

Chapter 33

Fans and Brands: Delineating Between Fandoms, Brand Communities, and Brand Publics

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ABSTRACT

Although fandom has a rich history within pop culture, it is difficult to know when fandom was formed and what constitutes a fandom. In this chapter the authors define fandom and its related activities, as well as delineate it from the similar fan-brand communities of brand communities and brand publics. A typology for fan-brand communities is presented with two dimensions: 1) motivation for engagement and 2) social status and relationship type. This typology can help guide researchers, brands, and marketers in effectively managing different subcultures of fans. This chapter may be used as a starting point for further understanding of fan-brand community-based relationships.

INTRODUCTION

Hannah is a young woman who is highly involved in a community formed around a mutual love of a specific entity. Every day she checks online forums to stay up to date and is known by others in the community as *the* biggest fan. Hannah routinely participates in staking, milestones, badging, and documenting (Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009). Staking refers to activities that set oneself apart, and Hannah does so through her reputation in the Midwest region as the most dedicated and involved fan. Hannah's first milestone moment was the first event she attended; at that event, she created authentic relationships with other individuals, marking a turning point in her die-hard loyalty. Hannah excelled in badging (presenting a signifier of a milestone), spending the next month decked out in fun and cheesy gear she received at her milestone event. Hannah also commemorated the event through documenting—she live-tweeted, discussed it with all her friends, and wrote a blog post about it. Hannah is forever loyal, dedicated, and

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affiliated... with the Mini Cooper brand community. The reader may have imagined Hannah's milestone event to be a first concert or comic convention, but the event she attended was the Keweenaw MINI Rendezvous, a four-day branded event complete with music, a MINI parade drive, and a brewfest for the Mini Cooper brand community.

Hannah's relationship with the entity (Mini Cooper) and her actions within the community are similar to those of a fan within a fandom. A fandom is defined as a social network or community formed around a common focal entity, which could be a person or people (like a music band), a team, or creative content such as a TV series or literature genre. However, because the entity of Hannah's affiliation is a for-profit brand that primarily sells tangible products, the social network created is a brand community rather than a fandom. The differences between traditional fandoms and brand communities lie not only in the nature of the focal entity, but also in consumers' motivations for engagement and the nature of the relationship between community members. These distinctions are important for brands, marketers, researchers, and participants to understand.

This chapter begins by providing a brief history of the fandom construct to offer context in exploring the distinctions between types of fan-brand communities. Next, it discusses the difference between brand communities and fandoms and addresses the question of whether such a division is meaningful. If so, what are the implications for the consumers and brands/entities that make up these communities? When is the line between fandoms and brand communities blurred? Does this difference matter in the lives of consumers, and how can the structure of the fan-brand networks impact brand equity? Fandom participation has undoubtedly impacted millions of lives and has become an accepted, normalized aspect of modern-day society. Further, thousands of brands and entities have been influenced, supported, and extended by the fans that engage in their communities. But the concepts of fandoms and brand communities remain foreign to many; even those that participate in fandom activities may have limited understanding of the scope and influence of fandoms on consumer behavior and society as a whole. Often fans themselves have differing accounts of what constitutes a fandom and what it means to be a fan. As offline society and the digital landscape are converging, communities such as fandoms are uniting fans together in unprecedented ways. Understanding what it means to be a part of a fandom, as well as how fan communities develop and thrive, will ultimately allow brands and entities to better harness the power of community. This chapter proposes a new typology that delineates between the subgroups of fan-based communities through an examination of motivations for engagement as well as the related community interactions and social hierarchies.

In order to develop this typography, the authors delineate between fandoms and brand communities by considering the differences and similarities in member interaction with the brand/entity as well as with other community members. The authors explore the potential impact and market outcomes of interaction with, and mobilization of, brand communities and fandoms on the brand/entity. The authors also explore the newly proposed term "brand public" and suggest that fandoms and brand communities are distinctly different from this construct as well. The digital landscape has allowed for expanded roles of the relationships in fandoms and brand communities—both between other fans/members and with the brand/entity itself—as well as an increase in a social hierarchy of the individuals; therefore, the impact of digital society on each type of community is addressed. Finally, the authors make predictions about the future of fandoms, brand communities, and brand publics and consider the implications for both brands and individuals within these fan-brand networks.

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