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IDEOLOGY AND AFFECT IN POLITICAL POLARIZATION AND FANDOM ONLINE

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Introductory statement

In recent years, scholarly attention has indicated the increased enmeshment of the political and entertainment media spheres, a change that has happened so gradually that it has not been as remarked upon as it should be. This is perhaps most observable in studies of community dynamics around both *political figures as fandom objects* and *media engagement as political signifiers*. The backdrop of digital surveillance capitalism, and the specific platform affordances on which these communities exist and interact, exacerbates both. Furthermore, beyond these inverse scenarios whose distinctive boundaries grow blurrier by the day, there is a third domain in the overlap, of the exploitation – or compensation – of fans, fandoms, and fan labor for political and financial gain. This, too, exists in a reactive feedback loop with the always-on conditions of our contemporary digital political economy. As consequence, there are prominent recent streams of work explicating what exactly the fields of fan studies and political sociology can offer each other for researching communities online in such contexts. Responding to both the current landscape and recent exemplary and novel scholarship, our panel presents four papers which each delve into an intersection of identity, community, and their ideological and affective ties. They investigate online affective community practices in reaction to fractured sociopolitical polarization and contribute to the expanding picture of interdisciplinary frameworks and methodologies available — and increasingly, required — to comprehend the motivations, justifications, and trajectories of community dynamics under such drivers.

To open, the first paper synthesizes in detail the recent scholarship in the nexus of fan studies and studies of political polarization (Sandvoss, 2019; Miller, 2020; Barnes, 2022; Nybro-Petersen, 2022). The utility and limitations of the interpretative frames of both fields are discussed, drawing on previous empirical research in the context of the increasingly interrelated study of fandomized politics and politicized media consumption in online communities. The paper questions the historical and contemporary distinction of these objects in academia, and predicts and proposes future research trajectories around the interplay of ideology and affect as motivations for identity formation online (Berlant, 2008; Stein, 2015; Papacharissi, 2016).

To follow, the second paper presents analysis of a case study of mobilization online around live-streamed Covid-19 investigations of the Brazilian government. It describes the practices of influential individuals around the livestreams, and how their tactics, reminiscent of tactics for social entertainment television engagement, resulted in direct impact on the investigations. With the landscape and context of the previous talk in-hand, this paper expands the discussion from shared conceptual frameworks to operationalizing into empirical study.

The third paper follows on the topic theme of live-streaming online, presenting a case study of identity formation responding directly to the first paper's provocation of what happens when ideological and affective motivations, amongst others, are in conflict. The paper investigates the actions and reactions of video gamers on the streaming platform Twitch as financial incentives encouraged them to play a game — *Hogwarts Legacy*, released 2023 — that generated them both peak attention along with widespread abuse

(Jacobs, 2023). Placing the ongoing ethical debates of the game as expository context, the paper analyses the strategies and tactics of the Twitch streamers in resolving their “identity projects” (Shankar, Elliott, and Fitchett, 2009) and personal brands amidst the controversy.

To conclude, the fourth paper returns to conceptual synthesis and the polarizing topic itself of fan labor in our current digital political economy. The paper then contextualizes and connects these commentaries to a longer, slower polarization within fan spaces on compensation for individuals. The paper argues that this debate, one in the roots of contemporary fandom and fan studies itself (Chin, 2014; Baruch, 2020), has accelerated due to the recent additions to the market of for-purpose apps which make commodification of fan labor more ‘seamless’ or at least, more widely accepted and expected. The alternative stance here, contrary to some shallow summaries by both media coverage and opponents in the debate, relies far more than might seem on an informed stance that is deeply woven into a sense of identity for its proponents. Far from amateurs without the awareness or knowledge on how to seek compensation for their fan labor, these communities make conscious choices to operate in gift economies with presumption of creative control, as conscious escapes from capitalism wherever they can make them. Such an observation is not only of interest to the panel as a case study outright on the dynamics and drivers of polarization in communities online, but furthermore for its implications for social participation under our current digital political economy, whereby, encouraged by monopolizing platforms, all community activity looks more and more like fan activity — activity people are working on methods to exploit.

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POLITICS AND IDEOLOGY OR IDENTITY AND AFFECT

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This paper seeks to explore how the continuum or the conditions in which passionate political participation and debate is a form of fandom. With the ubiquitousness of digital life, a life where pop culture exists in the same space as politics, and where fandom, meme culture, and public debate co-exist on platforms and even in the same comment threads, we examine the aforementioned continuum and, through two examples from the global north and global south, argue that ideology and politics now coexist with identity and affect, and that online political debate is motivated by affect in a way that mirrors what is well established as modes of communication within fandom/s.

Introduction

This paper will seek to explore how the continuum or the conditions in which passionate political participation and debate is a form of fandom. To do this we will first examine the literature of political participation and fandom to establish an interpretative framework for examining online political debate as a fan-like behaviour. Then we will turn to a case study to illustrate how ideology and politics now coexist with identity and affect.

Literature

In recent years there has been increasing interest in the intersections between politics and fandom, approached from several angles. There is a strong interest within a branch of fan studies in understanding how fandom and activism is connected, not least how fandom/s can inspire people to activist actions and engagements (Jenkins & Shresthova, 2012; Jung, 2012; Jenkins, 2015; Hinck, 2019). Lately, this has been expanded on by work explicitly and directly interested in politics, not least via the simultaneous celebrification of political figures and celebritisation of politics itself (Driessens, 2013), and how these mechanisms intersect and interact with an increasingly politically divided population and political discourse. Examples of this recent focus can be found in Barnes' (2022) recent book on fandom and politics, which uses fan studies as an interpretive lens through which to understand political debate and polarisation within debates. Also Nybro-Petersen's (2022) examination of conspiracy theories as play and fandoms, particularly using the concept of dark play to understand followers of conspiracy theories, while Reinhard et al (2022) similarly argue that QAnon is a form of fandom. The trajectory of former US President Donald Trump from businessman to TV celebrity to political candidate is perhaps one of the drivers of this interest, while simultaneously serving as a pertinent example of the increasing overlaps and confluences between fandom and politics. Such increasing intersections

suggest that a theoretical and methodological overlap could also be productive as a way of studying and understanding the political landscape of today.

Modes of Engagement

This political landscape is often understood as increasingly polarised; it is therefore timely to ask if, what, and how the aforementioned overlaps between fan engagements to politics function, and their expressions, including polarised discourses. As Sandvoss (2005, 3) argues, it is not the object that makes the fan, but rather the the mode of engagement with the object, what he terms “committed consumption”. We expand here on previous work on politics and fandom (Barnes, 2022) and on fandom critique and affect (Svegaard, 2021), to show how polarised discourses can be understood through the interpretive lens of fandom. This further enables us to understand a polarised debate as being based in fandom engagement as much as an ideological standpoint.

Fandom can be understood as an intimate public (Berlant, 2008) or, as Louisa Ellen Stein (2015) argues, a “feels culture”; a culture that is based in the sharing, exchange, and mutual understanding of emotional relations and reactions, not only to the object of one’s fandom/s, but also to one’s fellow fans. The ties within in-group of a fandom or similar culture are, then, predicated on shared emotions. Here it becomes clear how affect can compete with ideology. Considering this, it is also important to remember that it not just (positive) fandom, which inspires such passion, it is also anti-fandom (Gray, 2003; Jones, 2015; Gray, 2019; Sandvoss, 2019). The use of antipathy or hate makes it much easier for an in-group to believe sinister claims about an out-group member, such as a politician with an opposing viewpoint (Barnes 2022, 15f.)

Affect and Polarization

The fandom/anti-fandom poles thereby become another way of considering polarisation, one that again moves beyond or parallel to ideology. In this form of polarised discourse, it is not traditional political positions that are the poles, but a for/against or love/hate. This interpretive lens enables us to see the role that affect plays in polarisation. It is important to note, however, that when we use affect here, we do not mean the established concept of affective polarisation, though there are definite commonalities, but rather a use of affect that is more in line with the use of it by scholars such as Ahmed (2004), Berlant (2008) and Papacharissi (2016). Berlant’s concept of the intimate public is central, as is Papacharissi’s affective public, and Ahmed’s understanding of affect as something that can move us and contribute to the construction of in- and out-groups.

With this overlap established, one of the next questions to present itself is that of delineation. When is something political engagement? When is it passionate debate? When is it fandom? And is it even meaningful to make these distinctions? Through the use of two case studies to illustrate the process, commonalities as well as differences, we explore this delineation problem. Approaching the communication and use of fan-like affective discourses serves to examine this.

Case Study

We analyse the (fan) responses to Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen's communication on Facebook as an example of this complicated spectrum of fandom/debate/political engagement. We focus on responses relating to "minksagen", a contentious issue or scandal in Danish politics. During the COVID-crisis, all mink in Denmark were put down when a risk of further COVID mutation was identified. It quickly became apparent, that, due to complex legal minutiae, some of the mink were culled without proper legal justification. This breach of the farmers' constitutional rights remains a divisive issue in Danish political and public debate, including becoming the subject of electoral promises in the 2022 elections by parties in opposition to the then-government. However, post-election, the largest opposition parties are now in coalition with Frederiksen's Social Democratic Party, having resulted in the mink case not going to further investigation. Instead, the findings of a parliamentary commission criticised Frederiksen and her top official, while legal experts still debate the complexities. Most recently, a journalist has published a non-fiction book, researching the case and the mink industry as a whole.

Frederiksen has a strong following on Facebook, which is her primary social media platform (she does not have a Twitter account as opposed to most other high-profile Danish politicians), and this following is expressed also in support and fan pages and groups. Two such groups form the basis of our research here. We examine posts in the groups related to the mink case, and use inductive as well as deductive analytical methods to understand what the members of the group do to reconcile the case with their position as stated strong supporters of Frederiksen and her policies. This is particularly relevant regarding this case, as both groups were started around 2020, with one even bearing a name stating their support for Frederiksen's COVID policies. Out of this, we present findings showing the discourses and strategies that have emerged in the group as a way of responding to the mink case, and relate these to fan strategies, such as canon and fanon building and the push/pull of fandom vs. anti-fandom.

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FAN PRACTICES ABOUT SOCIAL TV DURING THE COVERAGE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC INVESTIGATION OF BOLSONARO'S GOVERNMENT

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Introduction and the Research Context

The following paper is a part of a bigger research project during 2021 and 2022 that analyzed social media data from the Twitter, Reddit, and YouTube networks to discuss the consequences of online misinformation, rumors, and conspiracy theories about the vaccination and vaccines during the "Covid-19 infodemic" in Brazil. The researchers want to find out which false messages were circulating and how do they affect the narratives around the pandemic. For that objective we rely on a combination of social media analytics methods and qualitative analysis to uncover harmful narratives and frames and identify opinion leaders. Our first research paper in this field has mapped different narrative categories on Brazilian twittersphere to understand the inhomogeneous anti-vaccination movements (Author et al, 2022). Our main results showed the stronger politicization of vaccines in terms of the polarization of the Brazilian context and that under the authoritarian and anti-science leader Bolsonaro, narratives that point to a strong division of political camps has played a stronger role. In this context a main player that has emerged from our dataset was the special Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry ("CPI da Covid"), which has led to the creation of a lot of content and discussions on social media, specifically on Twitter. Those political discourses have specific characteristics on a divided country such as Brazil as showed by Recuero & Stumpf (2021).

Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry (“CPI da Covid”)

Brazil was one most affected countries by the Covid-19 pandemic (Ferrante et al, 2021) nevertheless, the country was also simultaneously hit by “adverse effects” from the political scenario, such as misinformation, polarization and mismanagement that catalyzed the pandemic effects. Precisely for this reason, a special Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry (“CPI da Covid”) was instituted in the National Congress in April 2021. On April 13, 2021, the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry (CPI) on Covid-19 was created. Officially established in the Federal Senate of the Federative Republic of Brazil, this CPI aimed to investigate alleged irregularities and omissions in the actions of the federal government, under the command of now former President Jair Bolsonaro, during the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil. On July 14, 2021, the CPI was extended for another three months and the final report was presented on October 26, 2021. The report was approved and called for the indictment of 80 people, including the President of the Republic, Jair Bolsonaro. Its main objective was to investigate alleged irregularities and omissions in the actions of the federal government. The official investigation was TV broadcasted and widely followed by Brazilians on social media, which symbolically replaced Big Brother Brazil's (a reality TV show very famous) place among the most talked about issues in the country in the first months of its exhibition. This kind of phenomenon was more evident on platforms such as Twitch, Youtube and Twitter, reiterating the adhesion of Brazilians to Social TV practices. So, on Twitter specifically, the “CPI VIP area” emerged as a social phenomenon from the meeting of a few influential profiles that acted as “institutionalized filters” and guided the consumption of the CPI broadcasts through the platform, even directly influencing the investigation processes and being quoted at the National Congress a few times.

Fan Practices Around the “CPI Da Covid”: Intersections Between Politics and Pop Culture

In this paper, we intend to discuss these approximations between politics and pop culture in the Global South (Martino & Marques, 2022) from theoretical contributions that help to understand the phenomenon of Social TV in Brazil (Canatta, 2019) and even Fan Cultures (Author et al, 2021; Gunderman, 2020; Bennet, 2012 and others) that emerged around this set of profiles on Twitter. So, we conducted an exploratory research based on a Boolean search with some terms found on Twitter during CPI's exhibition. From the initial observation of this repercussion on the platform, it was possible to understand that some influential profiles were highlighted in the formation of Public Opinion and in the fight against misinformation along the live broadcast of the main sessions of the CPI: “Jaime Arrependi”, “Tesoureiros do Jair”, “Camarote da CPI” and “Desmentindo Bolsonaro”. After this phase, we analyzed these four profiles to identify characteristics of these content in publications on Covid-19's CPI. Our objective was to analyze how the production of content from these profiles mobilizes followers regarding the content being discussed in the sessions of the CPI.

Discussion of the First Results

Other essential elements were the terms most used by people and how they are articulated with the political positions in the network. The use of the hashtag

#cpidacovid indicates a kind of neutrality as it is a direct reference to the official name of the CPI, on the other hand, the use of #cpidocirco indicates a powerful government articulation, as it is the second most used while the opposition uses some more scattered as #cpidogenocidio which only appears in 4th place. In addition, the most common feelings linked to the terms used by people were Anger and Joy, indicating a latent polarization of the comments that came from all major cities in all regions of Brazil, especially São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. From the dataset that was gathered with Stilingue software, we've categorised nine (9) narratives: "Insulting government supporters", "CPI Celebration", "Acknowledgement of the profile at the Congress", "Celebration of allies", "Anti-vaxx government", "Engagement Litteracy", "President sons", "General Jokes" and "Covid-19 Mourn".

These findings suggest that Social TV practices, highly influenced by factors such as geographic localization, were mobilized as a strategy of Bolsonaro's government's opposers in social media through the deployment of humor, memes, and a network of creators articulated in sharing and engaging content. These mobilizations show that there are connections between entertainment and pop culture fan practices and politics. We aim to investigate these complementary aspects in future developments of this research through an intersectional approach considering more aspects about race, class, gender, generation, geographic spaces among other categories.

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NAVIGATING IDENTITY PROJECTS IN THE ERA OF TWITCH STREAMING: *HOGWARTS LEGACY*, PUBLIC PLAYING, AND CRISES OF PLEASURE

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In 2023, the Warner Brothers game *Hogwarts Legacy* was published across multiple platforms to massive success, with 12 million units sold in its first two weeks of release as Warner Brothers' biggest global launch in history (Maas, 2023). However, it was not released without controversy. The game's arrival emerged with heated debate, as despite the launch success, there was prominent coverage of boycott calls (Good, 2023). While Rowling didn't participate creatively in the game, she does benefit financially from its sales; the boycott calls argued, therefore, that playing the game was tantamount to endorsing the anti-trans causes that Rowling supports. For many gamers, this created a conflict in their identity between fandom and politics. Even as private as the choice felt, the constancy and immediacy of identity performance in the social media age allows for media consumption as public identifiers of political identity. In this way, unwanted political implications threatening media consumption can generate crises of pleasure (Soto-Vásquez et al, 2022).

For some, the choice between playing the game or not was made under greater strain. The role of video-game streamers on Twitch demands that they play games their audience recognizes, to maintain viewership and grow their channel. With the release of *Hogwarts Legacy*, users found that playing the game increased their visibility, with the game holding peak concurrent Twitch viewership of over 1.2 million between February 6 and 7 (Winslow, 2023). It became the single-player game with the highest number of concurrent viewers even before its official release, beating notable titles like *Cyberpunk 2077* and *Elden Ring* (Jacobs, 2023). But streamers found this viewership did not only bring positive attention. The vocal anti-Rowling contingent of the gaming community fomented a backlash against streamers playing the game, creating consequences for popular channels. The YouTube and Twitch duo *Girlfriend Reviews* were criticized for streaming the game on Twitch (Jacobs, 2023), even losing control of their subreddit. Others in the gaming community have drawn a harder line regarding identity and consumption. "If you purchase this game — if you praise its qualities and encourage others to 'support the developers' or 'treat yourself to a guilty pleasure' — you are making a choice that will harm the transgender community," Percy Ranson wrote for GamesHub, an Australian gaming news site, noting that they are transgender (Jacobs, 2023). The conflict between fan communities and ideologies regarding *Harry Potter* and *Hogwarts Legacy* remains a strong one, highlighting how personal identities and brands are wrapped up in the very public act of playing video games online.

The equivalence of consumer and political identity has taken on new meaning through the internet, resulting in a potential crisis of pleasure. This is a phenomenon when consumption is threatened by external forces, cognitive dissonance usually resulting in

public outbursts, misinformation, and increased politicization and tribalism associated with public consumption. For example, brands themselves are also increasingly advertising their products with the language and visuals of socially progressive movements around race, gender, and sexuality to target diverse identities (Kanai & Gill, 2021). However, this also means that WB Games promoting *Hogwarts Legacy* – or streamers trying to bring audiences to their channel – creates potential problems for their brands due to the negative associations caused by Rowling's views.

Outspoken streamers who damaged their public images reached for various tactics to fix them again in the eyes of their audience. Some streamers sought to separate their playing of *Hogwarts Legacy* from an endorsement of Rowling, by explicitly signaling that they were donating money to LGBTQ+ philanthropic organizations. Recently, Wallace, Buil, and de Chernatony (2020) defined "conspicuous virtue signaling" (CVS) as how consumers communicate about brands across social networks represent their own virtuous natures and link themselves to a brand's perceived morally-positive character. Both acceptance and rejection of brands via public displays are indicative of CVS in action (Tosi & Warmke, 2016; Wallace et al., 2020). The volume of backlash to streamers playing *Hogwarts Legacy* illustrates how the strong emotional connections to brands and the politicization of online consumption create the conditions necessary for a crisis of pleasure. Multiple Twitch streamers reported abuse and outcries in response to their streaming the game. Despite the nature of the abuse stemming from their public image being connected to an anti-LGBTQ+ stance, it continued even when the streamers attempted to turn their streams into philanthropic works for LGBTQ+ populations. Once the connection from consumption to identity had been forged, it was difficult to break.

One way to better understand the constant and curatorial connection between brand and identity is through the concept of "identity projects" (Shankar, Elliott, and Fitchett 2009) defined as "strategic configurations of objects, symbols, scripts, and practices to claim particular identity positions." To maintain identity projects, consumption must be made public in some way. However, the challenge with streamers and *Hogwarts Legacy* focused on the difficulty of navigating livestreaming. The game was immensely popular, and playing the game on Twitch aligned with the platform's affordances and incentives to generate views, but those same affordances created the potential for angry fans to voice their displeasure and potentially denigrate those streamers. Many streamers had to use multiple tactics and strategies to navigate this contentious period, if they did navigate it at all.

Online technologies and mediated experiences are linked to the visible consumption of media products. For example, the mediated experiences of theme parks (Soto-Vásquez, 2021) and international travel (Blackwood, 2019; Smith, 2018) on Instagram show how influencers self-represent their branded selves, part of the identity project formation. The attention and abuse received by Twitch streamers playing *Hogwarts Legacy* is part of the navigation process of these identity projects. Consequently, stating that one opposes Rowling's views and denigrates the purchase of *Hogwarts Legacy* is also potentially part of one's identity project. For example, Ranson, a games journalist, would fit their gaming community membership with their transgender identity to equate their identity project. Other viewers that engaged in abuse of streamers may be

navigating their identity project and different positions, which contributes to the controversy.

When one engages in consumption and behavior that runs counter to their established social identity, this creates potential cognitive dissonance for the individual and their social audience on platforms; in other words, it creates a crisis of pleasure. These crises often provoke public reactions, misinformation spread, and the politicization around consumption behaviors; for example, the very nature of purchasing from a Chick-Fil-A restaurant and discussing it online is linked to cultural and political ideals that are wrapped in identity. When a person whose values are opposite of Rowling's transgender views consumes *Harry Potter* content, there is a potential crisis of pleasure as the immediate pleasure of streaming or playing the game is countered by the cognitive dissonance of supporting a person whose ideals are not shared by the consumer. Hence, a crisis of pleasure occurs, one which potentially threatens the consumer's identity project(s).

This paper explores how Twitch users navigated their identity projects via crises of pleasure created by *Hogwarts Legacy*, if they did at all. It will address how the media consumption intersecting with identity formation is linked to Twitch's platform affordances and incentives to stream specific content, locating the production of culture and identity projects within a moment for online capitalist consumption and identity formation.

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COMPENSATION VERSUS CONTROL IN THE DIGITAL POLITICAL ECONOMY: POLARIZED PERSPECTIVES ON COMMODIFICATION OF FAN ACTIVITY ONLINE

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Introduction

A major fault line in internet culture coverage in recent years has been around ideas of “fan labor”. The term itself is not at all novel, being the subject of a special issue of *Transformative Works and Cultures* in 2014. But since then, the commodification of the specific *fannish* mode of engagement (Sandvoss, 2005) has greatly expanded outside of both fan spaces and fan objects. Scholarship of fan labor can be found now across social and behavioral sciences, media and communication studies, and increasingly in business and digital economics. Within our accelerating digital political economy, more players — creators and platforms alike — are recognizing the profit potential of fans and fan activity; however, not all agree on the specifics of its realization.

In this paper, we review recent events, as well as related commentary and coverage, surrounding the polarized topic of fan labor in the 2020s. We analyze the prominent discourses associated with specific dimensions, sub-topics, and groups in response to these events. From this, we observe that representation of the issue often fails to integrate both the breadth and depth of polarization on the topic within online community spaces. Most notably, beyond the visible public fault line on which the platform-creator relationship is negotiated, there lie decentralized communities which are analytically far further polarized in the sense of ideology, interaction, and interpretative foundations on the issue. But as other groups of hobbyists monetize as influencers and creators, the seeming ease with which they situate themselves in fulfilling self-employment creates a model for fans to do so within their own communities, establishing a personal brand as a fan-creator from which can be generated a positionality of authority and profit. The paper argues that this debate — one in the roots of contemporary fandom and fan studies itself — has accelerated and complexified due to the recent additions to the market of for-purpose apps which make commodification of fan labor more ‘seamless’ or at least, more widely accepted and expected.

Fan Labor In Contemporary Digital Economy

There are many dimensions to the contemporary realizations of commodifying fan labor. An often-unclarified distinction is the difference between financialization of fans — e.g., fans signing up for paid subscriptions to creators — and financialization of fandom —

fans subscribing to other fans and turning fans into creators, in a way specific to this era of platformization and suffusion of fan spaces by capital.

In the terminology of recent studies on political polarization, various groups may be conceptualized as differing on ideological grounds with a strong affective response — while retaining strong interaction network ties and relying on the same fundamental interpretative logics. Expanding this picture is the existing communities online of people *wholly* against the very idea of commercializing fan modes of engagement or their outputs. Where the debate above is a push-and-pull to find the balance of rights and support between where fan labor is considered *exploitation* or deserved *compensation*, these decentralized groups “basically just want to be left alone by both aggressive capitalists and large corporations” (Broderick, 2021). They have been known to prioritize the practices of gift economies, with free and open digital spaces for sharing, creating grassroots communities, and embedded senses of ownership quite separate from the commercial copyright of the original properties. This sits in direct contrast to web3-centric systems of “underlying ownership of tokens gives fans a built-in business model and incentivizes derivative creation” that venture capitalist blogger Li Jin observes in contrasting web3 and web2 creative projects (Jin, 2022).

These are community divides with influence from generational differences, differences in economic stakes and wealth distribution, ideological differences and affective differences — for many, their stance is deeply entrenched in their understanding of their identity. Fandom is a matrix of different status positions, with fans moving and re-negotiating their relationships with other fans and with fannish objects over time (Chin, 2018).

This paper articulates recent evolutions in the negotiation of labor within fan communities. These communities have historically operated on foundationally separate socioeconomic interpretations to mainstream spaces online. Broad commentaries offered externally from internet journalists and internally from community opponents, especially recently, often diagnose this as a lack of knowledge or confidence. On the contrary, these communities are developed by people quite *keenly* experienced with the drivers of digital economy. Far from amateurs without the awareness or knowledge on how to seek compensation for their fan labor, these communities make deliberate choices to operate in gift economies with presumption of creative control, as conscious escapes from capitalism wherever they can make them: for example, the repository Archive of Our Own, founded in 2008 in direct opposition to contemporaneous monetization platform attempts, remains nonprofit and open-source.

Recently, small networks of creators have embraced limited forms of monetization, in contrast with the well-known “gift economy” self-designation of fandom in the past (Turk 2018, Hellekson 2009), in which fan activity is performed for free and compensated via status and emotion. Though they still turn away from hyped, Web3-style tokenization, they rely on more individualizable commission and tip schemes with tools such as Patreon, Ko-fi, and Gumroad, “spinning up new systems of social status which reflect their own priorities” (Rosenberg, 2023). In 2017 Mel Stanfill noted cautiously that the commercialization of the Web has put new pressures on fans as their works and communities increasingly exist at the mercy of third parties on platforms they do not

control,” and asserts that the gift economy had up to then been the “soul” of fandom—but this default assumption is being challenged by changes in the platform practices of newer generations of fans.

The Financialized Future

The live debate presented here – both its discourses and their proponents – is of interest most simply in structure as a case study of polarization dynamics online. Existing community tension, where generational and economic factors have disconnected groups interactionally and interpretationally, is then stress-tested by external economic forces of extraction and exploitation, developing further divides along the ideological perspectives of these relationships.

Chin’s description of fandom as a space in which “fans with possession of “popular cultural capital” build on the fan’s social capital and symbolic capital” is already outdated. We are at a point in which thanks to technological and platform tools and the increasing normative acceptance of monetization it is as easy for a fan as for anyone else online with a certain amount of subcultural (social/symbolic) capital to convert that into actual capital, which is to say, money.

The question then is how this conversion is perceived and situated within the evolving social matrix of different fandom spaces. While comments on posts about AO3’s non-profit status and other issues of fandom monetization are generally in favor of protecting fandom’s ongoing existence as a “gift economy,” and the maintenance of the “free” fandom tradition passed down from pre-digital fandom elders, this is a self-selecting sample size and more research is needed to determine attitudes towards fandom monetization by those with differing opinions. Under our current digital political economy, all community activity looks more and more like fan activity, and fan activity is increasingly coming to resemble the commercial chaos of the wider “creator” ecosystem. How will “fan” continue to hold its own as an individuated identity?

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