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An Empirical Study on Fandom Culture in Society

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ABSTRACT

Fan culture, also referred to as fandom, is a subculture of popular culture, and characterized by the different fan communities that share a common interest towards a particular aspect of popular culture such as a celebrity, a television series, or a particular book. In this study, we mainly focus on discussing the two things. The first is the role of fandom culture in society and its positive and negative influence on society. The second is how technology has had an impact on fandom. Some scholars have noted the social influence of the entertainment industry, dominated by idols stars and the mass media, as the basis of communication. The present study focuses on Tamil Nadu State primarily and the outcome of the study concept and impacts of fandom culture in society shown by way of using simple percentage analysis. The results of the study show that there is indeed an inseparable and complementary relationship between society, fan culture and technology. This result benefits fandom culture's development and its impact on society. At the same time, the findings also indicate that toxic fandom culture can lead to incorrect values in the society.

Keywords: *Fandom culture, society, technology, toxic fandom, Tamil Nadu and percentage analysis.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Fandom can be traced back as early as the 1900s, when groups of individuals were witnesses publicly mourning the “death” of the fictional character Sherlock Holmes and publishing fan-generated stories in order to “revive” him. Since then, fan communities have grown enormously alongside popular culture. In particular interesting to examine how the mass arrival of the Internet in the 1990s has influenced the behaviour of fans. Thus, fandom culture has taken the world by storm in recent years. The term fandom can be derived from the idea of being a fanatic, or fan of something; most often a celebrity, book series, movies and so on. The purpose of being in a fandom is to connect with content relating to a person's specific interest and then discuss this content with other fans online. From movies and television shows to books and

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video games, fans have formed dedicated communities that celebrate and immerse themselves in their favourite franchise. This unique phenomenon has not only created a sense of belonging and camaraderie among fans but has also given rise to a wide range of opportunities within the entertainment industry. We aim to identify the main academic discourse on fandom culture to single out and categorize the current debates on fandom in society. Thus, the empirical study is based on the opinions by the students.

(A) Objective of the study:

- To study on the concept and origin of fandom culture.
- To study the characteristics of fandom culture.
- To study the concept of fandom culture in India.
- To study the positive and negative influence of fandom culture over the society.

Historically, fan culture has played an enormous role in the creation and development of science fiction and fantasy, and the genres have left a significant impact on the lives of their fans. This paper traces the historical relevance of the fan community as it relates to the evolution of science fiction and fantasy and the contributions fans have made to the genres literary and stylistic conventions.

(B) Statement of the problem:

Fandom culture had had a multifaceted impact on contemporary young people. It provides a social platform for young individuals to find like-minded friends and share common interests and hobbies. This environment of mutual support and communication helps foster a close-knit community among young people, promoting emotional and psychological exchanges and enhancing their sense of belonging. To some extent, the chaos, and behaviours that occur in the “fan circle” have brought negative impacts on the values of some young people, greatly affecting the positive cultivation and practice of their values. Taking the recent highly popular Chinese boy band 10th anniversary concert as an example, nine out of ten trending topics are related to them. One of the topics is about the excessively passionate behaviour of fans: two groups of fans even got into a physical fight in order to secure the best cheering spot for their idols, resulting in further chaos at the venue, which was already in a disordered state. This disorder extends to the online arena, where fan wars are even more intense, featuring various means of verbal disputes and conflicts. In addition to the above-mentioned incidents, forced hugs, hotel voyeurism, airport delays, online verbal violence and excessive obsession to the point of emotional involvement are common negative fan incidents.

“Fan culture” not only has negative impacts but also brings psychological comfort to fans. Idols spread positive energy to fans, some of them take idols as role models and motivate themselves to become like them. At the same time, some fans add happiness and a mental pillar to their lives through idols. They see idols as mirrors, reflecting the person they most want to be.

(C) Literature review:

Fan culture is formed around specific cultural texts and the nature of these texts is what distinguishes fans from nonfans.

According to Henry Jenkins, fan culture is a culture produced by fans and amateurs for circulation through an underground economy and that draws much of its content from the commercial culture.

As Erin Liabo, Senior Director for Viacom Velocity Marketing (MTV), told us, “a fandom is a subculture of diehard super fans with a shared, deeply personal passion for a specific TV show, movies, celebrity, character, book series, band, genre, etc.” Think of the Potterheads (Harry Potter fans), Swifties (loyal to Ms. Taylor Swift) or Whovians (enamoured with popular British series Dr. Who). Liabo pointed out that fandoms are now a qualified consumer target group, and one of the most engaged subcultures in the digital and social media space. She explained: “Social media has fuelled the explosive growth and influence of fandoms, teaching marketers a new culture, and, in some cases a new language along with it”.

(D) Area of the study:

The present study was conducted among college students in the Chennai city. This paper tried to elicit the perception of fandom culture in society, the origin of the fandom culture and its positive and negative influence on the society. The study has conducted especially among the students in the age category from 18 – 25 years. Lot of output was collected by the study respondents (50) and gave their opinion about fandom culture which plays havoc in individual’s life to a great extent.

(E) Methods of the study:

PARTICIPANTS: This study comprised of 50 participants (38 females and 12 males) from Chennai, Tamil Nadu in India. The data was collected through in-depth interviews and an online questionnaire. The ages of the participants varied between 18-25.

PROCEDURE: The in-depth interviews were conducted as per the convenience of the participants, both at their homes and in public places. For online questionnaire, volunteer-response sampling was used. To collect data online, a questionnaire was developed on Google

drive and then shared among friends and acquaintances. The online questionnaire was distributed through the use of social media platforms i.e., WhatsApp and Instagram were used for further participation in the research. All responses were recorded.

The data, gathered from in-depth interviews and online questionnaire was qualitatively analysed. The inputs and collected response were arranged in an orderly for analysis purposes. So the present study thus adopted a descriptive method.

(F) Operational definition:

The present study refers to fandom culture, is a term which describes communities built around a shared enjoyment of an aspect of popular culture, such as books, movies, television shows, bands, sports or sports teams, etc. This study considered students who are pursuing their respective courses various colleges at Chennai.

(G) Sources of data:

This study consists of primary and secondary sources of data. The primary data used online surveys such as primary source (focus group) for interview method and qualitative data collection and framing questionnaire. Secondary sources of data used from different websites, archival records for case studies through websites, and books in the textual analysis. i.e., published reports from books, journals, magazines, case studies and newspapers.

(H) Tools of data collection:

This study is based on the online survey method, using Google form conducted among the students who are pursuing their students.

(I) Scope of limitations:

The present study selected the respondents from college students in the age group of 18 to 25 years. Students who are studying in colleges and universities in different courses, both male and female students (50 nos.) were considered for the present study area respondents. The study area of the present study is colleges and universities at Chennai.

II. ORIGIN OF FANDOM CULTURE

The fandom culture has been around for decades, yet it is still considered to be a recent phenomenon. The term “fan” is derived from the word “fanatic” and was first recorded in 1885 to refer to “baseball die-hards”. It eventually expanded to include any form of entertainment – the way in which many recognise it to be today.

Fans of the series Sherlock Holmes are thought to be the first modern fandom and are credited

with creating some of the first fan fictions as early as 1897. In 1893, Sherlock was “killed off” and fans held public gatherings of mourning for the character. This ultimately separated the casual fan from the fanatic.

Fandom continued to evolve into more areas of interest and communities began hosting events and gatherings where people could come together. The science fiction community took over in the 1930s, creating organizations in every city and even creating their own “fan speak” or jargon. The world science fiction convention has been held every year since 1939.

Fandom evolved from an appreciation for the art from the relationships of characters. Fans were more interested in the potential connections characters were making with others than the written story in some cases. They became tangible people that fans could relate to and connect with and rewrite to fit their narrative. Fan art and fan fiction were created surrounding fandom such as Star Trek in the 70s and only became more popular as media became more accessible. By the mid-70s, it was possible to meet fans at science fiction conventions who did not read science fiction, but only viewed it on film or TV.

Anime and manga fandom began in the 1970s in Japan. In America, the fandom also began as an offshoot of science fiction fandom, with fans bringing imported copies of Japanese manga to conventions. Before anime began to be licensed in the American would leak copies of anime movie and subtitle them to exchange with friends in the community, thus marking the start of fansubs. While the science fiction and anime fandom grew in media, the Grateful Dead subculture that emerged in the late 1960s to the early 1970s created a global fandom around hippie culture that would have lasting impacts on society and technology.

The furry fandom refers to the fandom for fictional anthropomorphic animal characters with human personalities and characteristics. The concept of the furry originated at a science fiction convention in 1980, when a drawing of a character from Steve Gallacci’s *Albedo Anthropomorphic* initiated a discussion of anthropomorphic characters in science fiction novels, which in turn initiated a discussion group that met at science fiction and comics conventions.

Additional subjects with significant fandom include comics, animated cartoons, video games, sports, music, films, television shows, pulp magazines, soap operas, celebrities, and game shows.

(A) Characteristics of fandom culture:

- As its core, fandom culture refers to the passionate and dedicated following of a particular franchise or intellectual property.

- Fans often engage in various activities such as attending conventions, creating fan art, writing fan fiction, participating in cosplay, and engaging in online discussions and debates. These activities not only showcase their love and appreciation for a particular franchise but also contribute to the overall growth and success of the media industry.
- Fandom culture has the power to shape and influence popular media, with studios incorporating fan feedback into future projects. For instance, the Marvel Cinematic Universe owes much of its success to the passionate following of comic book fans who have supported and championed these characters for decades. Similarly, the “Harry Potter” series became a global phenomenon not only because of J.K. Rowling’s brilliant storytelling but also due to the dedicated fanbase that propelled it to new heights.
- With the rise of fandom culture, new career opportunities have emerged within the entertainment industry.
- Additionally, fandom culture has paved the way for the rise of fan-driven content creation. Platforms like YouTube and Twitch have become popular outlets for fans to share their thoughts, reactions, and theories about their favourite franchises. This has given rise to a new breed of content creators’ known as “fan influencers”.

III. FANDOM CULTURE AND TECHNOLOGY

Total respondents selected for the study reveal the role of technology in fandom culture in the study area. Students who have been attending the survey, 94 percent of them mentioned that technology plays a vital role in increasing the fandom culture in the society. And only 6 percent of the students stated that it is not so, but other aspects (passion and so on) are also related to it. Thus, the rise of the internet created new and powerful outlets for fandom. The purpose of this study is to understand and follow the evolution that new media and mass communication has had on the culture of fandom, social fan relationships and just culture wise overall, to see the ultimate change that society has had on these demographics when it comes to fandom.

Many processes, such as forming fan groups and creating fan culture, require communication and interaction. However, due to the limited means of communication, in the pre-internet era, communication between fans was always hindered in various ways, either by long distances or inconvenient schedules. But, now it is very easy to connect and communicate with fan groups due to the advancement in modern technology which can be clearly seen by the majority of the respondents accepted it.

Henry Jenkins argues that the emergence of digital networks has made it possible for fans who

might not otherwise have met to have meaningful conversations and has created a new context that fans can share. It is reasonable to declare that those barriers mentioned above haven't been broken in a digital network environment where the degree of fan interaction is much higher than in the pre-internet era, as is the degree of fan culture development.

IV. FANDOM CULTURE IN INDIA

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

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

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

Participation in fandom is very common amongst Indian young adults. Just like many fans around the world, there are several Indian fans who engage in fan activities. There are numerous Indian fan pages dedicated to certain fandoms, which help Indian fans to have a transcultural experience as it combines Indian culture and fan culture. Additionally, fans in India

portray their fan activity through the social media platforms in the form of fan art, videos, memes, etc. The scope for outdoor fandom activity in India is limited as there is lesser number of offline fan spaces such as fan conventions as compared to the western countries.

V. POSITIVE EFFECTS OF FANDOM CULTURE ON SOCIETY

Fandom culture has several positive impacts on our society:

- *Entertainment and stress relief:* Among 50 respondents 26 (i.e., 52%) of students says that fandom machine world. Thus, it serves as a source of entertainment and stress relief for people. It provides an escape from the demands of everyday life, offering comfort and relaxation. aids the society through entertainment and stress relief, which is essential for the people in today's
- *Economic Growth:* Among 50 respondents 8 (i.e., 16%) of students believes that fandom helps the society by improving its economy. The entertainment industry, a significant part of pop culture, contributes to economic growth by providing jobs, tourism, and revenue. It supports countless careers in various creative and technical fields. Fan's purchase power is also demonstrated when their object of admiration makes a new production, whether it is music, a film or other forms of achievement. For example, when a singer or a band releases a new album, fan bases will immediately devote themselves to negotiation with the publisher to get the lowest price possible and design special merchandises like slogans, canvas bags, bottles, etc. These merchandise, with beautiful pictures of the singer or band on them, must be purchased with the album, which serves to attract as many fans as possible to purchase the album, Baidu Jeon Jungkook bar, a fan base for the K-pop sensation BTS' member Jungkook, purchased a total of 166,200 Map of the Soul: Persona albums after its release.
- *Culture exchange:* From the total respondents 7 (i.e., 14%) of them says that fandom culture plays an important role in culture exchange of the country. Thus, pop culture fosters cultural exchange. As it spreads globally, it allows people from different cultures to learn about and appreciate each other's traditions, customs, and art forms.
- *Promotion of diversity and inclusivity:* Among the total respondents 6 (i.e., 12%) of the respondents believes that fandom culture aids to the promotion of diversity and inclusivity. Pop culture often celebrates diversity, breaking down stereotypes and promoting inclusivity. Through various forms of media, it showcases characters and stories from different backgrounds, encouraging tolerance and understanding among

different groups.

The remaining respondents are 5 (i.e., 6%) of them says other advantages such as *inspiration an aspiration*: Pop culture can inspire individuals to pursue their passions in the entertainment industry or other fields can motivate others to strive for success and personal growth; *social awareness*: It can raise awareness about important social issues. TV shows, movies, and music often address topics like discrimination, mental health, an environmental concern, sparking discussions and encouraging positive change; and *charitable initiative*: Celebrities often use their popularity to support charitable causes, raising funds and awareness for various social issues.

VI. NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF FANDOM CULTURE ON SOCIETY

Fandom, while often entertaining and influential, can also have negative effects on society.

Here are some the adverse impacts:

- *Influence on risky behaviours*: Of the 50 students who were considered for the study, 17 (i.e., 34%) students mentioned that the major negative effects of fandom culture on society is influence on risky behaviours. Certain elements of pop culture can glamorize risky behaviours such as drug use, excessive drinking, or dangerous stunts. This can lead to real-world consequences, particularly among impressionable youth.
- *Political polarization*: Among the total 50 respondents 13 (i.e., 26%) has voted that political polarization is the major impact of fandom on society. Fandom culture can sometimes reinforce political divisions by promoting certain ideologies or silencing opposing viewpoints. This can contribute to polarization and social discord. So, let us start by considering the example of Donald Trump. Not a traditional politician, he was a celebrity who, upon deciding to run for office, automatically became a celebrity politician. He had pre-existing fans when he hosted The Apprentice who helped bolster his cult of personality on reality TV. But when Trump ran for President of the United States he certainly generated a lot more ‘fan’ activity. Thus, Trump was a celebrity brand who became a celebrity politician.
- *Erosion of privacy*: Of the 50 students who were considered for the study, 10 (i.e., 20%) students mentioned that erosion of privacy of an individual is the main negative impact of fandom culture on society. Celebrity culture and reality TV can contribute to a culture of voyeurism and intrusion into the private lives of individuals; this can have severe consequences for the mental health and well-being of those in the public eye.

- *Reinforcement of stereotypes*: Among the total 50 students of the study, 8 (i.e., 16%) of them stated that reinforcement of stereotypes is the major disadvantage of fandom culture on the society. Pop culture can perpetuate stereotypes based on race, gender, sexuality, and other characteristics. These stereotypes can lead to discrimination, bias, and a lack of understanding among different groups within society.

Thus, the remaining four percentages of students argued that others are the major negative impact of fandom culture in society. Such as *consumerism and materialism*: Pop culture often promotes consumerism, encouraging people to prioritize the acquisition of material possessions. This can lead to overspending, debt, and a focus on material wealth at the expense of other values; and *body image issues*: unrealistic beauty standards promoted by pop culture, especially in the fashion and entertainment industries, can contribute to body image issues, low self-esteem, and eating disorders.

VII. FINDINGS

The present study shows that among 50 respondents of the study 16 (i.e., 32%) of the students stated that fandom culture has a positive impact on society by promoting diversity, raising awareness of important issues, inspiring individuals, fostering creativity, and contributing to economic growth. It has the power to unite people, encourage positive change, and provide enjoyment in our daily lives. And then 10 (i.e., 20%) respondents stated that the fandom culture has a negative impact on society. Though, it has many positive aspects, it also has the potential to negatively impact society in various ways. It is important for individuals and society as a whole to critically analyze and balance the influences of fandom culture to mitigate these adverse effects. While, the remaining 27 (i.e., 54%) of the students was not sure about the impact of the fandom culture on society.

It is also conferred that out of 50 respondents of the study, 36 (i.e., 72%) of the respondents stated that fandom culture contribute to the mental and physical illness among individuals. Such as body image issues, low self-esteem, violence and lead to more tolerant attitude toward aggression and so on. And the remaining 14 (i.e., 28%) supported that fandom culture does not contribute to any kind of mental or physical illness towards a society.

By analysing the study the connection between the individual and their fandom can be known by scaling it from 0 to 6. The result of the study shows that only 8% of the respondents is extremely connected with their fandom and 28% of the respondents stated that they are not at all connected with their fandom. And from the findings an average scaling is 3 where the 20% respondents are connected with their fandom.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Fandom plays a significant role in the lives of young adults, who consider themselves fans of a particular media object. The digital revolution has transformed the whole experience of being a fan. It has greatly expanded the opportunities for the fans to be engaged in their fandom. There are various online communities and forums dedicated to various objects of fandom, which provide tremendous opportunities to the fans to express their love for their fandom.

The findings of the present study demonstrated that some Western media-fandoms seemed to be more widely appreciated among young adults. The participants stated that they watched Indian, Western and other countries media-contents, but when asked about their fandoms, most of them named Western contents and especially East –Asia countries like China, South Korea or Republic of Korea, Japan, and Thailand. To get engaged in those kinds is also sought out by many young adults because there seems to be a charm in watching the media content in English language and is considered popular culture at present days.
