

ROUTES TO FANDOM DISCOVERY AND EXPRESSION OF FAN IDENTITY IN FURRY, ANIME, AND FANTASY SPORT FANS

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Abstract

In the present study, we examined routes to fandom membership and expressions of fan identity in members of the furry, anime, and fantasy sport fandoms. Participants from each fandom answered two open-ended questions asking how they discovered and became part of the fandom and how they expressed their fan interest. Furrries primary cite the Internet as their point of discovering the fandom. Anime fans attribute their interest to a combination of the Internet, media, and clubs. Fantasy sport fans cite their friends and family as the primary point of discovery. When it comes to expressing fan interest, furrries tend to produce fan-related artifacts and display group symbols. Anime fans, in contrast, tend to consume anime-related content, and fantasy sport fans research and participate in their activity, as well as evangelizing it. Together, the results illustrate that there is no one route to fandom, nor is there only one way for fan interests to manifest themselves.

Keywords: fans, furry, anime, fantasy sport, identity expression

Introduction

Psychologists studying fandoms have largely done so by focusing on sport fans (Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001). And while sport fans may be among the most mainstream and prototypical fans, this has resulted in far less research on other, less-mainstream fan interests (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). In recent years, psychologists have begun to reverse this trend, studying smaller and lesser-known fan communities. And while Reysen and Branscombe (2010) suggest that the same group processes should operate regardless of the fandom being studied, there may nevertheless be important idiosyncrasies specific to particular fan groups. For example, members of different fan groups may differ in how they discover their respective fandoms; we might not expect furrries to learn about the furry fandom in the same way a sport fan would. Members of different fan groups may also fluctuate with regard to how their fan interests manifest themselves: an anime fan may express their interests in ways that differ entirely from

furries *or* sport fans. In the present paper, we explore these potential differences in the routes to fandom discovery and in fan expression, specifically looking at three dramatically different fan groups: furries, anime fans, and fantasy sport fans. Furry fans are individuals who self-identify with an interest in anthropomorphism—the ascription of human traits to animals—and zoomorphism—the ascription of animal traits to humans (Plante, Reysen, Roberts, & Gerbasi, 2016; Plante, Roberts, Reysen, & Gerbasi, 2014). Anime fans are individuals with an interest in Japanese animation and manga novels (Reysen, Plante, Roberts, Gerbasi, & Shaw, 2016). Fantasy sport fans are individuals who create and manage hypothetical teams of real-world athletes and compete in fictitious leagues with other fans.

When it comes to how fans discover and eventually join fan groups, researchers know surprisingly little (Hills, 2014). For some fan groups, the answer seems fairly straightforward. Given the ubiquity of sports and the presence of sport consumption in everyday life, it is not hard to imagine how sport fans might become sport fans (Wann et al., 2001). Sports are in schools, on television and radio, in newspapers and magazines, and across the Internet. As such, it would be surprising if anyone was unaware that sport fans existed. And, indeed, studies of sport fans suggest that family, friends (Smith, Patterson, Williams, & Hogg, 1981) and schools (Wann et al., 2001) are the most common agents leading them into the fandom. Similar principles are likely at work when it comes to fandoms centered around other popular media—television shows like *Star Trek* or musical groups like *The Beatles*.

But how does someone discover a fandom that is small and non-mainstream, like the furry community? A recent study of furries found that many of them stumbled upon the fandom by accident, usually while looking for something only tangentially related online (Reysen, Plante, Roberts, & Gerbasi, 2016). What they were originally searching for may differ from furry to furry, but in the majority of cases, they saw or read something that piqued their interest, gave them the word “furry” to describe it, and ultimately guided them toward the fandom. Unlike sport fans, where it may be common to have parents and siblings who are all fans of a team or sport, this is not usually the case for furries—very few said that a family member played any role in their introduction to the fandom. While studies such as these suggest that the routes taken to fandom engagement differ by fandom, more research is needed systematically examining how different fans come to join their respective fandom.

Once fans have discovered their fandoms, however, a new question arises: how do they express their fan interests and identity? One way is through consumption: all fans consume content. Whether this consumption takes the form of watching a show, reading a story, or listening to a song, fans take in content related to their fan interest. Of course, consumption does not necessarily mean purchasing content, but fans *do* often spend money on their fan interests. These decisions about what to buy, in part, reflect their desire to build and express their ingroup identity as a fan (Escalas & Bettman, 2005)—something marketers are well aware of (Bhattacharjee, Berger, & Menon, 2014). For example, football fans buy and wear team

merchandise with the expressed motivation to publicly display their affiliation with their favorite team, and, therefore, display their identity to others (Apostolopoulou, Papadimitriou, Synowka, & Clark, 2012). Thus, fans can express their fan interests by passively consuming (purchasing or otherwise taking in) the fan interest, and by displaying their fan identity to signal their affiliation to others.

As Jenkins (1992) famously noted, however, fans can also do much more than just passively consume content. Many fans, he argued, also *produce* fan-related content. From fan-fiction to fan art, some fans actively create content as a way to express their fan interest. For example, a walk through a brony (fans of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*) convention dealers' room reveals hundreds of fan-made products (e.g., plush toys, keychains, posters, t-shirts) paying homage to the television program (Peck-Suzuki, 2016). Similar dealers' rooms can be found at fan conventions ranging from furies to science fiction, and anime to scrapbooking. Although there are professionally made products, there also exist hundreds of products made by fans. These acts of creation generate and sustain the culture of the fandom, even decades after the original content has concluded (Jenkins, 1992). By actively reproducing, modifying, or rejecting cultural patterns through their actions, fans play a contributing role in the fan culture itself (Adams & Markus, 2004; Shweder, 1990). In this manner, any act of engaging, participating (e.g., at fan conventions, online forums, local meet-ups), or being visible to others in the fan culture is a form of expression. And so, we can add production, participation, and displaying to

consumption as different ways fans can express their fan identity.

In the present research we are also considering two final forms of fan expression: evangelizing and research. Fan evangelists spread the word to others about the positive aspects of their fan interest. This behavior can have a significant effect on the propagation of the fandom: marketers consider fan evangelists to be one of the most important consumer bases (Harridge-March & Quinton, 2009). For example, Ito (2010) suggests that fan evangelists are the primary reason for the spread of anime from Japan to the West. Dwyer, Shapiro, and Drayer (2011) have similarly found that fantasy baseball evangelists were the most active group in their fandom, and Ortiz, Reynolds, and Franke (2014) showed that greater evangelism was associated with more participation, felt attachment, and greater involvement with the content compared to other types of fans. In addition to evangelizing, fans may signal their devotion through knowledge or expertise on the subject. Eastman and Riggs (1994), in a series of interviews with sport fans, found that the extent of one's knowledge of sport played a role in whether they should be considered a "real" fan or not. Fiske (1992) notes that knowledgeable experts are often viewed as higher in status and can be opinion leaders for the community. As such, researching and gathering information on a fan interest is a way for fans to increase their influence within the fandom. Illustrating this, fantasy sport fans highly value research related to players and their performance (Brown, Billings, & Ruibley, 2012). For fantasy sport fans, more knowledge means better performance in their fantasy league, but it may also be an intrinsically pleasing

and enjoyable activity. And so, like evangelizing, researching information can also be an important form of fan identity expression.

Current Study

The purpose of the present research is to examine routes to fandom membership and expressions of fan identity of furry, anime, and fantasy sport fans. Given the dramatic differences in content and popularity between these different fan communities, we expect that the routes fans take into these fandoms, and the ways in which their interests manifest, will differ among the groups. We tested this as part of a larger, general study of fandoms by asking participants to respond to two open-ended questions. One asked them how they became interested in the fandom. The other asked how they express their fan interest.

Methods

Participants and Procedure

Participants ($N = 4419$, 70.2% male; $M_{\text{age}} = 24.61$, $SD = 7.70$) were self-identified anime fans ($n = 3122$), furies ($n = 912$), and fantasy sport fans ($n = 385$). Furry participants completed the survey in-person at Anthrocon 2014, a furry convention in Pittsburgh, PA. Anime fans completed the survey in two locations: at A-Kon 2014, an anime convention in Dallas, TX, or online, recruited through various anime-themed websites. Finally, fantasy sport fans completed the survey online and were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk. The majority of participants indicated their racial/ethnic group as White (75.9%).

As part of a larger survey regarding fan interests, all participants completed open-ended questions asking (1) how they discovered and became a part of the fan community, and (2) three ways in which participants expressed their interest in the fan object (i.e., anime, furry, or fantasy sport). Two independent raters then coded the responses from participants that completed these items. A third independent coder resolved any discrepancies.

Coding

Our measure of routes to fandom discovery was the question asking participants how they became involved in their respective fandom ("If you are a part of the [Anime, Furry, Fantasy Sport] community, please briefly describe how you discovered and became a part of the [Anime, Furry, Fantasy Sport] community"). Themes that emerged included: (1) the Internet (e.g., forums, Facebook), (2) a friend, (3) a relationship partner, (4) a family member, (5) media (e.g., television, books), (6) searching for similar others, (7) a different fandom (e.g., discover anime through comic book convention), (8) clubs (e.g., school club, local meet-up), or (9) other miscellaneous sources ($\kappa = .81$).

Our measure of fan identity expression took the form of the question asking fans to list three ways they expressed their fan identity ("Identify three ways that you express your interest in [Anime, Furies, Fantasy Sport]"). Themes that emerged included: (1) production of content (e.g., writing, art), (2) consumption of fan interest (e.g., looking at art, reading, watching, collecting), (3) participation in fandom (e.g., convention attendance, interacting with

other fans on forums), (4) displaying fan symbols (e.g., wearing buttons, clothing with symbols), (5) evangelizing (e.g., telling others about fan interest), and (6) researching the fan interest (e.g., reading reviews, seeking out information regarding fan interest). Each of the three responses was coded with respect to one of the six themes referenced in the response or not. The inter-rater agreement was acceptable for each of the six themes: produce (response one $\kappa = .81$, response two $\kappa = .81$, response three $\kappa = .71$), consume (response one $\kappa = .90$, response two $\kappa = .86$, response three $\kappa = .82$), participate (response one $\kappa = .84$, response two $\kappa = .87$, response three $\kappa = .79$), display (response one $\kappa = .92$, response two $\kappa = .89$, response three $\kappa = .87$), evangelize (response one $\kappa = .65$, response two $\kappa = .76$, response three $\kappa = .60$), and research (response one $\kappa = .78$, response two $\kappa = .78$, response three $\kappa = .74$).

Results

To examine whether routes to discovering the fandom differed between furry, anime, and fantasy sport fans, we conducted a chi-square analysis. As shown in Table 1, furry and anime fans were more likely than chance to discover their fan interest through the Internet, $X^2(16, N = 3029) = 487.41, p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .284$. Anime fans were also more likely than expected to discover anime through media or through a local club. Fantasy sport fans, on the other hand, were more likely than chance to discover the fan interest through a friend or a family member. The results thus suggest both similarities (e.g., anime fans, furries, and the internet) and differences (e.g., only fantasy sport fans consistently

discovered the fandom through their families) in the ways members of fandoms discover the fandom.

To examine whether expressions of fan identity differ between the three fandoms, we conducted a series of chi-square analyses for each of the three responses. As shown in Table 2, furries were more likely than chance to *produce* fan-related content. In contrast, anime fans were more likely than chance to *consume* of fan content, and fantasy sport fans were more likely than chance to *actively participate* in their interest. Furries were also the only group that were more likely than chance to display their group membership, and fantasy sport fans were the only group more likely than chance to evangelize and research their fan interest. These trends were relatively similar in both the second (see Table 3) and third (see Table 4) responses. Taken together, the results suggest that members of different fan groups differ in the ways they express their fan identity.

Discussion

The purpose of the present research was to test whether there are similarities or differences in the routes that members of various fan groups take toward fandom membership and in the ways they express their fan identities. This test was conducted with a sample of furry, anime, and fantasy sport fans. As expected, the three fan groups differed in both route to discovery and expressions of their fan identity, although some similarities were observed. Both furries and anime fans tended to discover the fandom through the Internet, although anime fans were also drawn to anime through the media and clubs. Fantasy sport fans differed

from the other two fan groups in their being able to discover the fandom through friends and family. When it comes to fan identity expression, the three fan groups differed considerably: furies produced and displayed fan-related content, anime fans tended to consume content, and fantasy sport fans participated in, evangelized about, and researched their interest.

As noted in the introduction, very little research has examined routes to the discovery of fandom (Hills, 2014). Similar to past research with furies (Reysen, Plante, Roberts, & Gerbasi, 2016), the results of the present study found that furies discover the fandom primarily through the Internet. Just as noted in that study, most fans were searching for something and happened upon a furry piece of art, story, or comic, and then began to search more until eventually learning of the fan community. And, converging with prior research on sport fans (Smith et al., 1981; Wann et al., 2001), fantasy sport fans often discovered and joined the fandom through friends and family. In many cases, the respondents were encouraged by friends and family to start playing in fantasy sport leagues with them. And while there is little research formally testing the sources of induction into the anime fandom, the present finding that anime fans discover the community through media and clubs is consistent with interview responses in Napier's (2007) research on anime fandom. In the case of the former, many responses noted participants liking of anime on television when younger. Only later did they search out others who also enjoyed anime leading to membership in a club or the fandom. For the latter, a school club was their entrance into the anime fandom.

As with the varying routes to fandom discovery, the manner of identity expression differed across the fandoms. Furry fans express their fan identity through production of art, stories, and costumes, and display of group symbols (e.g., fursuit, tattoos, collar, clothing). Anime fans consume anime as a way of expressing their fan identity, including watching anime, and purchasing DVDs, manga, figurines, fan art, posters, collectables, and other merchandise (e.g., clothing). Fantasy sport fans participate in fan-related activities (i.e., playing fantasy sport), evangelizing (e.g., talking with other friends about playing), and research (e.g., following statistics and scores). The results are fairly intuitive and consistent with the nature of each of these communities: the furry community primarily revolves around art, the anime fandom around watching anime and reading manga, and the fantasy sport fandom around playing in competitive fantasy leagues. These results are also consistent with a social identity perspective (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), suggesting that participants' means of expressing their identities match what is normative within the group.

The present research is limited in the sampling of fans from these three fan communities. The survey was administered in English and thus may excluded fans from other cultural spaces where other languages are predominantly spoken. Additionally, furry fans were sampled at a convention and fantasy sport fans were solicited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk. Furry fans who were unable to attend that convention and fantasy sport fans that do not participate in MTurk surveys were thus excluded from this research. Although we expect their

responses would have been similar to those observed in the present research we cannot rule out the possibility that responses may have differed if fans from online communities would have participated.

To conclude, we examined fandom discovery and the expression of fan identity in three different fan groups. The groups differed considerably in both of these respects. These findings contribute to the research by providing new information about these aspects of fan identity. They also contribute to our understanding of non-mainstream, non-prototypical (e.g., non-sport fans) fan groups. Further research examining how these different fan expressions affect how the group is seen or one's own place within the group may be prove to be fruitful avenues of exploration for future research.

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Table 1

Observed (Expected) Discovery Route by Fandom

Route	Furry	Anime	Fantasy Sport
Internet	326 (283.5)	724 (689)	37 (114.5)
Friend	166 (178.7)	350 (434.2)	169 (72.1)
Partner	35 (18)	19 (43.7)	15 (7.3)
Family	12 (31.8)	61 (77.3)	49 (12.8)
Media	133 (127.8)	333 (310.6)	24 (51.6)
Search	23 (20.1)	51 (48.8)	3 (8.1)
Fandom	24 (11.7)	21 (28.5)	0 (4.7)
Club	51 (104.1)	336 (252.9)	12 (42)
Other	20 (14.3)	25 (34.9)	10 (5.8)

Table 2

Observed (Expected) First Way of Expressing Identity by Fandom

Express	Furry	Anime	Fantasy Sport	<i>df</i> (<i>N</i>)	X ²	<i>p</i> -Value	Cramer's V
<i>Produce</i>				2 (3985)	74.35	< .001	.137
Not Referenced	698 (757.3)	2549 (2471.1)	299 (317.7)				
Referenced	153 (93.7)	228 (305.9)	58 (39.3)				
<i>Consume</i>				2 (3985)	197.15	< .001	.222
Not Referenced	542 (464)	1333 (1514.3)	298 (194.7)				
Referenced	309 (387)	1444 (1262.7)	59 (162.3)				
<i>Participate</i>				2 (3985)	154.21	< .001	.197
Not Referenced	647 (633)	2149 (2065.5)	168 (265.5)				
Referenced	204 (218)	628 (711.5)	189 (91.5)				
<i>Display</i>				2 (3985)	95.54	< .001	.155
Not Referenced	627 (706.6)	2341 (2305.9)	341 (296.4)				
Referenced	224 (144.4)	436 (471.1)	16 (60.6)				
<i>Evangelize</i>				2 (3985)	35.98	< .001	.095
Not Referenced	846 (822.4)	2673 (2683.6)	332 (345)				
Referenced	5 (28.6)	104 (93.4)	25 (12)				
<i>Research</i>				2 (3985)	180.05	< .001	.213
Not Referenced	846 (836.1)	2750 (2728.2)	319 (350.7)				
Referenced	5 (14.9)	27 (48.8)	38 (6.3)				

Table 3

Observed (Expected) Second Way of Expressing Identity by Fandom

Express	Furry	Anime	Fantasy Sport	<i>df</i> (<i>N</i>)	X ²	<i>p</i> -Value	Cramer's V
<i>Produce</i>				2 (3776)	89.21	< .001	.154
Not Referenced	664 (733.9)	2426 (2365.5)	327 (317.6)				
Referenced	147 (77.1)	188 (248.5)	24 (33.4)				
<i>Consume</i>				2 (3776)	50.16	< .001	.115
Not Referenced	569 (506.9)	1537 (1633.8)	254 (219.4)				
Referenced	242 (304.1)	1077 (980.3)	97 (131.6)				
<i>Participate</i>				2 (3776)	13.60	.001	.060
Not Referenced	550 (556.7)	1830 (1794.4)	212 (240.9)				
Referenced	261 (254.3)	784 (819.6)	139 (110.1)				
<i>Display</i>				2 (3776)	59.77	< .001	.126
Not Referenced	660 (712.2)	2316 (2295.6)	340 (308.2)				
Referenced	151 (98.8)	298 (318.4)	11 (42.8)				
<i>Evangelize</i>				2 (3776)	35.49	< .001	.097
Not Referenced	801 (767)	2441 (2472.1)	329 (331.9)				
Referenced	10 (44)	173 (141.9)	22 (19.1)				
<i>Research</i>				2 (3776)	183.74	< .001	.221
Not Referenced	809 (779.9)	2529 (2513.6)	293 (337.5)				
Referenced	2 (31.1)	85 (100.4)	58 (13.5)				

Table 4

Observed (Expected) Third Way of Expressing Identity by Fandom

Express	Furry	Anime	Fantasy Sport	<i>df</i> (<i>N</i>)	X ²	<i>p</i> -Value	Cramer's V
<i>Produce</i>				2 (1760)	20.46	< .001	.108
Not Referenced	634 (661.1)	639 (619.4)	323 (315.6)				
Referenced	95 (67.9)	44 (63.6)	25 (32.4)				
<i>Consume</i>				2 (1760)	32.78	< .001	.136
Not Referenced	544 (496.2)	413 (464.9)	241 (236.9)				
Referenced	185 (232.8)	270 (218.1)	107 (111.1)				
<i>Participate</i>				2 (1760)	27.70	< .001	.125
Not Referenced	417 (458.9)	481 (430)	210 (219.1)				
Referenced	312 (270.1)	202 (253)	138 (128.9)				
<i>Display</i>				2 (1760)	39.81	< .001	.150
Not Referenced	616 (637)	583 (596.8)	339 (304.1)				
Referenced	113 (92)	100 (86.2)	9 (43.9)				
<i>Evangelize</i>				2 (1760)	35.12	< .001	.141
Not Referenced	714 (685.9)	629 (642.6)	313 (327.4)				
Referenced	15 (43.1)	54 (40.4)	35 (20.6)				
<i>Research</i>				2 (1760)	69.25	< .001	.198
Not Referenced	723 (707)	670 (662.4)	314 (337.5)				
Referenced	6 (22)	13 (20.6)	34 (10.5)				