Contemporary participative TV audiences: Identity, authorship and advertising practices between fandom

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Abstract:
This article looks at how TV audiences articulate their identity as fans, paying special attention to authorship and advertising roles in the age of convergence culture. It is divided into three main sections. The first part of the article draws on a panorama on fan studies. Then the second part focuses on the methodology. We sent a questionnaire out on social networks in order to collect data on the role of fans, gift economy and the links between fandoms and official productions. Finally, the results and conclusions are analyzed and drawn.

Keywords: *Game of Thrones*, Fandom, Fanadvertising, Engagement, Content Production.

1. Introduction

In the current television environment, the reception of television texts and contents for fans is not limited to the precise moment of the broadcasting of the show on a channel, but goes beyond this, thanks to several activities that fans express and practice within a virtual community. It can be seen as an endless circle, even a cycle, in which fans watch the episode, log on to a forum, discuss it with other members, search for the latest news and spoilers, play interactive Alternate Reality Games related to the show, and stay surrounded by the show atmosphere.

      Moreover, today, fans are more and more creative and produce content, meaning and activities. Actually, fans are TV viewers who not only watch a program but also write

fan-fictions and cultural reviews, produce fan-art, create videos, websites, and find some other fans to talk to and share their passion with (Jenkins, 1992). Following Jenkins' seminal work on the Trekkies community, fans are seen as an expert audience who perform, share, and produce activities and creations in a community of practices, called fandom (Jenkins, 2008). Roberta Pearson states: 'The digital revolution has had a profound impact upon fandom, empowering and disempowering, blurring the lines between producers and consumers, creating symbiotic relationships between powerful corporations and individual fans, and giving rise to new forms of cultural production' (2010: 1). Fans are part of a social audience, which means that they are part of a group, of a community. Sharon Marie Ross explains why fans are different from the average TV viewers, mainly because of this notion of belonging to a community: 'A social audience can be thought of as a collective; people come together (sometimes literally) to watch a show, guided in part by the work of the television industry. Spectators, on the other hand, are individuals who engage with a TV show but who may or may not do so with any sense of belonging to a larger collective of viewers (either symbolically or literally)' (2009: 7). Fans are part of a participatory culture in which they contribute to TV series using new technologies and interactivity, using second screens and social TV possibilities to engage and discuss with other spectators. As fans 'have often been categorized in terms of their modes of participation, with that participation often usually defined in terms of production' (Zubernis & Larsen, 2012: 16), it is interesting to focus at how this audience articulate their own identity as fans.

Currently, in the academic field we are more concerned about linguistic debates, in order to define a series of practices and types of (active) audiences, and perhaps we are leaving aside the fans themselves (or at least those considered as such) and their stories. The academic debate does not seem to agree on the definition of what a fan is and what is not a fan and, in most cases, this is not a linguistic problem but rather a sense of identity that only fans can answer themselves. The aim of this study is to analyze fan identity through three very connected axes and research questions:

1. *Fan definition* or *what is to be a fan?* In a recent study (Bourdaa & Lozano Delmar, 2015), we analyzed *Game of Thrones* and what characteristics are important in the life of a fan. With a qualitative analysis we were able to identify five most common reasons why respondents considered themselves *Game of Thrones* fans: (1) their devotion to the show and (2) their experience of it as something that goes beyond the simple act of reception, (3) the urgency in watching every episode, (4) the fact that they collect memorabilia from the show and (5) the fact they are already a fan of the universe via the books. One of the conclusions raised by this study was that 'French and Spanish fans are not keen on defining themselves as fans, and when they do, they do not engage in many of the activities that are associated with the performance of fandom, such as creating fan artworks' (2015).

2. *Fan as authors*. As we discussed before, participative audiences have been categorized in terms of production and creativity, and so we want to explore here if these audiences feel

part of the production process of the TV Show. In the above mentioned study, 67% (Spain) and 70% (France) of respondents considered online activities and user-generated content created by fans to be important and part of the fandom (2015). Nevertheless, only 29% (Spain) and 20% (France) of the respondents reported engaging in online activities related to the series: live tweeting, Tumblr, creating or watching subtitled episodes, or writing or reading fan art and fan fiction (2015). So, the main questions we pose here are: do fans consider themselves as auteurs? Do they see their production as a part of the story? Is fan identity linked to user-generated content?

3. *Fan as advertisers*. Today, some studies are starting to analyze the relation between TV Show fandom and advertising, and try to prove that fans can be a valuable element in the marketing strategy. One example would be the Ultimate Lost Fan Promo Contest, which was created to promote the final episode of the TV series *Lost* (ABC, 2004-2010). For this reason, ABC's official website introduced an online trailer maker tool that allowed every spectator (who now came to be known as a prosumer,[1] or, one who consumes and produces content at the same time) of the show to create his/her own video promoting the end of the series. The winning video, entitled 'Convergence' and shot by Sam Balcomb (2010), was broadcast on TV as a trailer for the final episode of the show. Fans of the series generate advertising content to promote their favorite product. In another example, producers of *Orange Is The New Black* (Netflix, 2013-) asked fans to take selfies wearing orange each Wednesday and to share the pictures on social networks with a specific hashtag #onwednesdayswewearorange. All these prosumer actions bring awareness around the TV show, are supported by fan communities, and offer free advertising for the producers. The producers of AMC *Fear The Walking Dead* (2014-) recently asked fans to submit their artworks (gifs, fan arts, drawings) to Tumblr in order to promote their favorite scenes and moments from the first two seasons of the series.

In this sense, producers and TV channels tend to re-appropriate fan activities to promote their shows in a movement that Lozano, Ramos and Hernández-Santaolalla have defined as 'fanadvertising': 'those fan-created contents that contribute to reinforce and strengthen the image of a determined product and brand. Therefore, these creations can be considered advertising material' (2013: 351). With this in mind, we wanted to know if fans consider themselves marketers of their favorite TV show and if they actually are engaged in these kinds of actions.

2. Methodology
In order to study fans' identity, we have chosen a qualitative approach (Patton, 2002) with online questionnaires addressed to fans. Taking the above three axes into account we proposed the following questions in order to better understand Fan Identity:

- Why do you consider yourself a fan?

- Do you produce/create texts related to the TV show? Why?
- Do you think that by doing this online activity you become a part of the TV show? Why?
- Do you think these creations could be considered as canonical texts?
- Do you participate in marketing campaigns organized by producers?
- Do you see yourself as a marketer for your TV Show?

Regarding the data, we collected 34 interviews through an open online Google Form. We asked participants if they considered themselves fans of any TV series, and all of them stated they are fans of at least one TV show. Participation in the survey was voluntary and it was sent randomly by posting a public Google Form link via Twitter and Facebook. It was then shared and retweeted through various networks of people. The period of participation was open from May 5th to June 15th, 2015. We assigned a code to each of the participants (R1, R2, etc.) and we processed all responses. We also asked participants to tell us the country they were from. We analyzed 13 answers from Spanish participants, 9 from United States participants, 3 from the UK, 2 from Australia, and 1 each from Argentina, Turkey, New Zealand, Germany, France, Finland and Brazil.

Although this sample cannot be taken to be representative of all fan viewers, the results from this study allow us to draw some conclusions about the perception of fan identity as a whole.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. *Fan definition*
According to the survey results, most of the respondents agree to be called fans because they engage in compulsive and repetitive consumption of their favorite TV show. For example, one of the responses noted: 'I wait anxiously for the next episode to come' (Respondent nº2). For the respondents, the simple act of watching the episodes, sometimes in a sense of urgency to avoid spoilers for example, make them fans of the series, more than a creative activity around the show. However, many respondents are therefore eager for knowledge, for ancillary contents and paratexts and they want to know everything regarding the TV show, gathering as much information as they can, keeping up with the latest news on the series and consume as many texts as they can connected to the show: 'I don't just watch the TV show, I like to be informed about everything and consume every product related to it' (R6) or 'I spend a lot of time increasing my knowledge about them and enjoying them in a special way' (R22), emphasizing the time investment of fans in their search for knowledge. Some fans go beyond the text itself and search different kinds of texts: 'As well as watching the shows I also seek out transformative works and discussions on the Internet so my activity extends beyond just watching them on screen' (R24).

Therefore, discussion and interaction with others also seems to be a common element, reinforcing the importance of the communal aspects of fan practices; of the social community and the sense of belonging to a fandom. 'I do more than just watching the programmes. I interact with other fans, create fan works for the shows and actively seek out other information regarding the shows' (R25). Within the fandom, fans share a common interest in the shows they love but also find some intellectual stimulation, challenges and friendships. Fandoms can thus be considered both an interpretative community (Radway, 1984) in the sense that fans will decode together the meanings of the narrative, and also a social community in the sense that fans share a social bond. Fans 'take pleasures in the fact that they are part of a specialized social audience while also working to defend their text as worthy of a broader social audience' (Ross, 2008: 49).

More than the plots, or the universe depicted in the show, what make fans engage emotionally with the show are the characters and the relationships between the characters. Usually, they care about the characters and have a strong link with them: 'I have a huge affection for the characters' (R5), 'Something awakens inside of me when I admire these characters' (R14). Usually, the affection for the characters is what triggers the writing of fanfictions, as fans will rely on fantasized or canonical relationships to create their stories. Fans' creativity is exacerbated by a paradox that makes fascination for the text but also frustration when the stories' orientations collide. In that sense, some respondents consider themselves to be fans because they produce any kind of creation or work or any participation in organized fandoms and communities organized around shared practices, underlining their active reception of the show:

> First of all, I am emotionally and critically invested in the series and its trajectory (in this case, *Sherlock*). Far from the casual viewer, I was immediately interested in other people's reactions when I first saw the first episode. So, I did a Google search. Doing this propelled me instantly back to being active in a fandom, a space I hadn't inhabited in over 10 years. I blog/Tweet, I read meta, I read fanfic, I actively engage with other users who like the things about Sherlock that I like (specifically, the ship Johnlock)' (R30).

3.2. *Fan as author*

Around 45% declare that they produce/create texts related to their favorite TV show. Among them, the main content created are fanfictions and blog posts: 'I write FanFiction, because I ship #KeithandAllura, writing is my sanity; it brings together fans from all other the world' (R3). Following Eate's (2015: 22) definition, we describe fan fictions as works of texts by fans centered on a canon or fantasied plot that extend the storyworld. Fan fictions are a good example of fans' creativity as they often rework the source material, and of their ability to engage in an active reception. Moreover, with their works, fans want to extend the storyworld, mixing canon stories with fanon stories in a movement that Henry Jenkins called 'performance' (2011). Fans will produce their own ancillary content, filling the gaps left by

the producers in the stories. 'Yes, I write fan fic and occasionally produce graphic art. Because I consider myself to be a writer and I like the creative outlet that fanworks bring. I write because I want to expand on the series I watch' (R25).

From the other 55%, many respondents say that they do produce some activity on Twitter but they don't consider this activity relevant. Live-tweeting TV shows using hashtags is considered as a collaborative viewing experience. Nonetheless, some respondents confirm that they enjoy reading/consuming texts produced by other fans: 'I do read and analyze a lot of fan fiction and fan activity. I don't actually write fan fiction because I don't feel educated enough in the speech and characterization conventions to pull it off' (R31). Some of them don't produce texts because they do not consider themselves creative enough: 'I do critical analysis of some shows. But if you mean fanfiction or things of that nature then not really. Mainly because (for the latter) I don't feel that I'm creative enough to work with and produce a text that is for others to enjoy that inhabits the same universe' (R28).

Most of our interviewees don't consider themselves part of the TV Show by producing works related to it. Instead, most of them say they belong first to a community. Therefore, there is a strong sense of belonging within fandoms (Bourdaa, 2012): 'I have become part of the fanbase for the show, and that can affect the show' (R1), 'Not necessarily part of the TV show itself, but more part of the community around the show. It helps you connect to the material and feel more a part of it' (R4).

However, fans seem to agree that when they act as mediators for preventing the cancellation of a TV show they can be considered as taking part in the production of the show: 'I don't consider myself part of it in terms of creation but I do in terms of evolution. Before, show continuation and evolution depended only from audiences. Today, social networks and blog commentary allow creators to have an audience's feedback and, if the wish, to develop their text according to its followers "likes"' (R6). In this sense, the authorship seems to be related to the industry product and its life, not the content creation or diegetic expansion.

Regarding the issue of canonicity, most of the respondents consider these fan-created contents as fanon and not canon. Most of the respondents agree to let their series' authors define the canon of the fictional universe. They believe that authenticity of the text lies in the hands of the producer. 'I think that canon must be managed by the work's creators to avoid discrepancies and mistakes' (R7). Some of them gave credit to those stories which explore untold parts of the story, providing they are consistent and coherent with the main narrative: 'You could consider canon those stories with characters who are not well defined or those where you tell something that doesn't contradict the main series. If you change the story then it is not part of the official story' (R10). The storyworld, the bible created by the producers is the canon, what gives credits to the authenticity of the show.

Some others argued that canon depends on the quality of the written material: 'I feel that if it is a well written, widely known, and popular interpretation of the show and its

characters then yes it can be canonical' (R28). 'There is certainly a sort of canonicity in fanon. And I often wonder if there is any effect on fanon on canon. *Sherlock* is still being written, actively created. I would like there to be: the fanon stories are so very rich and intelligent' (R30).

3.3. *Fan as advertisers*

This notion of fans as advertisers is closely linked to the commercial relation with the producers and how channels, showrunners, marketers use fans' works and activities to promote their shows. For example, *Game Of Thrones* asks fans to produce original contents via interactive websites such as *Join The Realm* (to create a house banner) or *Beautiful Death* (to post fan arts) in order to freely promote the seasons of the show. Fans are then asked to share their produced contents with their community and in the public sphere, bringing awareness to the show and the paratexts surrounding it. *Hannibal* during the hiatus between season 2 and season 3 created a contest, asking fans to send art works that summarize their perception and reception of the show. Many contributions pointed out to the relationship between Will and Hannibal, emphasizing the importance of slash contents in the community. Working from the concept of a 'hybrid economy' set out by Lawrence Lessig, Paul Booth (2010) develops the idea of the *Digi-Gratis economy,* which implies a reward economy and a gift economy for the fans. This new economy promotes social relationships in a digital world and amounts to connecting the production and consumption of media content on an equal footing. The ARGs are a good example of a mash-up between a standard economy (promotion of a media text) and the reward economy (community work and play). On the other hand, Abigail de Kosnik (2009) fears that fans' creativity and contents might only profit commercially the media corporations, using fans as a market bait to promote their shows. Presenting a case study on the *Battlestar Galactica* videomaker toolkit proposed by Syfy to fans of the show, Suzanne Scott states that 'When ancillary content models do actively attempt to replicate the reciprocity of fandom's gift economy by encouraging fans to submit their creative fan works (typically through contests for fan film or fan vids, or galleries for uploaded fan art), the legal and creative strictures they place on fans circumvents their efforts' (2009).

Gift economy or fan advertising play a huge part today in the balance between canon and fanon contents, and in the way media industries see the labor of fans, trying to capitalize on it to promote their official content for free. However, our study shows that few fans engage in the creations of contents in order to promote their show and to give materials to media corporations to use freely. Mostly, they play the part of gatekeepers and advocates of the shows, in their fandoms or in the public sphere. Most respondents say they do not actively participate in marketing campaigns created by producers or broadcaster to foster creativity and contents from fans. They don't consider themselves as 'a business partner; I'm a fan' (R17). However, most of them do consider themselves advertisers: 'No. I am an involuntary publicist at best. I have no interest in getting other people to watch my show, as long as there are enough people watching for the show to survive' (R17),

'DEFINITELY. I joke all the time that the BBC and Benedict Cumberbatch should pay me a salary because of how much I promote and proselytize about the show' (R31).

Fans are part of a community, a fandom, and they share contents within this fandom and in the public sphere, in a movement called 'spreadable media' (Jenkins, Green, Ford, 2013). Most respondents compare this role of advertiser to the one of a preacher who does, for instance, posting, tweeting, and word of mouth in order to get more people to engage with the TV show: 'Yes. It's good to help other fans engage with the show and bring more fans in' (R26), 'In some weird way, yes, I do. All the things that are involved with a show being popular and getting more people to watch come from the fans (and good advertising) so I feel that I'm as much of a marketer as someone who designs the campaigns' (R28),

There is a sense of a gatekeeping role that could be compared to a religious engagement. The spreading abilities of fans, as opinion leaders is an important part of their activities (Jenkins et al., 2013): 'If I like a TV show I recommend it', 'When I love a TV series or episode I share it in social networks' (R12), 'I like to get friends to watch my favourite shows, and we often organise parties where we watch something together. I will share links to the show on Facebook and Twitter' (R4). Fans, with their online activity, their sharing and their community, can spread the word on a TV show and act as mediator in order to enroll newcomers in the series' universe: 'I think more than participating in the marketing organised by the show, my online activity (reposting/recommending/discussion) can reach new fans and by others may be deemed more authentic that the producers (who have commercial goals behind their marketing), whereas fans view other fans activities as 'labour of love' etc' (R24).

4. Conclusions

To summarize, we could say that this work has allowed to confirm some of the results obtained in a previous research (Bourdaa & Lozano Delmar, 2015) and to analyze with a qualitative approach the concept of fan as an author and advertiser.

Regarding our research question *what is to be a fan?*, we can deduce that the four main reasons for which viewers consider themselves fans are the following ones:

- Viewing episodes more than once in an addictive mode of consumption.
- Collecting material related to the series.
- Immersive reception: identification with characters
- Experiencing the show as something that goes beyond the simple act of reception: knowing everything, talking about the series, searching the Internet for additional information, and keeping constantly up to date on the latest news on the series are some examples.

In fact, these four reasons are compatible with the ones obtained in our analysis of the reception of *Game of Thrones* (Bourdaa & Lozano Delmar, 2015), confirming that the fan as

an active producer à la Jenkins is not how viewers see fans in general. Most respondents pay special attention to the 'community' aspect: discussion and interaction seems to be the most important element in defining fandom and user-generated content doesn't seem to be a shared practice between fans.

Nevertheless, we have to be aware, as Hills (2002) points out, that 'the ethnographic process of "asking the audience", although useful in many cases, constitutes a potentially reductive approach'. Hills argues against the idea of 'fan knowledgeability' and states that asking the audience is not a guarantee of knowledge (2002: 66). In this study the main aim was to draw some first conclusions about TV show fandoms' identities and activities worldwide. Thus, the analysis, though by no means representative of all the viewers or all the fans, still allows us to focus mainly in two particular roles: fan as author and (less explored) fan as advertiser or marketer.

When asked about authorship, most respondents agreed to establish a clear difference between canon and fanon materials. They don't see themselves as authors but as participants in a community, in a fandom, around the TV show. It is also relevant to say that almost none of the respondents considers him/herself a fan because of any kind of creation or production work or any participation in organized fandoms and communities of practices. Only three respondents pointed out this aspect when asked about their identity as a fan. Despite that, around 45% acknowledge that they produce/create texts related to their favorite TV show. It seems, then, that fan identity is more connected to modes of consumption, immersive reception, experiencing or collecting than content creation. This reinforces the theories of Fiske (1992) and Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) on fans' productions and activities. Fiske (1992) classifies fans' productivity in three categories: a semiotic one, an enunciative one and a textual one where fans produce contents. On the other hand, Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) established their taxonomy of fans, from consumers to fans, cultists, enthusiasts and producers, depending on their engagement in the fandom and their productivity. Today, there still is an ongoing debate around the concepts of 'affirmative' and 'transformative' fans (terms originally coined by Obsession_inc):

> Affirmative fans tend to collect, view, and play, to discuss, analyze, and criticize. Transformative fans, however, take a creative step to make the worlds and characters their own, be it by telling stories, cosplaying the characters, creating artworks, or engaging in any of the many other forms active fan participation can take (Hellekson & Busse, 2014: 3-4).

Part of the academic interest in transformative fans is 'that there exist actual artifacts that can be studied and analyzed' (Hellekson & Busse 2014: 4). As Hills points out, 'Fan practices have often been approached as transformative' (2014) but in the web 2.0 age, the relevance of these taxonomies is questionable (Hills 2013). Jenkins (2014) himself says: 'You can make

an argument that many forms of fan speculation and critique are also already transformational in that they encourage new ways of thinking about the fictional world'.

Finally, despite their definition as participative audiences and prosumers in research, in general terms, fans don't seem very engaged with the act of producing original contents. Regarding the idea of fans as advertisers, most of the respondents stated they do not participate actively in marketing campaigns, and thus left these responses in blank or answered with a short 'no'. These advertising campaign participations seem then something restricted to the very few fans who decide to actively participate in these experiences and immerge themselves in the storyworld.

Despite that, fans agree to see themselves as advertisers whenever this is related to their activities as advocates of the show and when they can recommend the consumption of the product to other receptors. The fans' loyalty to their TV show extends to other fans in order to share their consumption with them. This idea connects with the ideas raised by Lozano Delmar, Hernández-Santaolalla and Ramos (2013: 351): 'Today fans act as prosumers, turning into a preacher and an advertising agent at the same time, certifying the quality of the product and disseminating this message through Internet and social networks'. Taking this into account, we could say that fans don´t see themselves as marketers of their TV Show. Rather, they see themselves as preachers who disseminate the word, leaving aside their participation in organized marketing campaign to very few fans.

Pearson (2010) discusses these practices in her article 'Fandom in the Digital Era': 'Many producers now actively seek ways to benefit from fan prosumers by indirectly monetizing user-generated content for the purposes of promotion'. Russo's academic work on vidders also points towards this issue: 'Marketing campaigns that solicit user-generated content offer an instructive contrast to the horizontal creativity of vidders. Such user-generated advertising typically features a top-down arrangement that attempts, through its interface and conditions, to contain excessive fan productivity within proprietary commercial spaces' (2009: 127). These works could be seen as a practice of Consumer-Generated Content and, more specifically, consumer-generated advertising (CGA). As it has been noted in recent studies, CGA helps persuade consumers; it increases trustworthiness and therefore advertising effectiveness (Lawrence, Fournier and Brunel, 2013; Thomson and Malavilla, 2013).

The Latest Nielsen study (2015) already reveals the important value of fandom-generated content in terms of advertising and revealed which programs had the most socially loyal fans during the past TV season regarding their implication in Twitter conversation:

> Program authors who Tweeted about three or more episodes also exhibited other traits that could be valuable for TV networks and advertisers. On average, these authors sent nearly 3 times as many Tweets per episode than other authors. They were also found to have more followers and sent more Tweets about brands. Identifying and cultivating relationships with loyal

authors could be powerful for TV networks and advertisers as they each look
to maximize earned media driven by TV content and advertising (2015).

In short, taking into account the results, we could say that this analysis provides some
precision to the current debate on identity and fan production. As shown in these
interviews: fans do not consider themselves 'authors' nor 'advertisers' and, most
importantly, the production of content is not relevant to being defined as a fan (regardless
of the type of production). Their identity seems to be more connected to the act of Viewing
and Acting in a community (modes of consumption, immersive reception, experiencing,
collecting). In future research, it would be interesting to go deeper into these concepts
linked to fan identity.

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Note:

[1] A prosumer is a person who doesn't limit him/herself to the mere enjoyment of a consumer society, but also contributes with their own values and proposals, so that others can participate with their lifestyle, providing other goods or services in return to the net. The term was coined by Toffler in his book *The Third Wave*, and it refers to a new kind of individual within the 'Global Village' (Toffler, 1984).