An Analysis of the Psychology Surrounding Fan Culture in the Music Industry and Its

Effects on Marketing on Social Media

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Introduction

The concept of fan culture in the music industry is not new to American culture. Fan groups have been around for a while, which can be referred to devoted fans showing their love and going to greater length to express their admiration of their favorite artists more than the average person. Actions of fan groups to show their adoration included buying concert tickets and merchandise to creating fan art and starting fan clubs, all to convey the emotional connection they have developed with certain music or musicians. These behaviors are still very much prevalent today, however, with the rise of social media platforms and other forms of digital media, fan culture is even more influential than it was in the past. Considering the psychology behind the different levels of fandom in the music industry and how it contributes to the investment and engagement fans have with their idols, fan culture has a positive impact on the music industry's marketing and brand awareness through social media by offering easier ways to reach audiences online, promoting with shared media on different platforms, and being more engaged and loyal to buy into an artist's brand.

There are more ways for fans around the world who share the same passion to communicate with each other as well as with their favorite artists. On the other hand, it also gives the artists other creative ways to reach their fan bases. While these benefits are all very true, there are obviously the negative effects of fan culture, including the lack of privacy it can give the artists from fans with obsessive behavior and the problematic communication online. Despite the negative effects, fan groups have the power to extend their fandom to new lengths, and they continue to have a deep influence and impact the music industry in new ways every day. Aside from just the specifics of the music industry, there are many psychological factors that contribute to the obsessive behavior of fans as well as the different levels of fans, in terms of

how invested they may be in the lives of their idols, as well as how they view other fan groups, which also has an effect on fan culture in general.

Psychology of Fan Groups

Mainstream vs. Nonmainstream Fan Cultures

When thinking about fan groups in general, there are the ones that are popular and well-known to anyone based on how talked about and relevant they are in the media. These would be known as mainstream fan cultures. When talking in terms of the music industry in particular, mainstream fan cultures, according to a study done in 2016, would include those of musicians such as Michael Jackson, The Beatles, and Justin Bieber (Plante and Reysen, 2023). On the other hand, there are fan cultures that are not as well known or popular to the general public, called nonmainstream fan cultures. In terms of the music industry, fans of more underground or up-and-coming artists with not too many followers would be known as nonmainstream fan cultures. In other cases, apart from the music industry, fan cultures of things or interests such as anime or fantasy are nonmainstream that face more prejudices and judgements from nonfans.

Prejudices and Negative Affects and Beliefs

In general, relating to fans or not, there are factors or motives that drive certain prejudices towards certain groups, as well as negative emotions associated with them. There have been studies done, in which certain negative emotions are shown in response to groups like obese people, homosexuals, and BIPOC. Even though the emotions that were studied are not the only ones that can be associated with different groups, the "studies implicate disgust and discomfort as two plausible affective mechanisms driving prejudice toward groups, especially when those groups do not represent the dominant or majority position" (Plante and Reysen, 2023). This can also apply to fan groups who don't have as much of the general public behind them. With the

expression of a more intense connection that fan bases have with their interests, comes more judgement from others that are not a part of the fan base. According to Plante and Reysen (2023), the study done in 2016 by Reysen and Shaw helped them understand what people's "prototype of a fan" is, in the sense of what types of fan bases they believe to be the most popular and mainstream. Respondents of this study "rated football, basketball, and baseball fans to be the three most prototypical fan cultures from the list, which included a mix of sport fans, music fans, media fans, and hobbyists. Other popular, mainstream interests like high-profile musicians (e.g., The Beatles) and blockbuster film franchises (Harry Potter, *Star Wars*) also scored fairly high in terms of perceived prototypicality" (Plante and Reysen, 2023). Based on the findings of this study, there is a correlation between the level of nonprototypicality of a fan culture and the prejudices towards it. According to the Plante and Reysen (2023) there has been little research done about what drives the prejudices towards nonprototypical fan cultures. However, "A look at examples from popular culture and at research on fans suggests that unflattering affective responses and unsavory beliefs about nonmainstream fan groups may drive prejudice toward fans who do not fit the mold of what most people consider to be a 'typical' fan" and that "at least one study has shown that, compared to more prototypical sport fans, fans of fantasy and science-fiction are considered to be somewhat physically and socially unattractive , which may reflect feelings of disgust and discomfort, respectively" (Plante and Reysen, 2023). When something is different than what people are used to or not what would be considered normal (to them), there are negative, harmful, or unflattering beliefs that can be associated with it. Therefore, in terms of fan culture, two examples of this include "beliefs about fans having ulterior or unsavory motives for their interest and the belief that fans are dysfunctional" (Plante and Reysen, 2023).

Fan Identifications

In fan culture, there are different levels as to how far immersed into a fandom someone can be. There is the type of fans that are fans of an artist's music and aware of the general information given to them from the media that everyone is aware of, and there are the fans that are more seriously dedicated to knowing everything about their idol, whether it relates to their career/music or personal life. According to Edlom and Karlsson, the three levels of fan identification include "low (social fans), medium (focused fans), and high (vested fans)" (p. 124). So, you have your typical fan, which one can refer to as "someone having a positive, personal, relatively deep emotional connection with an artist or a brand." Then, you have a "superfan," which is the highest level and are the "most loyal and engaged, spending considerable time and money on their favorite artist in long-time relationships. They see themselves as a part of an artist's extended family, which they have a vested interest in protecting and supporting" (Edlom and Karlsson, 2021, p. 124-125).

Another way that fans are classified is through hierarchies being separated by five categories including knowledge, access, leadership, venue, and fandom level or quality" and it was argued that "fans who are at the top of all five hierarchies are executive fans" (Edlom and Karlsson, 2021, p. 124). This also feeds into status among fan groups—the fans with the most knowledge have a higher status within the fandom. The more knowledge and status that a fan has in a fandom, the more power they have. Along with power, "deep fan engagement bridges the larger fan community and the brand. Superfans and executive fans are often used as mediators to initiate activities, gain access to the fan community, and build the brand" (Edlom and Karlsson, 2021, p. 130). In other words, with this power, executive fans are able to have a closer connection to the artist or brand and, in a way, help it succeed.

Marketing/Consumerism of Fan Culture

Engagement of Superfans Compared to Regular Fans

The concept of superfans in the music industry and their levels of fandom directly relate to their engagement and how it affects marketing of certain artists. This is because a lot of the engagement that superfans take part in has a lot to do with how much they are willing to and how much they do spend on their favorite artists or brand such as buying products or music, concert tickets, and merchandise, as well as how in tune they are to the marketing tactics and content being thrown at them in the media from their idols.

How Artists and Brands and Artists Market More Specifically Towards Fans

When having superfans and a dedicated fan base that seems to really understand its favorite artists and what they are about as a person, it allows for these artists to come up with more creative ways to advertise to them. Singer-songwriter, Taylor Swift, is an example of an artist that uses her extremely supportive and knowledgeable fanbase to her advantage. She always markets her new content to her fans in a creative way that draws in the attention of, not only her fans, but even the general public. According to Galloway (2020), Swift used her brand partnerships with American Greetings and Papyrus to gift her fans, known as "Swifties," Taylor Swift greeting cards because of their "devoted fandom" (p. 241). This kind of gift from a fan's idol helps solidify the connection fans already feel with their favorite artist, and Swift definitely has the kinds of fans who would feel this type of connection with her. Artists trust that their most invested fan base understands the kind of brand image they are trying to convey in the media and use it in their marketing strategies. For example, "Greeting cards are an unusual collectible object; however, Swift's brand and identity are closely linked with the sentiments and values of the greeting card industry, and she frequently references the significance of communicating with

friends, family, and fans through forms of handwritten correspondence, including greeting cards" (Galloway, 2020, p. 241). Along with this, it is easier to communicate with these types of superfans through the media because artists are able to get more sentimental and personal in a way that regular level fans or people of the general public just wouldn't understand. Superfans are then able to take this sentiment and spread it around within their fan community.

Communication and the Spreading of Content Among Fans Through the Media

With so many different social media platforms, communication among fans or between fans and their idols is much more easily done. For instance, Youtube was used for a lot of this kind of communication when Taylor Swift sent her music greeting cards to fans. According to Galloway (2020), "While YouTube is well known as a platform that promotes the rapid circulation and virality of videos posted by users, YouTube is used by Swifties to foster intimate connections among fans" (p. 241). Social media has allowed different individuals in the same fan group or fandom to easily communicate and share content with each other, no matter where they are in the world. Everyone has easy access to each other, so they are able to share their passion of their favorite artists, talk about their common interests, and share artists' content and discuss it. In addition to the connection fans develop with each other, social media gives the artists the opportunity to make connections with their fans as well, no matter the distance between them. For example, "Throughout her career Swift has cultivated a close relationship with her fans, connecting with them on a personal level when possible, frequently using social media and gifting gestures to facilitate these interactions" (Galloway, 2020, p. 242). With Taylor Swift's very dedicated fan base, social media—Youtube to be more specific—allows her to give some of that passion back to them by communicating and connecting with them. According to McLean and Wainwright (2010), "Communication has become easier and more productive

because technology eliminates the need for face-to-face interaction" (McLean and Wainwright, 2010). Because of the internet, there are really no barriers when it comes to what and when fans and communicate online. It is easier to create online communities and stay updated, while also updating others, on any new content that may appear in the media about their shared interests and idols. Furthermore, "participation in online communities often leads to positive fan experiences that 'bring value through enhancing an individual's sense of social identity.' This desire of fans for interaction makes it important to understand not only the artist/fan relationship but also the fan/fan relationship" (Edlom and Karlsson, 2021, p. 125).

Social Media's effects on Fan Culture

Social media gives fan culture the power and opportunity to expand. There are more musicians and up-and-coming artists that are discovered on social media. This means that it is easier for an artist to develop a fan base without being popular or well-known to the general public. According to McLean and Wainwright (2010), "Technology, particularly related to production and distribution, has significantly reshaped the industry. Slater (2000) states that "the popular music industry is driven by technology, the music industry has been driven and occurred as a result of a new technology" (McLean and Wainwright, 2010). With the media, the music industry itself is growing, which means that there are more opportunities for fans to come together and share an interest for more musicians. According to Edlom and Karlsson (2021), "Through the use of social media, the brand/firm has the opportunity to follow and learn from the actions and interactions of customers (fans) and, in the process, gain information that can be valuable to their goals, but that can also be misused in certain instances, such as creating working consumers" (p. 125). With this bigger opportunity for up-and-coming artists and new fandoms, the media makes it easier for fans to start connections with their idols earlier on. Newer artists

who don't have as many fans and therefore don't need all these restrictions on social media, are more likely to create more connections with fans and take more input from them in response to their loyalty and support.

Owned and Shared Media

From the perspective of the music industry and the artist, social media and fan culture has a positive effect on marketing. It gives the industry a different type of advertising strategy. Social media gives industries and marketing teams the ability to control the content that they want to share and spread through the media without having to pay for ads. Artists and brands alike are able to utilize the different platforms available to them to post their own content and get it to reach their desired audiences without having to pay for an official advertisement. Also, when posting one's own content, a musician knows that it will reach their fans because the first people that will see it will be their followers on that specific platform.

Fan culture really pays a big role in the other aspect of this different kind of advertising strategy. With social media and the way it has severely grown fan bases and the level of engagement fan groups give to an artist, the fans themselves are also the ones doing the advertising. According to Linden and Linden (2017), "Social media is a key component for the formulation of the fan in the 'brand advocate era'" (p. 188). Every time a fan interacts with or reposts their idols' social media posts and content on their own profile, they are promoting that artist or brand. This would also be considered unpaid advertising, since no one is paying the fans to spread the content or raise awareness of the brand, even though that is exactly what is happening. In other words, according to Edlom and Karlsson (2021), "the fan's engagement is unpaid, regardless of where they are in the hierarchy, including the executive fans who lead and administer the group" (p. 130). Even if this may be a looked at as a slight disadvantage to the

fans because in some sense, they are "working" for no money, this benefits the music industry and the brands of individual artists because they are essentially getting free promotion just by being popular and having an invested fan base.

Conclusion

Fan culture is very prominent in the music industry, whether a fan is considered a social or general fan or an executive or superfan. There are different statuses within a fandom that contribute to the fan's level of engagement with their favorite artists in real life or online. Social media plays a big part in how fans engage and communicate with other fans and with their idols. On the other hand, as shown with research, the more intense fan culture that comes with social media has positively impacted the industry in several ways. Fan groups allow musicians and their marketers to develop more creative ways to reach the niche audience of their fan bases and promote their favorite musicians just by engaging with their content on social media platforms.

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