship with the fans’ icons’, enhance their self-image, and hence address their innate need or a symbolic para-social [a one-sided relationship with a person or a character on screen] attachment to screen stories and characters” (Kottasz, Bennett, 16).

Emotional attachment in fandom intersects with the phenomenon of parasocial relationships because of the increased use of social media. Relationships between consumers and fans have changed as social media has allowed celebrities to become more intimate and open about their personal lives. A study conducted by Marwick and Boyd (2011) demonstrates that different communication strategies are being used on Twitter by celebrities, and even influencers now that they are becoming more mainstream. Some “send very factual tweets, related to their career and news. Others go much further and communicate about their private and sentimental

life, a photograph of their meal, or even their [newly] manicured fingernails” (Derbaix, Korchia, 117). All of these factors give the sense of having a backstage pass without having to be there in person. On that same note, Bennett (2012) also observes that a powerful way for fans to commit to an artist is to cultivate “the feeling of direct and personalized dialogue on a social network” (Derbaix, Korchia, 117).

Fans also access media that centers around a certain celebrity, such as blogs, fan accounts, and unofficial websites. Having followers and fans dedicated to celebrities, characters, etc., can strengthen exposure, profit, and the chance of boosting the marketing of the media brand. The *Star Wars* fandom is a primary case of emotional attachment, from the increase of the once-mocked religion, Jediism (Lynden, 775) to their hatred for the prequel trilogy, resulting in fan-made recuts (Lynden, 780). This study proves that fans are emotionally attached to the degree that Alexander the Great, an early focus of fandom, and his managers could have only dreamed of.

In late 2017-2018, research done by Rita Kottasz and Roger Bennet, associate professor, and professor of marketing, respectively, at Kingston University, asked fans to self-report their reactions to screen-related shows. This research was in response to a phenomenon called Post-Series Depression (PSD); defined as “a feeling that encapsulates a sense of loss and emptiness, and also, in the words of Feldman (2001, 51), a ‘yearning, longing and desire to experience an emotional state suffused with a melancholic euphoria’ ” (Kottasz, Bennett, 16). PSD usually happens when one is binge-watching a series, gets invested, and fully commits to the show until its finale. When the show is over, the individual falls into various forms of melancholy or depression. They might also seek to find spaces related to their favorite

media or similar content (such as Discord servers, Youtube videos, fan fiction, fan accounts, etc.), in hopes that a sequel will come soon.

Power Dynamic Between Fans and Corporations

As successful as the fandom scene is and has been, corporations and mainstream media primarily see fans through a capitalist lens, rather than an emotional one, and view fandom as an opportunity to profit off of and exploit fans by using fan consumption and desire to their advantage. Fan work is easily capitalized on by the media industry by taking advantage of how technological fan practice “predate(s) contemporary tools and platforms more visible and easier to aggregate” (Stanfill, 133). Technology, the internet, and pop culture are accessible by the public and easily consumed and edited on social media platforms, which corporations can take advantage of and exploit. Fans are considered commodities because of the emotional labor they put into generating content for free, which benefits corporations. One has to live for the other, but there are uncomfortable power imbalances within these structures.

Not only do corporations exploit fans for their emotional labor, but the fans themselves also have a long history of involuntarily becoming targets of mockery and bullying in mainstream media, academic settings, and pop culture. Media portrayal of fans in shows like *The Big Bang Theory* (Booth, 83), movies like *Fanboys* (Booth, 86), and parodies such as *Galaxy Quest* and William Shatner’s *Saturday Night Live* sketch in 1986 (Stanfill, 58), are notorious for mocking fans as hyperactive, entitled, rabid, with nothing else going on in their lives and comparable to children; one of the only ways for a fan to redeem themselves is to give up their passions and “grow up” (Stanfill, 56).

Fans are no strangers to being exploited by Hollywood and business people who have little to no knowledge of how fans operate. Poorly written and produced live-action adaptations of cartoons, anime, and video games (i.e.: *The Last Airbender*, *Dragonball Evolution*, *Jem and the Holograms*, *Death Note*, *Resident Evil*, and *Halo*) have a history of disrespecting fans, resulting in a refusal to acknowledge their existence on social media and fan rants being released on sites like YouTube.

Another part of fandom that gets easily exploited by non-fan-friendly businesses and Hollywood is fanfiction. In Abigail de Kosnik's "Should Fan Fiction Be Free?", there is a debate on whether or not fanfiction should be monetized. Some argue against this idea, as it "didn't emerge bottom-up from the fan culture itself...[Commercializing fanfiction company, FanLib] was a business [not run by fans] [...] run by a board of directors that was entirely composed of men. This last point is especially relevant when you consider that the overwhelming percentage of people who write fan fiction are women" (De Kosnik, 119). One fan stated that the monetization was going to arrive anyway, but they argue that they would "rather it was fan-creators getting the benefit of the [money], not some cutthroat entrepreneur who doesn't care about our community except as a market niche."

This debate resurfaced after the theatrical release of *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015), based on the book by E.L. James (2012). The film adaptation was an original retelling of James' 2005 *Twilight* fan fiction, *Master of the Universe*, after it received attention from the fan fiction world and book talent agencies. The series was met with many controversies, from the storytelling and perpetuating stereotypes of fan fiction writers as "lazy, lacking talent, and leeching off 'real' creativity of others" to the poor depiction of bondage, domination, sadism, and

masochism (BDSM) and the romanticization of abusive relationships (Jones, 417). Fanfiction writers, supporters, and those who are in BDSM spaces spoke up against how the movie and the fanfiction that the movie was based on do not reflect how those spaces operate regularly, and that it depicts BDSM in a negative light. Radical feminists have also protested how the book portrays normalizing abusive relationships and their stance against BDSM due to their arguments of kink endorsing violence against women.

Corporations have a history of commodifying fan work via plagiarism and reproduction of their work published on their properties without their knowledge and permission. Disney and Cartoon Network have been under fire for stealing fan-made work and placing it in their shows and advertisements without the artists' consent for *Star Wars*, *Moana*, and *Steven Universe*. Because fans typically do not hold the intellectual property rights to the media on which they are basing and creating fan works, companies see this as a way to claim copyright because it is still technically their intellectual property. Thus, they take ownership of fan-made work without permission.

Bills like Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and Protect IP Act (PIPA) from late 2011-2012 were supported by Hollywood and the United State Congress as a means to enact mass censorship and the blacklisting of many websites such as Google, Twitter, Reddit, and Tumblr based on copyright laws, which would have prevented fans from creating and sharing fanart in online spaces as easily. Fans protested by refusing to log online and boycotting online spaces in 2012, and the bills were not passed. If they had been, this would have been a threat to the Internet at large, not just online fandom culture.

Legal battles can also complicate things for fandoms, especially when it comes to copyright. The Copyright Clause, also known as Article I, Section 8, Clause 8 of the United States Constitution, “identifies the purpose of copyright protection as ‘To promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts,’ which is accomplished “by securing for limited Times to Authors and Inventors the exclusive Right to their respective Writings and Discoveries” (Stanfill, 107). This Clause means that exclusivity encourages more science and arts, as it serves a public good; exclusive roles have a limited time (initially fourteen years) before the intellectual property (IP) and its materials become freely available to the public domain, which is seen as a “cultural and intellectual commons, from which creators benefit, and which their works, in turn, enrich (Hyde 2010; Toula and Lisby 2014)” (Stanfill, 108). Corporations do not necessarily prevent fan art from popping up on the Internet in real-time. At the same time, popular films, television shows, etc. are released and consumed, but they can be found and taken down for infringement.

Because corporations that own IP are favored by the law, the corporations themselves are the owners of the content, rather than their employees who are doing the content creation. Today’s definition and standards of copyright are that “rights holders have control by default over their copyrighted materials” (Stanfill, 110). Once a creator signs a contract with a corporation, any form of intellectual property that they create automatically belongs to the corporation and not the author; this can jeopardize the creator and their team financially. Cease and desist letters have been sent by corporations such as Paramount and Fox in the past “to owners of fan websites that included (nontransformed) sounds, images, and clips” (Pearson, 91).

Terms of Use is a double standard that protects the rights of corporations, which is in contrast to the rights of fans who create fan art related to the media the corporations produce.

While fans are subject to legal repercussions for borrowing elements of intellectual property from corporations, corporations have the final say because the works belong to them with little chance of reclamation. One notable incident in which corporations took advantage of copyright and backed down was when Warner Brothers threatened to sue a twelve-year-old girl running a *Harry Potter* fansite for copyright infringement. There is no clear information on whether the company gave a formal apology or recompense, but they ended up retreating after backlash (Stanfill, 115-6).

Trouble in “Inclusive” Paradise: Who Gets to “Escape” from Reality? Who Gets to Be Taken Seriously in Spaces?

Consumption within fandom is usually seen from an emotional perspective, and it intersects with investing personal time and energy in online and in-person conventions. As a result, corporations have less control than they used to over the content and how fans are consuming and engaging with it, which has opened the doors for issues to simmer and explode within fandom.

Stanfill discusses that the majority of the average, major fanbases in the West consist of cisgender, heterosexual, white men (Stanfill, 305). However, with whiteness being the default of fan culture, especially in international fanbases like Japanese and Korean entertainment and lifestyles, this demographic can intersect with white/white adjacent women, white/white-adjacent LGBTQ+, and disability/neurodivergence. Being a “fangirl” also tends to be synonymous with white, cisgender, middle-class from a Western lens, mostly from the United States and the United Kingdom (Pande, 320).

Fandoms heavily rely on escapism to get away from the harshness of the reality of the world. Unfortunately, in fan spaces that are predominantly white, heterosexual, and/or male, it comes with a multitude of challenges, such as racism, misogyny, and negative treatment of LGBTQ+ communities. Misogynoir (the hatred, dislike, and erasure of Black women in all forms of history, media, and society) and colorism are also prevalent in these spaces since every issue regarding identity tends to intersect. Discrimination and fetishization in online fandom spaces are reinforced via stereotypes, whitewashing/racially altering characters of color in fan art to Eurocentric beauty standards, abuse, harassment, and death threats toward actors/actresses, artists, content creators, and fictional characters in marginalized groups.

Racism

Rebecca Wanzo, a professor of American Culture Studies and Department Chair of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Washington University in St. Louis, states that “Fans studies [...] has focused on people who reject the mainstream, not those rejected by it, putting disproportionate emphasis on those who have a choice” (Stanfill, 23). Regarding race in fandoms, white and white-adjacent people within these spaces have the option to engage or are allowed to be ignorant about race, which is not normally seen as a major deal the way it is outside of the fandom.

Stanfill also argues that corporations like SyFy and ESPN have a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy when it comes to talking about race; discussing race on their websites would assume that “only racists notice race. Sites assume that race will only come up as a result of racism” (Stanfill, 27). She also mentions that the internet is often perceived as “race-free,” with research showing that “online spaces are presumed to be nonracial until they are racialized by the

presence of users of color” (Stanfill, 26). Whiteness is a default in the online world, and talks of race are usually looked down upon and overlooked, stripping the concept of being “colorblind.” In most cases, Hollywood has disproportionately favored white actors and predominantly white casts, while leaving out opportunities for people of color (Richardson, 45-6).

In the essay, “ ‘Where Do You Want to Go Today?’ Cybernetic Tourism, the Internet, and Transnationality,” the University of Michigan media and cinema studies professor, Lisa Nakamura, presents the issue of how internet-centric companies like MCI, AT&T, and Microsoft portray cyberspace as a “postethnic America,” and a utopian liberal and progressive society, in which race and diversity are nonexistent and obsolete online (Nakamura, 255-6). Advertisements also portray a utopia of human diversity while sharing the exact likeness of corporate products like Coca-Cola, with no race involved, only “just minds” (Nakamura, 263). On the contrary, paralleling what Stanfill, Sperb, Wanzo, and Richardson argued, this “utopia” of a post-racial America is easily debunked with the reality that achieving equality and equity is far from over.

When fans of color address these issues taking place in different media, specifically pointing out harmful stereotypes and erasure against marginalized groups, retaliation often follows. Though some backlash is in response to why the media would allow these types of things in the first place, others resort to attacking and gaslighting those who highlight these issues while simultaneously defending said media as “nostalgic” and “historical.” When Disney decided to ban *Song of the South* (1946) in 1986 due to its racist content, bootleg films were distributed, and online discourse collectively defended the film and convinced the company to release a DVD. Defenders justified re-releasing the movie as “innocent” and “only a children’s

movie,” heavily relying on nostalgia rather than critically examining why content like this was offensive then and now (Sperb, 25).

Offensive content found in children’s media, both old and new, is not taken as seriously by the mainstream media and in online fandom discourse. Excuses like “it was a product of its time,” or “it’s just a cartoon/kids’ show,” are used to dismiss concerns that viewers, especially young children, might believe that the behavior displayed on the screen is acceptable and that this is what the real world is and should be.

When the 2016 *Ghostbusters* reboot trailer was released on YouTube, actress Leslie Jones was subjected to misogynoir on Twitter with racist tweets about her character, Patty. It is argued that “popular culture producers increasingly embrace ‘haters’ as part of the fandom,” and that the study of anti-fandom includes “discussions centered on hatred for a character and the actor who plays the despised character [...], campaigns to get actors fired from TV shows, and conflicts between fans, as well as with cast and crew members, in public forums and social media” (Jones, 422). Although it is true that anti-fandom also plays a role in fans, a line must be drawn between what is encouraged and condemned by both fans and the companies in charge of production. Both fandom and anti-fandom tend to be harsher toward Black women and girls, who are usually excluded or not considered to be what the average fan looks like.

Responses like those from right-wing, former Breitbart technology editor Milo Yiannopolous about Jones not “understanding free speech” (Jones, 423) were used as a way to justify what the trolls tweeted about Jones. Yiannopolous was also accused of encouraging his fans to go over to Jones’ account and post racist memes and slurs toward her. Free speech is not the issue, it is how it is used online, especially toward marginalized people and groups that are

either side/token characters at best, or seen as inhuman, second-class citizens, invisible, and background characters at worst.

Misogyny

Within nerd and geek fan bases that cater to a predominantly male audience, misogyny has been a pivotal force. Al Valentin, a Boricua Ph.D. candidate in gender studies at Rutgers University, observed that in Let's Play Culture, "streamable videos where players record themselves playing a video game with added commentary to share their experiences with other gamers" (Valentin, 196), women are policed for the way they presented themselves as "Girl Gamers," which can range from female content creators like Melonie Mac imposing their internalized misogyny by separating herself from " 'fake geek girls' who only play 'Tetris on their phones,'" to Twitch streamers like Amouranth, who received death threats and harassment that she pretended to be single surfaced (Valentin, 204-5).

Valentin has also observed that Black female gamers are often invisible within the gaming commentary space, especially in the Top 10 YouTube Gamers videos from WatchMojo in 2014 and Business Insider in 2017 (Valentin, 201-2). They also mentioned that YouTube has an algorithm problem due to its bias and hostility toward creators not aligned with whiteness, maleness, and beauty standards centered around white supremacy (Valentin, 196). Even by looking at the front page of YouTube today and many suggested columns, and observing content creators who create topics about fandom and all things nerd and geek culture, it is mostly dominated by white men and those adjacent to whiteness. However, YouTube is fully aware of this issue, so they now promote and fund channels run by those who are marginalized groups and

do not get enough attention. The channels they promote are not only the ones covering fandom and pop culture, but gaming, cooking, and STEM as well.

To possess femininity through a fandom lens can be both a blessing and a curse. Female fans have proven themselves to be the driving force of many forms of media, specifically in movies, TV, and pop music. One example is the identification and attachment of a subject like Clara Bow, combined with female empowerment in response to patriarchal positions of subjectivity, known as Female Spectatorship. Bow's movies and career portrayed her as a symbol of rebellion for her time, causing her to become one of the original "It Girls" for her claim of agency and sexuality. Fan magazines, department stores, and films such as Bow's starring film, *It* (1927), saw an opportunity to market and to create personal desires in challenging gender roles and social divisions during the Roarin' 20s with shorter skirts and haircuts.

However, media catering to female audiences and women taking the room in predominantly male spaces often results in controversy. In the late 2000s to early 2010s, women began seeking more access to nerd and geek culture thanks to *Twilight's* major influence at San Diego Comic-Con (SDCC) in 2009. This resulted in vitriol from the majority demographic, consisting of white, heterosexual, men in their late 20s and early 30s. Panels like "Women Who Kick Ass" in SDCC in 2013 were also met with backlash from that audience, with one attendee shouting "women who talk too much" at panelists (Kohnen, 75-6).

Fandom, according to Stanfill, is seen as "failed masculinity," as representations of fans in the media are portrayed as "failing to live up to expectations of white men but maintain a belief in white men's essential capacity for dominance" (Stanfill, 49). Femininity is looked

down upon in mainstream fandom and pop culture, rooted in the history of misogyny. White, heterosexual, male fans are depicted as “losers” and “insufficiently manly men, infantilized as immaturely fixated on activities suitable only for childhood, and constructed as virgins, sexually deficient, and/or unable to engage in real relationships” (Stanfill, 52).

Nerd and geek culture, as well as shows and movies, also have a history of oversexualizing and objectifying female characters, and giving them poor storylines and writing. Shonen, a demographic in anime and manga catering to young boys, has experienced controversy due to how female characters are portrayed and are typically sidelined in favor of their male counterparts. It has also been accused of overshadowing and erasing female demographics, Shojo, for young girls, and Josei, for older women, in the past decade. Female anime fans have expressed discomfort with how women and girls are portrayed in the source materials, adaptations, and fan art, especially when depicted in a pornographic manner. Still, they are met with backlash from fans who see nothing wrong with them. Sakimichan, a famous fan artist, has faced controversy due to her drastic change in how she portrays women in her work. Her most infamous work in the past year was a depiction of Anya Forger, a six-year-old protagonist from the anime *Spy X Family*, who was aged up and sexualized. Many have confronted her and her fans about how wrong it was while defenders insisted that it was just art.

The most controversial form of misogyny within fandom was #Gamergate. In 2013, game designer Zoe Quinn released a video game called *Depression Quest*, which resulted in controversy because it was released on Steam on the same day as Robin Williams’ passing, along with its poor quality. Quinn’s ex-boyfriend published a blog accusing her of “having a [sexual] relationship with a journalist [from Kotaku] who wrote about the game” (Jones, 424). The rise of

#Gamergate took off when supporters from 4chan and Reddit claimed that there was a corruption and ethics issue within the gaming industry, as it was “being overrun by feminists and social justice warriors, and that [white, male] gamers were maligned victims.” Hate sites were also created and were just as organized as the average fan site (Jones, 424).

This resulted in Quinn getting attacked, alongside feminist game critic Anita Sarkeesian, who had a YouTube channel analyzing sexist tropes in video games. After mocking Gamergate supporters and trolls, game developer Brianna Wu was subjected to rape and death threats. The threats were so dangerous that the police and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) got involved, though; no arrests nor awards were confirmed (Jones, 425).

Gamergate was a prime example of the phenomenon called outrage discourse, as politics were heavily involved in the demand for better representation and involvement of women in video games and in the industry itself. Outrage discourse “involves efforts to provoke emotional responses (e.g.: anger, fear, moral indignation) from the audience through the use of overgeneralizations, sensationalism, misleading or patently inaccurate information, ad hominem attacks, and belittling ridicule of opponents [...] it takes the form of verbal competition, political theater with a scorecard” (Berry, Sobieraj, 7). Outrage discourse is what predominantly men took part in as a response to Gamergate, as it began to usher in the rise of “Anti-Woke” and “Anti-Social Justice Warrior” YouTube and Twitter channels; its later successor, Comicsgate, was created out of outrage culture to speak against the push to diversify comics like Marvel and DC.

Treatment of the LGBTQ+ Community

The representation of the LGBTQ+ community within fan spaces and media is typically hypersexualized, demonized, and subjected to queerbaiting (Bourdaa, 388). Hypersexualization can happen to anyone in the community, but it mainly happens to lesbians and bisexual females, as fantasies about these sexualities tend to overwhelmingly cater to the heterosexual male gaze in media like movies, shows, music, art, and pornography. On the other hand, when conventional attractiveness does not play in their favor, women in these communities tend to be despised and looked down upon for not desiring men.

Fojushi culture, meaning “rotten girl” in Japanese, is notorious for oversexualizing gay, openly or questionable, fictional male characters, mostly in anime and manga, which unfortunately bleeds into real-life perceptions; this includes the overbearing presence and toxicity of shipping culture within fandoms like *My Hero Academia* and the incestuous shipping of the Winchester brothers from *Supernatural*. The former has had a reputation of fans fighting over which pairing is best, and going as far as to insult the creator and the crew for not making them canon. The latter has one of the largest fandoms, and they are known for pairing Dean and Sam Winchester, respectively played by Jensen Ackles and Jared Padalecki.

Historically, Hollywood has portrayed queer or queer-coded characters as villains in their movies. Between the 1930s to the 1960s, Hollywood films had to adhere to rules and guidelines as to what was and was not allowed in movies. This was the Motion Picture Production Code, also known as the Hays Code, named after a Presbyterian elder and then president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), Will Hays,

and enforced by Joseph Breen, the head of the Production Code Administration (PCA). Anything that depicted nudity, sex, profanity, crime, interracial relationships, etc. was strictly prohibited in Hollywood at the time (Masterclass).

Explicit depictions that were not heterosexual were also prohibited. Queer actors, writers, and directors found loopholes to include themselves in the films, but either had to go underground or be portrayed as villains. Even after the code was lifted, films like Disney still had queer-coded villains, specifically during their Renaissance era in the 1990s. Many were depicted with dramatic makeup and inspired by drag queens like Divine, who modeled for the concept art of Ursula from the 1989 animated adaptation of *The Little Mermaid*.

At the same time, queer characters are more often killed or put into tragic situations, typically to advance the plot of a straight person (Bordaa, 397). This trope is known as Bury Your Gays. One tactic that has been used to amplify the trope in modern media is queerbaiting, where audiences are manipulated or tricked into thinking that they are going to get some form of proper representation, only to deceive them by killing one of the characters off or sidelining them by not expanding the stories more.

Queerbaiting has been used in modern television shows like the infamous season three, episode seven of the CW show, *The 100*. This episode had a budding relationship between Commander Lexa and Clarke Griffin, played by Alycia Debnam Carter and Eliza Parker, respectively. Lexa was written as a lesbian, while Clarke was written as bisexual (Bourdaa, 388). The former character's death sparked outrage because it contributed to the Bury Your Gay trope, in which gay characters on American television are killed to advance the plot of a straight character (Bourdaa, 397).

The creator of the show, Jason Rothenburg, issued a statement of apology claiming that “he didn’t think about the social consequences in terms of representation at the time” (Bourdaa, 388). It was not enough for the fans, however, as it sparked several petitions and demanded better representation of lesbian characters, with fan support on social media, notably Twitter and Tumblr, and Clexa-Con, a convention dedicated to the fan-favorite pairing that was ripped apart. *Variety* critic Maureen Ryan accused Rothenberg of misleading fans or raising their expectations unrealistically. She also writes that “promotion is a two-way street: The fans flock to your show and help raise its profile can just easily walk away if they are disappointed or feel they’ve been manipulated” (Stanfill, 2).

Conclusion and Recommendations

In a society where anything can become lucrative with views, likes, shares, and any form of attention, it is ultimately up to the fans to decide whether to consume or ignore. Their power is in the money, the platforms, and the accounts they make online, and they can either make or break a medium. If a company wants to be successful and win over the hearts of fans, they, and other fans, must take the time to listen to what has been overlooked and overdone in terms of tropes presented in media, who gets to be involved behind the scenes and on-screen, etc. Listening to and involving fans from marginalized groups is also essential, as they have been the most excluded in fandom.

Corporations should provide more space for fans to engage with media like convention pop-up experiences, and fans can support other fans that create either fan work or original work inspired by what they enjoy the most.

Corporations

Corporations must do more to understand and involve their fans. If corporations want a better reputation with fans, they must make them feel as if they can immerse themselves in the properties they love. One of the most notable examples is the promotional function of pop-up branded entertainment experiences at San Diego Comic-Con in 2019, incorporating “experimental marketing to promote films or TV” (Kohnen, 159). Despite being corporate-run, the industry has recognized that fans play an important role in why content like NBC’s *The Good Place* and *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, Amazon’s *Carnival Row*, and Fox’s cartoons from their *Animation Domination* lineup had advertisement through interactive experiences outside in front of the convention venue or inside at no extra cost. These sites were built as a “way to encourage fans to interact around the same time experiential marketing did” (Kohnen, 164.).

Corporations must honor fandom when it comes to mainstream adaptations of beloved games and other content. Many recent media that center around transformations based on video games have received positive attention because they think about and, in some cases, involve fans behind the scenes. Animated prequel adaptations of video games like *Arcane: League of Legends* and *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners* have received critical acclaim for adding solid plots and character writing, though they did not create them exclusively for fans of the video game series. Other straightforward video game adaptations such as *Castlevania* and the recent series, *The Last of Us*, have also gained attention from fans and those unfamiliar with the original adaptations. They were praised for staying faithful to their video game counterparts.

Fans

Fans must also do their part to support and uplift independent media. A push to support independent media by following and supporting their work on social media could amplify the stories that are still untold and outnumbered by big corporations that manage to cultivate large fanbases. *Transformative Works and Cultures* is a fan studies journal that focuses on preserving fan culture and addressing the issues that are brought into the spaces and how they are treated by the entertainment industry. They concentrated on fan labor in a special edition in March 2014 (Stanfill, 132).

Blogger and *Teen Vogue* writer Stitch, also known by her social media name Stitch's Media and Mix, analyzes online fandom culture through the lens of race, gender, sexuality, and class. YouTube and social media content creators like Harriyanna Hook, Veridis Joe, Princess Weekes, Cheyenne Lin, Shansphere, Nicque Marina, F.D Signifier, Xiran Jay Zhao, Foreign Man in a Foreign Land, Turkey Tom, basic boi, The Anime Tea, Sherliza Moe, Yara Zayd, Mann of 1000 Thoughts, La'Ron Readus, Imurgency, T1J, voice memos for the void, lil' bill, and Moth's Audio and Videos cover issues regarding problematic tropes and stereotypes pushed onto media, especially from the past two decades, and the majority fandom responses to the addressed issues. These creators also challenge the status quo of what the media and fandom are through the lens of race, gender, sexuality, and class, and why they should be taken more seriously.

Other independent media that seek to make change are anime-centered companies that are putting diversity in the forefront; these companies include but are not limited to: *Saturday AM*, a pro-diversity digital manga magazine similar to Japan's popular anime magazine, *Shonen Jump*, and Noir Caesar, an upcoming indie platform that focuses on placing

marginalized groups in anime settings. Webcomics are also gaining attraction through sites like Webtoon, Lezhin, and Tapas; supporting webcomic artists on social media is just as important. Though the website is currently under construction, *Adorned By Chi* by Jacque Aye is a webcomic series about magical college students from Nigeria. Many of these artists can be found on social media sites like Twitter, Tumblr, YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram, along with artists' official websites and pop-ups in Artist Alley at conventions such as Comic Con and Momocon.

Diversity panels at conventions, such as “Women Who Kick Ass” and “Black Heroes Matter” are also just as important, as they add to the narrative and include marginalized voices that have been silenced and overlooked by the mainstream for decades. Conventions like BlerDCon (Blerd meaning Black Nerd), Indigenous Comic Con, Flame Con, and Small Press Expo also cater to these groups. Diversity panels and conventions can add to the discussion, help tell stories, and get involved behind the scenes of every piece of media rather than waiting for big companies to do the bare minimum.

Fandom caters to people who reject what is popular in the mainstream but does not do the same for those who have been rejected and marginalized. Introducing these studies into mainstream sites like academia and popular culture can benefit everyone, regardless if one is into fandom or not. Because issues regarding harmful biases and their history bleed into society, they also bleed into fan spaces, and they should not be suppressed. Fandom can be fun in most cases, but if it causes someone to get hurt or even traumatized in any way, shape, or form, it must be addressed by both corporations creating the content, and fandoms consuming it. If fans and corporations are serious about making fandom a better environment for all, they must work

together and on themselves individually; after all, fantasy may be fake, but the people who are engaged in it are real.

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