

# Gender as a Variable of Identity in the Fan Culture

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Giener, Lucija

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Sveučilište J.J. Strossmayera u Osijeku

Filozofski fakultet Osijek

Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij Engleskog jezika i književnosti i  
Sociologije

Lucija Giener

## **Rod kao varijabla identiteta u fan kulturi**

Završni rad

Mentor: doc. dr. sc. Goran Milić

Osijek, 2023.

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Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

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Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Dr. Goran Milić, Assistant Professor

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Lucija Jener; 01222356987  
Ime i prezime studenta, JMBAG

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## **Abstract**

The goal of this paper is to describe and explore how and in what depth gender is a part of identity in fan culture, what, if any, are some gender differences in fandoms, how much identity and fan culture are actually connected, and what are some good and bad aspects of that. It is written based on previous scholarly research, and backed up by my personal experience combined with critical thinking during years of online presence. The general hypothesis assumes and compares differences between the behavior of women (especially teenage girls), for example, during pop music concerts and men during sports (especially football) matches. Even though the first type of behavior is considered childish and overdramatic, the second is completely normalized, which leads to the conclusion that the only difference is gender. The end of the paper will summarize all arguments and findings, and answer to what extent the topics of identity, gender, fan culture, and mental health are interconnected.

**Key words:** fan culture; fandom; identity; gender; sexism



## 1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to describe what fan culture is in general, explain the importance of it in modern society and analyze and compare differential aspects of sex and gender within contemporary fan culture.

For this paper, two different types of research were used: examination of scientific and other research papers about this and similar topics, and personal experience gathered over years in different online communities and fandoms. At this point, a definition of an aca-fan thus seems to be in order. Matt Hills explains the term “scholar-fan” or “aca-fan” as a scholar who also happens to be a fan or becomes a fan through the cases that they research. Furthermore, Nicolle Lamerichs describes this type of research in more detail: “The methodology that the aca-fan deploys is a strand of auto-ethnography or participant observation, depending on how the researcher uses his or her experiences and contacts. As in any type of insider’s ethnography, being an aca-fan allows for many levels of participation.” (Lamerichs 2018: 52). As a researcher who had spent a certain amount of her teenage years in different fan communities, I have to add that I will do my best to be as objective as possible when using references that I am familiar with this way.

The paper is divided into four parts and structured as follows. In the first part, some of the key concepts, like culture, fan culture, sex, and gender, are introduced for a better understanding of the paper. Other parts revolve around behavioral patterns of the male/female dichotomy of fan culture, but not without mention of gender as a fluid social construct. It will also touch upon a very current problem of the connection between mental illnesses and social media, as most of fan activities take place online in huge communities. All of these topics revolve around a very important theme, namely identity. Identity is the major topic of the paper, and as all other parts center around it, it is really important to help understand it. Just like culture in general, fan culture can help shape (especially young) people’s opinions on many topics and ideologies. Their sense of identity expression (which they can *learn* from fan culture) is intertwined with concepts of gender, lifestyle, sexuality and worldviews.

## 2. Gender and Sex

Professor, psychologist, and sexologist John Money is usually regarded as the person who introduced the difference between sex and gender to the academic world, based on his research on human sexual behavior and gender in the 1960s. However, he did not invent anything new, as a myriad of evidence from all walks of life exists to support his ideas, showing how social norms of gender expression change throughout history. For example, high-heeled shoes, which are today associated with femininity and women, were during different time periods worn only for men, as a symbol of power and wealth:

(. . .) King Louis XIV of France decreed that only nobility could wear heels. Seventeenth-century portraits of King Louis XIV depict the various intricate heels worn by the king and they were often decorated with miniature battle scenes. They came to be known as “Louis heels”, and were in the region of five inches tall. Louis’s decree *les talons rouge* prohibited anyone but the nobility to wear red shoes, which furthermore could be no higher than his own. (K. 2015: 6)

Furthermore, in difference to today’s modern society, many ancient cultures recognized among themselves more than two genders, such as Hawaiian indigenous society and some Indonesian ethnic groups: “Indonesia recognizes a third gender, *waria*. (. . .), the Bugis (numbering around 3 million people) recognize five genders. Their language offers these five: *makkunrai* (“female women”), *oroani* (“male men”), *calalai* (“female men”), *calabai* (“male women”) and *bissu* (“transgender priests”).” (“Exploring the History of Gender Expression”: 2019)

In the last decade, however, thanks to the enormous influence of social media and rapid changes in ideas of identity, especially among younger generations, “gender versus sex” discourse has never been more popular.

Even though opinions are heavily divided, especially between conservative and liberal groups, a basic definition of what sex and gender are is quite simple. Sex refers to a person’s biological reproductive organs and whether they produce female or male gametes. It is something a person is most commonly born with and is only partially changeable during some gender-affirming surgeries. As McDermott and Hatemi (2011: 89) suggest, “(. . .) biological sex, which, short of surgical and hormonal intervention, remains constant for most individuals across their life span. While there are some individuals who undergo sex changes and a not-trivial number who are born

intersex, most people possess biological organs of reproduction that distinguish them as male or female.”

On the other hand, gender is a purely social construct that consists of roles, rules, and characteristics that traditionally differentiate men and women. Lippa (2005) suggests that the notion of gender relates to traits of masculinity or femininity, including such characteristics as sex-typed interests and occupations, appearance, mannerisms, and nonverbal behavior.

These characteristics are present in every aspect of society. Some of these are: women wear dresses and other “feminine” clothes, men do not; women use make up, spend time and money on personal hygiene, talk more than men, men are more knowledgeable in certain topics that are considered to be “masculine”, such as technology, business, and engineering, etc.

A specifically interesting aspect of how gender roles are presented is described in Robin Lakoff’s 1975 book *Language and Woman’s Place*, in which she compares women’s and men’s speech in many ways, such as: usage of empty adjectives, avoidance of cursing, usage of tag questions, so-called “speaking in italics” (using tone for emphasis of certain words) etc. By these characters Lakoff has describe, we can conclude that women are stereotypically more polite and talk about “less important” things.

Throughout history and especially since the rise of feminism in the 1920s, gender roles have been challenged and changed. Slowly but surely, the binary system is becoming more of a spectrum. Gender is more associated with identity and personal preference, which are unique to every individual and their own choice of expression.

For example, S. Feeney, N. K. Freeman and K. Schaffer had written an article called “Gender Expression and Identity” in the journal *YC Young Children* about how should educators behave towards children who are learning and exploring their gender identity, in which they added a glossary of terms. Two very important terms from that glossary are *gender identity* and *gender expression*:

Gender identity defines “how a person self-identifies their gender, which may include man, woman, genderqueer, or other gender identities. A person’s understanding of their gender identity can begin as early as age 2” (Feeney et al. 2019: 85). Gender expression, on the

other hand, defines “the way in which a person expresses their gender identity, typically through their appearance, affect, behavior, and activities” (Feeney et al. 2019: 85).

While rejecting traditional societal norms and searching for a new meaning for the concept of identity, society experiments with presentation and expressiveness. Social media and pop culture might have been two of the biggest influences to this paradigm shift, as they also mostly promote individuality and unique identities, which consequently erases traditional communities, that consist of larger groups. Fan culture is especially interesting in that sense, as it combines the two, consisting of different, bigger groups that consist of individuality-driven people.

## **2.1. Culture and fan culture**

The Cambridge Dictionary defines culture as “the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time and the attitudes, behavior, opinions, etc. of a particular group of people within society. It is, however, one of the most complex themes of modern sociology, as it is so diverse and has so many countless aspects that simply defining it is never enough. Scientists have devoted their entire lives to trying to describe only small portions of it because it can go in so many different directions that starting in the beginning can never go in one linear path towards the end. Culture has been present in the world for as long as humans have been, from the oldest parietal arts to Internet slang.

Fan culture is one of those countless aspects, and a rather interesting one. Even though it is mostly considered to be a part of social media culture, which is again an example of participatory culture, it has deeper roots.

Participatory culture is a term that is often used for designating the involvement of users, audiences, consumers and fans in the creation of culture and content. Examples are the joint editing of an article on Wikipedia, the uploading of images to Flickr or Facebook, the uploading of videos to YouTube and the creation of short messages on Twitter or Weibo. (Fuchs 2014:57)

The participatory culture model challenges consumer culture, and that is how fan culture actually proves its existence to be older than its online presence. In the following pages, some historical

examples of fan culture and fan behavior will be presented to exemplify its evolution and more importantly, to show that the aspect of gender has always been present in this variable of culture.

## 2.2. Lisztomania

One of the most famous historical fan culture occurrences is the one directed toward Franz Liszt, the Hungarian composer from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Even though both men and women enjoyed his music, his female admirers were more extreme, as they would also battle to get his gloves and handkerchiefs. Alan Walker writes about it in greater detail in his book *“Franz Liszt: The virtuoso years, 1811-1847”*: “His portrait was worn on brooches and cameos. Swooning lady admirers attempted to take cuttings of his hair, and they surged forward whenever he broke a piano string in order to make it into a bracelet. Some of these insane female “fans” even carried glass phials about their persons into which they poured his coffee dregs. Others collected his cigar butts, which they hid in their cleavages.” (Walker 1987: 372). It is visible from this that women were the majority of Liszt’s admirers, even though he was liked among men as well. It is also important to mention that the question of women’s sexuality was a huge taboo, making it seem like normal human experiences were a sign of hysteria and other mental illnesses.

Furthermore, gender norms were very strict:

“Even as women were encouraged to develop an aesthetic sensibility, they were vulnerable to accusations of overemotionality. You can see this double standard clearly in public debates about the “feminization of culture” in the 1890s. Many middle-class men felt that cultural activities involving literature, art, and music were the foundation of any great civilization, but, for them, the fact that culture had become the domain of women meant that it was also inadequate, a frail and pale imitation of civilization’s promise. Reconciling “manly” responsibility in the public sphere with a love for music increasingly became fraught with difficulty. (Cavicchi 2014: 66)

The writer Heinrich Heine was the first to use the term Lisztomania in one of his feuilletons.

The Epilogue, which introduces Heine's term, "Lisztomania," sums up Liszt's love of and devotion to instrumental music as "a poetic language . . . [that] readily expresses everything

in us that transcends the commonplace, everything that eludes analysis, everything that stirs in the inaccessible depths of imperishable desires and feelings for the infinite. (Dixon 1991: 332)

Of course, it was far from what was considered a social norm in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, making it quite a mystical phenomenon. Today, we know that Franz Liszt was simply attractive to women. “He was very good-looking, with strong features, luxuriant hair and a brooding air“ (caeciliajane@gmail.com 2019).

In today’s society, the types of behavior presented above are considered almost normal, and a lot of it is encouraged by managers and the industry in the form of merchandise. Seeing people wear clothing that represents a musician, actor, athlete or anything similar is far from unusual. Even somewhat bizarre situations, like selling the air from a concert in a plastic bag, are profitable for many, proving that there is a market for it. How, and if it is dependent or reflects the notion of gender, traditionally seen as a dichotomy, is to be discussed later in the paper.

### **2.3. The Werther Effect**

Being a part of a fandom can also heavily affect a person’s mental health and therefore identity. Many times, that leads to violence. For example, something much more tragic seems to have happened before Lisztomania, after Goethe’s novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* was published in 1774, and it makes for an example of an interesting difference in historical behavior of men and women as fans, compared to *Lisztomania*. Several young men, captivated by Goethe’s work, started to dress up as the character of Werther and commit suicide, mimicking the behavior at the end of the novel. Such behavior could be linked to many historical aspects, for example, the fact that mental health was an enormously taboo topic, especially among men. It makes sense, from today’s point of view, that people who suffered from depression and were not given proper help would find the solution to their issues after reading a book describing emotions they had felt themselves. Even though scholars debate if the accidents have ever actually happened due to the

lack of evidence.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, in 1974, David Phillips used the term “Werther Effect” in a scientific paper for the first time while describing the phenomenon of copycat suicides.

Besides that, it is possible to link it to fan culture as well, based on two examples, even though many more exist. The first one happened in 2015, after Zayn Malik left then-globally popular boyband One Direction. Numerous fans started uploading images of their wrists cut, which is a form of self-harm, using the hashtag “#cut4zayn” on Twitter. The second example is that of Kyota Hattori, a twenty-six-year-old Japanese man who entered a train dressed up as the Joker, a DC comics villain, stabbed a man in his 70s, and tried to kill 12 other people by starting a fire. These tragic situations show not only how much media and being a part of a fandom can influence a person and their mental health, but also that it is something that has unfortunately been associated with violence for centuries. While this may be a simple difference in one’s identity and behavior, the main difference might be that women have a tendency to harm themselves because of emotions that occur as a result of something fan related, and while the same can happen to men, they also discover violent behaviors within themselves because of how they relate to tragic or immoral characters. Online research done for the purpose of this paper does not show support for cases of any women committing crimes dressed as fictional individuals.

## 2.4. Beatlemania

*Beatlemania* refers to a more contemporary type of fan behavior, the one surrounding the Beatles. The Beatles are, of course, one of the most popular bands of all time, and had fans all over the world and of all genders, but, similarly to *Lisztmania*, the hysteria surrounding them that consisted of specific behavior was more female-centered.

In the 1960s, the movement of the sexual revolution was developing, and it challenged the traditional idea of heteronormative, monogamous sex. Parallely, the second wave of feminism took place, fighting for equality and women’s liberty against patriarchy. Thanks to all of that, the Beatles’ arrival in the US was greeted by thousands of very excited, mostly teenage women. The

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<sup>1</sup> Goethe himself said: “My friends ... thought that they must transform poetry into reality, imitate a novel like this in real life and, in any case, shoot themselves and what occurred at first among a few took place later among the general public”.

reaction was so violent that the band had to be driven in an armored vehicle to their concerts, and the screaming was so loud that the decision to stop having live tours was made. Nothing of the sort was ever seen before, and, again, even though this type of behavior is considered mundane during concerts today, in the 60s it was a huge shock to society. Davies (1969: 280) writes that: “The [The Beatles] cult is one in which masculinity is minimized and femininity idealized”. It had shaken the traditional role of a woman and how she behaves publicly.

## 2.5. Fan culture today

During both the technological and the evolution of fan culture and fandom as a subculture, new branches started to develop. Before television became a mainstream form of media, literature had the most active fans, especially when it came to J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and A.C. Doyle’s *Sherlock Holmes*, whose admirers wrote the first known examples of fan fiction. However, today we can divide fandoms into myriad of categories, but according to the research done for this paper these four seem to be the most popular ones: music, sports, television and books, and video games. Even though a fan base can be found within every niche that exists both offline and online, these four categories seem to be the most popular. Television and books, while very different types of media, are put in one box as they are heavily intertwined because of movie adaptations and similar. Video games could almost be put together alongside those two, but the community would be too diverse for one category.

Fans of all of these “products” are known for specific forms of behavior that make them what they are:

When fans become frustrated or dissatisfied with the source material, they can be motivated enough to create their own version, interpretation, or homage to the source material. This is not to say that a fan creating *fanwork* dislikes the source material, but rather is inspired to improve or adapt the material to their own needs and desire. (Conroy 2015; 5)

Some of the most common activities are: writing fanfiction about characters or real people they admire; making fan art; cosplaying, – which includes wearing a costume, talking and behaving like a character; and belonging to a community online. These communities can be found on all



popular social media platforms, like Twitter, Reddit, Facebook, TikTok, Tumblr, and Instagram. There, fans exchange information within the group, share their opinions, theories, and creations, and follow the creators they admire.

Fanfiction is defined as “creative material featuring characters that have previously appeared in works whose copyright is held by others” (Coppa 2017:6). Fanfiction functions as a way to express desires, play and engage in imaginative processes, further explore characters and storylines, and elaborate on ideas and topics that are of fan interest (Barnes 2015, Coppa 2017, Jenkins 2012, Russ 2014).

Women are found to be much more interested in writing fanfiction, and many of them start reading and writing them before the age of twelve. Barnes (2015) writes that fanfiction is a form of daydreaming, a way in which an audience member can live within the world and live as a character. There are many ways this daydreaming can manifest, but many fan writers delve into characters and relationships, often more than plot, which Jenkins (2013) refers to as “genre shifting” (Barnes 2015, Coppa 2017, Russ 2014). This frequency has something to do with the fact that women are more likely to write fanfiction than any other gender demographic (Barnes 2015, FFN Research 2011, Bacon-Smith 1986).

Similarly, what is most usually video pornography to men, both an outlet for understanding and conceptualization of the notion of sex and simple sexual pleasure, reading (especially NSFW) fanfictions is to women. Issue is, just like with pornography, is that it can give young girls a highly distorted image of what love, sex and relationships should look like. For example, at the fanfiction website AO3, there are currently 402,869 works tagged as rape or non-consensual sex.

Generally, none of this is harmful or wrong. In fact, sociologically and psychologically, it has many benefits, particularly for the teenage population, who seem to be the biggest percentage of fans present online. Yujia Gao writes: “The age group with the largest number of fans is undoubtedly the youth group. Identity diffusion, in this stage is the greatest problem, adolescents are looking for the answer of who are they and what kind of person they want to be in the future.” (2022: 332). It gives people a safe space to talk about their hobbies and interests, a welcoming community consisting of people who are similar to them, and a sense of belonging to a group. Unfortunately, fan culture also has many issues, mostly dealing with judgment, bullying, sexism, racism, violence, and all other types of hatred.

### 3. The gender aspect

Just like in every other aspect of culture and society in general, gender is present in fandoms as well. Whether that is something positive or negative is debatable. Nevertheless, it exists, as it was shown in the historical examples provided above.

The first interesting gender difference within fan culture is this: “Specifically, females tend to identify with many of the more marginalized fandoms, while males comprise a fair amount of the more socially accepted groups” (Mendelsohn 2023). Here might be a couple of reasons why this happens, however men are very much a part of marginalized fandoms as well, they just hide themselves. While being a movie admirer is fine, romantic comedies are not something men are most likely to mention as their favorite genre. In 2017, a study on gender-specific stereotypes about movie-genre preference was done by P. Wühr, B. P. Lange and S. Schwartz, and this was one of the conclusions: “Drama and romance were more strongly preferred by women than by men. Nine genres were more strongly preferred by men than by women: action, adventure, erotic, fantasy, horror, mystery, science fiction, war, and Western.” (Wühr et al. 2017: 8)

It seems to be the case in many other domains, even some categories that are considered to be male-dominated, like sports.

Sports are today’s prime field in which societies negotiate and define their desirable and undesirable types of masculinity. Symbolic rule-breaking and rebellion is (...) typical of a certain type of idealized masculinity. Young fans are at a stage in their lives in which their masculinity is yet to be fully defined; many of them are still testing their limits and play with identity choices. Traditionally, adolescents (particularly males) have had to rebel against their fathers during that period, i.e. against older men, whom they experience as wealthier and more powerful than themselves, and who—to a teenager—appear arrogant and unwilling to compromise. (Senkbeil 2016: 271)

Therefore, even sports have to be masculine enough for men to like them. The answer to that is toxic, fragile masculinity, which harms men as much as it does women. Because of that, they hide behind fake profiles online, where they can enjoy the female-dominated niches they like.

For those participating in more marginalized fandoms—those celebrating content that is not accepted by mainstream society to be worthwhile or cool—shame plays a large role in their fandom participation. People seek out fandom communities in order to have a way to express their enjoyment for these forms of content without letting their friends or family know about their involvement. (Mendelsohn 2023)

Another reason why this might be the case is the difference in sexual expression. As already mentioned during the description of *Beatlemania*, women’s sexuality has been more of a taboo, while men had a set of rules they needed to follow to be considered “masculine enough”. While women have been fighting for equality all through history, they are very aware of the judgment they are going to perceive no matter what they do or how they behave. Activities of marginalized fandoms almost always include fanfiction containing detailed sexual acts, NSFW drawings, etc. Let us take the *Twilight Saga* as an example. On AO3 there are currently over 40 000 works written about the characters from the novels. There are more websites though, and on one of them *Fifty Shades of Grey* used to be published, which is now known internationally as an original work which was the best-selling book of the decade in the US, along with a movie franchise.

On the other hand, the general population of football fans does not engage in such activities, even though they exist. However, it appears that worse things happen in male-oriented fanbases. Consider the so- called Gamergate, which was a 2014-2015 online harassment campaign, which targeted women in the video-game industry<sup>2</sup>. It was incited by male gamers who were unhappy about the involvement of women and feminism in the field. Furthermore, Gamergate had negative consequences for both sexes: “gamers and their allies responded by digging in their heels in opposition to "social justice warriors," and name-calling intensified on both sides. By the beginning of 2015, gamers appeared as psychopathic cyber-terrorists and rapists in an episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims*” (Galbraith 2017: 68)

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<sup>2</sup> The Gamergate campaign was sparked by the release in 2013 of Zoë Quinn’s game *Depression Quest*. The game received acclaim from game critics and praise from mental health professionals, but it also spurred a backlash from a vocal minority in the online gaming community because its subject was depression. Although interactive fiction was among the oldest and most established genres in the history of video games, the text-driven interior monologue style of Quinn’s game was disparaged as boring. (Greengard, 2023)

Sexism, misogyny, and misandry can be unfortunately seen in all fandoms, both female and male dominated. In sports, for instance, men will much more often support male athletes, and if they follow women's, it is usually because of attraction. Again, based on personal online research, countless comments have been found about women's sports, especially volleyball. Women's football is judged based on performance much more than men's is, but online comment sections will always contain opinions about athletes' bodies, looks, and similar aspects much more than those about their skills. For example, Alessia Russo was named Manchester United Women's Player of the Year for the 2022/23 season, after winning the fan's vote and scoring 12 goals this season. However, she had to accept the award very uncomfortably while she was told "she might not be able to hold it" as it is "very heavy".

Female dominated fandoms are not much better either. The hyper-sexualization of actors and musicians who are considered to be conventionally attractive is all-present. Especially popular are homoerotic pairings of two actors who work together or two musicians who are in a band together. This is something called *shipping*. "Shipping is the practice of pairing two fictional male characters in a romantic relationship. Shipping fantasies are expressed in the form of fan art, fanfiction, and *doujinshi* (explicit manga made by fans)" (Rahmawati et al., 2018: 440)

It goes to extreme measures, as seen with, for example, Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson, whom the fandom has paired for more than ten years, harassing them, their families, and partners online and in real life and writing explicit stories about them.

When it comes to fan culture, fans of something that are more included than casual fans are called fanboys and fangirls, respectively. While it might seem like a simple gender dichotomy with the same meaning, unfortunately it is not. "Fangirl is used to describe a fan, whose focus in their fandom is based on emotions or relationships, (...) word [fangirl] evokes the image of teenage girls screaming when the Beatles were on the Ed Sullivan Show – or when BTS recreated that iconic performance on Late Night with Steven Colbert." (Blaise, 2019)

On the other hand, fanboys are seen as more knowledgeable than casual fans, as those who know all the details of a certain franchise, and are most usually connected with fans of science fiction. "It's not about emotions, it's about a mastery of the details. It's a knowledge-based concept of fandom, rather than an interpretive one." (Blaise, 2019)

While fanboys and fangirls share the exactly the same hobbies and feelings towards their points of interest, they seem to be treated much more differently. Fangirls are described as “insane” and fanboys as “geeks”. While both groups get marginalized, there is a huge gap when it comes to opinions of who is considered to be more knowledgeable and mentally stable.

Furthermore, when it comes to the comparison of genders, the level of “shame” is very present. For a simpler illustration, two examples will be used, based on an article by Kaya Mendelsohn. The first one is One Direction fandom (fandom A), and the second is Real Madrid fandom (fandom B). Participants in *fandom A* are predominantly teenage girls, while those in *fandom B* are men of all ages. Both groups support their idols the same way: they buy merchandise, buy tickets for their shows and matches, and spend their free time following them. There are, of course, some major differences. *Fandom A* creates fanfiction and fanart of the boyband, has deep emotional bonds with them and feels attraction towards them. *Fandom B* gathers in groups to watch a football match they were unable to attend, either at home or at a local pub. Socializing with friends, but alcohol and violence are also involved.

In both situations, emotional outbursts, deep connection to the subject of admiration and money and time are involved, yet *fandom A* is marginalized and judged. Mendelsohn says: “The same yelling and enthusiasm one might see at a One Direction concert is paralleled at any sports game, but the pitch of the shrieks makes all the difference—male sports fans are not punished or shamed for their fandom involvement, while female boy band fans are shamed”. That reflects the gender aspect which was in focus of the second wave feminism, particularly in the so-called dominance approach to gender (and language).

#### **4. Mental health**

The topic of mental health has gotten very acknowledged on the Internet in the last ten years. It went from a deeply personal issue that is not talked about enough to something that cannot be avoided online. While it is a positive thing that people are learning what mental illnesses are and how to handle them, it has also become something romanticized and wanted, especially among the younger generation, as it has become a part of a person’s identity and how they represent

themselves. Fan culture also struggles with that problem. The reason why this is relevant is because there is also a difference in mental health connected to gender. World Health Organization has made a paper in which it says: “The mental disorders of childhood, for instance, tend to be far more prevalent in boys, but in later life women are more likely than men to suffer from poor mental health. This is particularly true of problems such as depression and eating disorders. The exception is substance abuse, for which rates are more than three times higher in adult men than in adult women.” (WHO, 2012: 11)

It is important to mention that being a part of a community is generally good for one’s mental health. Talking about personal dilemmas and seeking advice from people who share interests makes sense and it has helped a lot of people. Many people who are more involved in fan activities suffer from depression and anxiety, might have problems at home, come from abusive families, lack good social skills (and, therefore, friends in their surroundings) or other. Expressing through creativity; writing fanfiction, making fanart, doing cosplay or partaking in online discussions suffices all of that. These hobbies also help people to take time off of their issues.

The negative side shows what happens when things get out of control. Many people, while trying to relate to their idols, actively try to “become depressed”, self-diagnose after reading about symptoms of mental illnesses online without consulting medical care, or actively become obsessed with them. “#cut4zayn” was only one of numerous situations like this. The worst case is when a para-social relationship is formed, as explained below.

#### **4.1. Para-social relationships and difference between fans and stans**

*National Register of Health Service Psychologists* defines para-social relationships as “one-sided relationships, where one person extends emotional energy, interest and time, and the other party, the persona, is completely unaware of the other’s existence. [They] are most common with celebrities, organizations (such as sports teams) or television stars.”

A study named *Loneliness, Gender, and Parasocial Interaction: A Uses and Gratifications Approach* (Wang et al. 2008) researched connections between themes described in the title:

A multiple regression was used to test the remaining hypotheses and answer the research question. The regression had 13 predictors: the six types of loneliness (family, emotional, social, chronic, situational, and transient); gender, which was a control variable; and six interaction terms, which were the products of gender with each type of loneliness. The dependent variable was parasocial interaction (Wang et al., 2008: 100).

The authors suggested that lonely individuals are more likely to develop greater psychological dependence and affinity for media characters and may therefore habitually ‘communicate’ with these fictional characters as if the communication were two-way. This way, they compensate the lack of social interaction and connection they have with other, real people. “[lonely individuals] have been found to use media to fulfill social-compensation motivations such as seeking companionship, passing time, and seeking escape” (Finn and Gorr, 1988).

The gender aspect is once again important, as the research shows that there is a difference between how men and women deal with types of loneliness and how much do they engage in para-social relationships.

In particular, women, unlike men, increased their use of parasocial interaction as family loneliness increased; on the other hand, men, unlike women, increased their use of parasocial interaction as chronic loneliness increased. Thus, parasocial interaction appears to be a functional alternative for women (but not for men) who suffer from insufficiency of quality relationships with family members and parasocial interaction is a functional alternative for men (but not for women) to compensate for loneliness over time. (Wang et al., 2008: 103)

Para-social relationships are not usually harmful to anyone except for the person engaging in them. They are very visible in fanfiction, especially in “y/a” (your name) genre. Authors of this type of fanfiction leave an empty slot instead of a name of the main character, so it is easier for the reader to imagine themselves in a specific story. For example, if a woman wanted to read a story in which she is in a relationship with a famous singer, this would be one of that ways to do so. The gender aspect is even more visible when we did a simple search on one of the most famous fanfiction websites, AO3, and type in *female reader*. 102,847 results were found. When we typed in *male reader* we got “only” 32,230 results.

The real issue begins, however, when para-social relationships turn into harassment of celebrities and creators of idolized characters, and disruption of their private lives.

In the year 2000, rapper Eminem coined the term *stan* in the song of the same name. The song was about a stalker fan who became obsessed with the rapper, killing himself and his pregnant girlfriend because Eminem did not respond to his letters. Even though it was never confirmed, people all over the world decided that the term stan (conveniently a portmanteau of the words stalker and fan) would be associated with the most dedicated and borderline obsessive fans. They are much more present online than regular fans, tend to be aggressive and defensive of everything their idol does. They also harass people who disagree with their choices of admiration and attack journalists. Often their behavior becomes unhealthy and it can be dangerous at times. Another issue is that they have addiction to media, following everything that is happening inside the fandom and/or concerning their idols.

The biggest issue with *stanning* is however that it is completely normalized in today's society, especially among music fans. Female fans of Korean pop (also known as kpop) and Taylor Swift fans are mostly known for *stanning*. As it was mentioned before, there is nothing wrong with fan activities, casual fans do them as well, in smaller amounts. The problem is blindly defending everything an idol does, even if it is not morally right or socially acceptable. In the era of "cancel culture", it is worrying to see people defend criminals; rapists, abusers or even murderers because they fancy them. Chris Brown, singer and Rihanna's ex-partner, who physically abused her throughout their relationship, is still adored by millions of fans who will defend him no matter what. Again, as with previous issues and phenomena, the role of gender as a variable in this respect demands further and constant, specifically-tailored research.

## **5. Conclusion**

In conclusion, fan culture is something much more present than it might seem at first, especially among teenagers. Many people take part in fan activities as hobbies and because they want to support someone they like, for any reason. It might be because a person is a good singer, a good



actor or simply just conventionally attractive. And while culture industry heavily exploits both artists and fans, it makes people happy.

Furthermore, it has been proven that the gender aspect exists as a part of fan culture, and while there are some perks to it – men are able to feel masculine at football games and women are able to read fanfiction without fear of judgement – as this paper tried to suggest and exemplify, sexism is unfortunately present as well, and it prevents people to sincerely and freely enjoy whatever they like.

When it comes to both gender identity and identity in general, fan culture participates a lot. Teenagers start by idolizing celebrities and fictional characters, they see how they dress, talk and behave, and that influences them a lot. In some cases, they will change entire personalities they had while growing up to act similar to their idol. They might also relate to it more than they had experienced in their social circle among friends and family. For example, in countries where same sex marriages and relationships are illegal, a person might come across an openly gay character online, who helps them understand themselves better, and so on. Communities within fan culture can also be very welcoming and helpful, so socialization does not lack, as some might believe. The issue begins, however, when things get out of control, again, on examples like para-social relationships in which people completely detach themselves from society and live day-to-day daydreaming about a version of them that does not exist in real life. Lack of care for mental health and creation of para-social relationships is a huge problem, as it separates people from the society and makes them socially excluded.

However, after combining all negative and positive sides of fan culture, it is obvious how much it can influence and shape someone's identity. While some say that fans and stans lack their own, personal identity, one must disagree. If it is done right, with correct parental guidance and correct development of critical thinking, it can help a person learn more about themselves easily. Our hobbies make a huge part of our identity after all, but besides that, watching other people's behavior and learning something positive from them can only strengthen one's character.

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