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SHAME AND THE FIGURE OF THE FANGIRL: THE SOCIAL DYNAMIC OF SHAME IN POP MUSIC FANDOMS ONLINE

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Abstract

Approaching shame from a queer theoretical framework, this paper will consider how the dynamic of shame operates within popular music fandoms online. Fangirls are subject to and participate in external and lateral shaming to enforce femmephobic ideals of normative femininity within fandom spaces. This leads to the derision of these fandoms, often labelled as 'toxic'. However, shame is also used productively in these spaces – shame has been made a criterion of community bonding and shared intimacy between fangirls. Drawing on surveys and interviews, this paper aims to uncover how fangirls ultimately negate and rework experiences of shame through participation in pop music fandoms online, as this collective shame strengthens community ties and feelings of kinship among fangirls.

Research questions to be discussed

1. In what ways is shame externally perpetuated against fangirls of popular music, as well as within popular music fandom?
2. How do fangirls rework and negate this shame through their fandom communities and practices?

Background

Shame is often mentioned as a common, marginalizing feeling among fans who participate in fandom, and is also a distinctly gendered experience (Asquith, 2016; Chin & Morimoto, 2013; Sedgwick, 2003). Fannishness and femininity have always been theorized as inextricably linked, constructing feminized, and therefore shamed, communities surrounding cultural objects (Gerrard, 2022; Jenkins, 1992). Not only are fangirls shamed by wider society based on cultural expectations of good taste, shaming is also perpetuated *between* fangirls, in order to maintain the boundaries of ideal online fandom, and therefore, the boundaries of normative femininity.

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However, this shame also provides the foundation for the initiation of fulfilling and intimate relationships between fangirls. Shame is productive in this sense, as the social dynamic of shame produces the online spaces in which fandom thrives, through shared experiences of shame. This paper will therefore explore how shame is both experienced, yet ultimately reconstructed through participation in online popular music fandoms by fangirls.

In the context of my research, the term ‘fangirl’ represents a fan of a cultural product that has been deemed feminine. Colloquially, a fangirl often denotes a young female fan who displays extreme passion and devotion for a cultural product (Bucy, 2025). However, the term has evolved into a catch-all phrase deployed in popular media and modern vernacular to represent a predetermined link between femininity and pop music, heterosexual desire and mass consumption (McCann & Southerton, 2019). The fangirl is often presented as the scapegoat for these ‘toxic’ fandoms who engage in boundary policing of fans. It is not required for people labelled as a fangirl to be a girl, in respect to their age or gender identity – rather the term is more often deployed to denounce a set of undesirable (feminine) behaviors and characteristics.

Methodological approach

My theoretical approach to shame hinges on the notion of shame as a social dynamic. As Sedgwick (2003) contended, shame is a compound emotion with unpredictable presentations – it is dismantling, yet foundational. Shame strikes you to the core of who you are, but also serves as the genesis for these questions in the first place. Rather than subscribing to the therapeutic view of shame as something to be rid of or move beyond, this project frames shame as a structuring point of fangirl subjectivity.

My research is informed by queer theory and methodology. Queer theory recognizes that research can be emotional – allowing for the exploration of sites not previously verified by the academy as serious (Dadas, 2016). Fandom studies has a rich ethnographic tradition, which has placed emphasis on the sophistication, seriousness and complexity of fan products, structures and economies (Busse & Gray, 2011). This project instead privileges the emotional response to popular music fandom, daring to take these emotions seriously, emphasizing how emotions structure these communities, and how they foster the connections between fangirls.

It is these emotions that lends pop music fandom its proximity to femininity, that results in its derision under ubiquitous cultural misogyny. Femininity has largely been overlooked within academic spaces because of the “canonical tendency” (Hoskin, 2021, p. 14) of femme scholars to work through theory utilizing life writing and personal narrative. This project is therefore distinctly feminist in its epistemology, particularly in my own position as an “aca-fan” (Jenkins, 1992) which recognizes my personal emotional investment in the project.

This project conducted a cross-sectional study on popular music fans based in Australia, who were over the age of eighteen, using both surveys and interviews. The survey contained four open-ended questions to gain insight feeling lives of fangirls, with

the call for participants advertised on social media. Thirty of these respondents then participated in a follow-up interview. The twofold method was purposeful as the survey asked open ended questions that mimics the “style of interaction” (McCann & Southerton, 2019, p. 51) of fans online, and the interviews enabled a more nuanced understanding of themes discussed in the survey.

Findings

Fangirls are acutely aware of the ways in which they are shamed and can often identify external sources and experiences of shame. The study participants identified the vitriol attached to the term, as well as the association of fandoms as being ‘toxic’ or ‘parasocial’. Fans also pointed to the cultural hypocrisy that exists in discussing popular masculine cultural products, identifying the lack of vitriol levelled toward sports fans.

Despite being aware of the external cultural devaluation of their passion, fangirls often engage in lateral shaming to regulate the boundaries of normative fandom, and therefore of normative femininity. The same derision that is levelled toward fangirls externally defines these boundaries; the connection between the term fangirl and the image of a screaming, boy-crazy cultural zombie aids in what I have termed the good fan/bad fangirl dichotomy. The good fan therefore aspires to distance herself from any association to this image, while the bad fangirl is rejected or mocked for exhibiting these improper, *feminine* behaviors. These behaviors constitute the so-called ‘toxic’ fandom that has become the ubiquitous perception of popular music fandom, exemplifying how this regulation ultimately hinders fangirls within their own communities.

However, shame is also used as a collective impetus for community connection. A counterpublic is called into existence through the circulation of texts to an imagined community (Warner, 2005). When fans interact online, they do so for an audience with presumed contextual understanding of norms, values and meanings. Therefore, when fangirls lean into their shame to construct the relationships and communities, convalesced around their passion, they construct an imagined public. The active processes of knowledge generation, familial relationships and connection is often a point of pride for fangirls, subverting the shame that resides in the fangirl experience. This project argues that this exemplifies the social dynamic of shame, for these experiences would not occur, if not for shame.

Relevance

Despite the negative aspects of shame, which result in vigilant privacy and strict boundaries within fandoms, shame is also utilized in a productive, affective way through fandom communities online. As one respondent explained, “identifying as a “fangirl” has become a way to celebrate my passion and dedication... challenging stereotypes and showcasing the depth and intelligence of fan communities”. Ultimately, popular music fangirls online represent the conflicting social dynamic of shame, breaking down the regulatory purpose of shame.

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