

Towards a Theory of ‘Appropriate Fandom’

Mark Stewart

University of Waikato, New Zealand

Abstract

As fandom and fan practices become more broadly recognised within popular culture, tensions and conflicts arise between different understandings of the ‘appropriate’ way to perform fandom. Different groups have different unspoken understandings of what constitutes the ‘right’ and the ‘wrong’ way to be a fan, to behave as a fan; these understandings may differ within a fandom, between different fandoms, between fans and the media industries, and between fans and the broader public. This article sketches a framework for how we might understand differing conceptions of ‘appropriate’ and ‘inappropriate’ fandom, what the drivers behind these understandings might be, and in some cases how different participants and stakeholders work to bring fans within their own conceptions of ‘appropriate’ fandom. The article lays out four modes or directions of ‘appropriate’ fandom, and then provides a detailed analysis of how top-down ‘appropriate’ fandom is evidenced within the television industry through a case study of the US competition reality television series *Survivor*.

Key words: fan studies, fan policing, media industries, appropriate fandom, fan behaviour

Introduction

*I'm a fan. I'm a sports fan, I'm a music fan and I'm a Star Trek fan. All of them. But here's what I don't do. Tell me if any of this sounds familiar: "Let's list our ten favorite episodes. Let's list our least favorite episodes. Let's list our favorite galaxies. Let's make a chart to see how often our favorite galaxies appear in our favorite episodes. What Romulan would you most like to see coupled with a Cardassian and why? Let's spend a weekend talking about Romulans falling in love with Cardassians and then let's do it again." That's not being a fan. That's having a fetish. And I don't have a problem with that, except you can't bring your hobbies in to work, okay? – Josh Lyman in *The West Wing* S04E10 "Arctic Radar" (*The West Wing*, 2002)*

The idea of “doing fandom right”, or more often, “doing fandom wrong”, echoes through many of the discourses, popular, fannish, industrial and academic, that have surrounded fandom in the past 30 or more years. These very ideas seem to establish a binary, a suggestion that there is a singular ‘appropriate’ way to be a fan, to which each person can and should conform. Recent work from a variety of scholars, to be subsequently explored, has described the expectations of different fandom stakeholders of the ways that fandom should be performed, and the conflicts that arise when those expectations are not met, or in fact are directly contravened. Putting these individual conflicts into conversation with each other allows us to see the way in which each grouping or sub-grouping develops an unspoken image of ‘appropriate fandom’, a term I use to describe the behaviours, practices and attitudes which are considered acceptable, and by virtue of that, those which are considered ‘inappropriate’. It is the distinction between these images, so often invisible to outside observers, that leads to many of the tensions within fan communities and structures, and which guide and govern behaviours, hierarchies and cultural and social capital.

This article works through the academic histories of ‘appropriateness’ and how it has been used within fan studies literature, as well as providing a theoretical understanding of two of the key drivers of ‘appropriate’ fandom: ontological security, and the image of fandom as deviance. A full framework of ‘appropriate’ fandom is then sketched, suggesting four modes or directionalities which each have their own unique drivers and implications for fans. Finally, the top-down directionality is used to provide a detailed case study of ‘appropriate’ fandom in practice in the US television industry, including the practices deemed by stakeholders to be ‘inappropriate’, and the tactics used to corral fans towards the preferred practices of ‘appropriate fandom’.

A Terminological Caveat

It is important to recognise that the term ‘appropriate’ is used with due caution. I do not wish to suggest that there are appropriate or inappropriate ways for fandom to be performed. The term is used to suggest that these judgements are made by many of the stakeholders within fandom, including networks, producers, creatives, and fans themselves. These views are multiple, in that different creatives will have different perspectives, as will different fandoms, and even different groups within those fandoms. It is these different perspectives and expectations which often lead to tensions within fandoms, as one group may not approve of the behaviour or practices of another. This work does not seek to privilege one set of beliefs over another, but rather to sketch a framework through which we might understand them.

The terms ‘appropriate’ and ‘inappropriate’ are used here with intent, as distinct from any number of other terms which might be or have been applied to elements of this sort of behaviour (e.g., good v bad, right v wrong, ethical v unethical, progressive v toxic, reasonable v unreasonable, sanctioned v unsanctioned, acceptable v unacceptable). Each of these binaries has, I believe, a place where they can be appropriately used, and I do not set out to erase work which has come before. It should be noted that scholars have used this terminology in the past, some drawing on the framework of appropriateness laid out in this article, and some with their own definitional terms (Hills, 2012a; Lanckman, 2020; Proctor et al., 2018; Proctor and Kies, 2018; Reinhard, 2018; Scott, 2019; Stanfill, 2010). I do not aim in any way to redefine the work that has been done, even though I draw on their insight in many cases. Instead, I offer a framework which brings together a number of the instances where these terms might have been invoked, while also aiming to remove from the discussion, as outlined above, a turn towards adopting a moralistic, ethical, or legal standpoint. There are certainly instances this framework can usefully describe in which I believe a moral standpoint is significantly apt, such as when discussing moments such as RaceFail, Nazism within the fanfic communities, the appropriation of fanwork by industry, fan behaviours around the Johnny Depp defamation trial, the pseudo-fannishness of those involved Q-Anon and in the January 6 2021 storming of the US Capitol, or the toxic masculinity of Gamergate. However, the “appropriate” of appropriate fandom does not suggest a positionality taken by the external viewer (the academic), but instead an internalised perspective from those who are engaged within the dynamics highlighted within the directionalities explored below; as such, the use of the term within this definition does not imply a societal or moral judgement.¹ ‘Appropriateness’ suggests an engagement with a “social contract” (Sedgman, 2023), potentially with elements of etiquette; however, it is also

¹ The Outside-In directionality, within which a broader societal force or discourse shapes an understanding of appropriate fandom, may apply a cultural moral standpoint, but that is a significantly more complex example which goes beyond the bounds of this article.

positional. 'Appropriateness' recognises that engagement with and understanding of the social contract are individually constructed, at a cultural, sub-cultural, familial and social level, and what one person may see as an 'appropriate' behaviour (e.g., leaving food on one's plate to indicate that one has been sufficiently fed), others may see as 'inappropriate' (in the previous situation, not cleaning one's plate may be seen as unappreciative of the provided meal). 'Appropriate' and 'inappropriate', then, offer us a level of subjectivity in order to understand the drivers of the specific individuals and groups who come into tension with each other through the expression of fandom and fan practices.

Academic Histories of 'Appropriateness' in Fandom

The formation of the 'appropriate fan' nomenclature is built on the back of theorising by multiple fan scholars who have each recognised these practices existing along particular vectors; 'appropriate fandom' aims to encompass a series of practices with similar goals in order to create a framework for understanding these practices and the tensions which can arise from the clashes between them.

An early use of the ideas of 'appropriateness' features in Joli Jensen's foundational text in fan studies, "Fandom as Pathology" (1992). Here, Jensen quotes a security guard in the aftermath of the murder of an actress, who suggests that the ways in which celebrities are portrayed on television "[blurs] the line between appropriate and inappropriate behaviour" (1992: 10). While Jensen is making the point that fandom in these discourses is positioned as passive and tied to negative tropes of excess and deviance, we can also see the way in which a clear distinction is already being drawn within popular discourse of how fandom should and should not be expressed. Within Jensen's reading (in 1992, thus pre-dating significant advances in fan studies theory), the fan is positioned as either the obsessive loner or the frenzied fan in a crowd, with both being seen by the broader public as 'inappropriate'. While greater nuance has entered the public consciousness in intervening years, these underlying assumptions can be seen to still carry through, and underlie a number of the updated public positions.

Fan policing is one set of terminology which comes under the bounds of 'appropriate fandom'. Here, the work of Lynn Zubernis and Katherine Larsen has been exemplary, providing significant insight into the ways in which fans might disapprove of the behaviour of other fans, and seek to bring them into line (Zubernis and Larsen, 2012). Bertha Chin's work has also highlighted the ways that fan policing might also be applied to those with more visibility, in examining how celebrity fans of a fan object might be subject to similar forms of policing, especially when their celebrity status restricts them from being aware of the specificities of expected behaviour within their chosen fandom (Chin, 2015). Fan policing refers more to intra-fandom structures of governmentality, structured around what Melanie E. S. Kohnen describes as "the implicit rules of a fan community" (Kohnen, 2018: 339). This article is only concerned with these particular forms of policing insofar as they are

structured by an adherence to the interests of the industry itself; future work will pick up this thread in order to analyse and discuss these forms of inter-fan control.

“Fanagement” is an additional term which serves to describe practices contained within the framework of ‘appropriate fandom’. Coined by Matt Hills in 2012, fanagement refers to creatives and industry “responding to, and anticipating, fan criticisms, as well as catering for specific fractions of fandom who might otherwise be at odds with the unfolding brand, and attempting to draw a line under fan resistance to diegetic and production changes” (Hills, 2012b: 410). This idea is expanded indirectly by Kohnen, who addresses the contradictory desires of industry attitudes to fandom in establishing transmedia campaigns. Kohnen notes that industry needs the sort of fannish affect that drives audience members to engage with paratexts and become involved with the transmedia campaign, but that simultaneously producers are “wary of too much affect because it is unpredictable and not quantifiable; it might evade the profitable paths set out in official transmedia experiences” (Kohnen, 2018: 337). Thus, Kohnen explains, the industry tries to get, not just a response from fans, but the “right” type of responses, the ones which fulfil the criteria the industry seeks fulfilled, without working counter to their industrial concerns.

In addition, fanagement can be seen as a response to “fan-tagonism”, a term coined by Derek Johnson (2007, subsequently 2017) to describe the tension which can exist between fans and producers, the sort of fan resistance Hills describes fanagement as working to control. Fan-tagonism, or more recently fantagonism, often exists in situations where fan expectations of producer/creative behaviour or action are not met (Johnson, 2007; Jones, 2018; Williams, 2010). Johnson describes a “struggle for discursive and productive authority between fans and producers” (2017: 378), being careful to differentiate these challenges of produsorial authority from anti-fandom, given their retention of the same base practices of fandom. Critically, in discussing fan factions, Johnson notes that factions “maneuver to secure extratextual, intracommunal interpretive dominance” (2017: 378), which might well be seen as understanding the text in the ‘right’ or ‘appropriate’ way, itself a form of ‘appropriate fandom’.

‘Appropriateness’ is also weaponized as a way of constraining what should and should not be said about fandom, its people and its practices. Recent years have seen an elevation of the voices of those who do not feel that fandom represents them or allows them to represent themselves, or who recognize the ways in which fandom might be reinforcing hegemonic practices in ways which cause societal damage. Work by Rukmini Pande, Stitch, among others, has noted the unspoken whiteness of much of fandom and fan studies, and the ways in which their practices replicate and promote white supremacy (Hayashi, 2020; Pande, 2018: 7–8; Stitch, 2021). The backlash against those who point out systemic faults in fandom is often strong, and vitriolic. Those who name and highlight the issues within fandom and fan systems are positioned as ‘fandom killjoys’, building on Pande’s work, which builds itself on Sara Ahmed’s description of the ‘feminist killjoy’ (Pande, 2018: 13). Ahmed notes that “certainly to be a good subject is to be perceived as a happiness-cause, as making others happy. To be bad is thus to be a killjoy” (Ahmed, 2010:

20). She further explains that “[the] feminist killjoy ‘spoils’ the happiness of others; she is a spoilsport because she refuses to convene, to assemble, or to meet up over happiness” (2010: 65). Fandom is positioned as a place of happiness, a diversion, one which rejects critique or criticism as antithetical to the practice. Those who would suggest problematic elements are positioned as “not understanding”, “not being true fans”, or to draw on a discourse present within fan studies itself, not recognising that “fuck yeah, fandom is beautiful” (Coppa, 2014).

Ontological Security/Insecurity

While the fear of deviance, of rogue practices, might guide the industry’s perception of the need to constrain and guide fan behaviours in a top-down structure, or the general public to disapprove of fannishness, we can look to other rationales for intra- and inter-fandom expressions of ‘appropriateness’. I suggest that one critical element of this might stem from the ontological security that is offered to fans through their understanding of their fannish identity, and the ways in which that might be called into question by alternative understandings of ‘appropriateness’.

The use of ontological security in relation to fandom and fan cultures has a history that builds from its initial theoretical introduction by Anthony Giddens, through its development by Rebecca Williams, and continued nuanced work by Lori Morimoto. In the coming paragraphs, I describe their work, and demonstrate their relevance to the concept of ‘appropriate fandom’.

Ontological security describes the way in which a person sees themselves within the world. By being able to describe themselves, to categorise themselves, and to have those categories clear and defined in their mind, they are able to position themselves in relation to the people they see around them (Giddens, 1991: 92–93). For instance, if someone self-identifies as a gamer, or a football fan, then when they think of those categories, they conceive a grouping which encapsulates themselves. Frequently, this means that they are actually conceiving a grouping which directly resembles them, often excluding a variety of people who do not. These conceptions may be heavily reinforced by media representations, which often reduce categorisations of identity groupings to stereotypes. It is from these oversimplified representations that we get the popular image of the teenage, loner, anti-social (white male) gamer, and the middle-aged, overweight, hooligan (white male) football fan. These categories do not have to be representative, or even particularly accurate, but if they are pervasive enough, then they will be adopted by those for whom the image provides ontological security: “I see myself as a gamer, and I fit into the category that the world describes as a gamer, therefore I am secure in my own identity formation”.

In recent years, we have seen significant push from the margins of these identity categories, calling for a recognition of the reality of the breadth of participants within these groups. This move takes a different form in each space, but broadly calls for more inclusivity,

often for an increased range of content in recognition of the diversity of the audience, and for less reliance on tropes, language and practices which might be harmful to some members of the community. This is matched by ongoing social movements aimed at systemic racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and others, as people push for a more inclusive society, and recognise that one element of that comes from representation in media.

Rebecca Williams is one of the first scholars to make a direct connection between ontological security and fandom, noting that “fans can use popular culture to construct self-identity” (Williams, 2016: 18). Williams suggests two forms of “fan pure relationships”, fan to object and fan to fan, which allow fans to understand their own identity and to form their ontological understanding of what being a fan means to them. Crucially, Williams argues that “fans may adapt to changes in texts even if they appear to contradict their own ideological of issues such as gender, nationality, and so on” (Williams, 2016: 23). It is in this adaptation that fans are able to maintain their sense of ontological security, shifting their self-positioning against the object or their conception of fandom, allowing their ontological understanding of the categories of self or fandom to expand or develop to encompass each other. It is when fans are unable to or choose not to adapt these conceptions that they are placed in a position of ontological insecurity.

Morimoto extends these ideas even further, suggesting that the politics of transcultural fandom might be identified in “fans’ attempts to re-establish ontological security following traumatic transcultural clash” (Morimoto, 2018: 260). Morimoto’s “contact zones”, which she describes as the spaces where different cultures meet and clash, might be expanded to recognise meetings of groups beyond the transcultural, including where fans of different objects engage with each other, as well as distinct groupings within a specific fandom. A similar “trauma” that fans experience in transcultural clashes might also be seen when fans with differing understandings of the normative fan, or ‘appropriate’ fan behaviour, meet within a contact zone. The inherent ontological insecurity in this contact might lead to the types of fan-policing and governmentality that this article subsequently outlines, with the aim of re-establishing ontological security of the self.

Fandom as Deviance/Deviant

While ontological security/insecurity provides a basis for understanding the drivers behind interpersonal clashes over ‘appropriateness’, deviance might offer a way of understanding how and why media industries might attempt to guide and constrain fan behaviours and practices. In her aforementioned work, Joli Jensen observes that “the literature of fandom is haunted by images of deviance” (Jensen, 1992: 9). Fandom is frequently characterised as “rogue” (Jenkins, 1988: 86), as oppositional, as operating counter to the interests of the media industries. Fan practices, including spoiling, shipping, and the production of fan fiction and other fan texts, are often described as being in opposition to the authorship and

control of the fan object by the creative and industrial teams behind it, and at times directly contravening the legal rights which the industry asserts. However, in an era of audience fragmentation, media industries are also highly aware of the need to maintain audiences who are engaged, invested, and who will evangelise their fan objects, spreading the word about a text and encouraging further audiences to become engaged. These dual drivers lead industries to cast certain forms of fan practice as preferable, acceptable, as ‘appropriate’ ways to perform fandom. This is, of course, mirrored by depictions of ‘inappropriate’ fandom, practices seen as unacceptable, creating an industry-based hierarchy of the ways one should and should not behave as a fan.

A Framework of ‘Appropriate Fandom’

In investigating the different ways that ‘appropriate fandom’ plays out, four modes or directionalities fall into place: intra-fandom, inter-fandom, top-down, and outside-in. Each of these is governed by its own set of pressures, structures and hierarchies, and as such needs individual consideration. This article will describe all four, but will only provide a detailed analysis of top-down ‘appropriate fandom’, leaving the other three directionalities, and the quirks of specific positionalities, for future research.

Intra-fandom refers to tensions and differences which might exist within a given fandom. One crucial elision that we tend towards in the fan studies discipline is referring to a given media fandom as a singular static object; Rukmini Pande has usefully highlighted the ways in which such a practice leads us to create a normative image of a fan of a given object, and how that leads us to ignore difference along cultural, ethnic, or racial axes (Pande, 2018: 112–115). Much of the divergence in the ways one fandom might perceive ‘appropriate fandom’ can be connected to differences in culture, age, race, gender, sexuality, nationality, or even antecedent fandoms.

Inter-fandom picks up on that last point, and highlights the ways in which different fandoms might approach fan practices very differently. Again, this might be connected to the image of the normative fan, and how that diverges based on the fan object, an idea that will be further discussed in relation to ontological security and insecurity. Tensions may arise when members of one fandom perceive another behaving in a way that would be considered ‘inappropriate’ in their own, or especially when fandoms collide, such as when an actor with an established fanbase joins a television series with its own established fanbase and structures.

The top-down mode highlights the ways in which media and creative industries have their own image of the types of fan practice that they see as ‘appropriate’ and ‘inappropriate’, usually those that are seen as beneficial to their corporate goals, tied into capitalist practices and ideals. As such, affirmational fandom is often seen as preferable over transformative fandom, although again, these delineations can be seen to differ from one

industrial grouping to another. This mode of ‘appropriate fandom’ will be highlighted and explored in much greater detail later in the article.

The final directionality is outside-in; this refers to the ways in which the general public, conceived here as broadly non-fannish, sees and reacts to the broadly visible practices of fandom. Popular discourse around fan practices is not new, and can be tied more broadly to the exoticization and Othering discourse around subcultures more broadly (e.g., Hebdige, 2012: 97). However, as fan practices become more visible thanks to digital cultures, and the aforementioned top-down modes of ‘appropriate fandom’ start representing fandom in popular journalism, criticism and texts, non-fans also develop their own image of what is ‘appropriate’ and ‘inappropriate’ within fandom, and within their culture more broadly. There is room for significant work to be done here on the ways in which culture and society, broadly conceived, shape their own image of the ‘right’ way to be a fan, including the idea of who should and shouldn’t be a fan, but that work stretches beyond the scope of a single article.

Top-Down ‘Appropriate Fandom’: An Example

The term introduced in this article, ‘appropriate fandom’, offers us a way of drawing together multiple theoretical concepts in order to understand the power dynamics at play between stakeholders of fandoms. Clearly, the types of dynamics are distinct, dependent on the mode or directionality laid out above – the impetus behind a fan choosing to police another fan will be distinct from the rationale of a media industry for constructing an image of idealised fan practice, and will be different again from the ways that the broader community understands the ‘right’ way to be a fan. However, providing case studies of each of these modes is well beyond the scope of a single journal article. In lieu of that, I offer a single case study of how the producers of one US television series have constructed their own image of the idealised fan, and the ways in which they guide their viewers towards what they see as acceptable or ‘appropriate’ fan practices.

The television industry is one space of many where fans are constructed as narrative objects. Within this space, we can often see the ways in which these depictions are characterised as good or bad, as right or wrong, as ‘appropriate’ or ‘inappropriate’. I argue that the behaviours which are celebrated are mostly those which conform to the industrial view of what constitutes ‘appropriate fandom’, with those who do not conform being positioned as bad, deviant, wrong – i.e., ‘inappropriate’. Some texts choose to show fans from both sides of this constructed spectrum, displaying them in contrast to each other. Others tend to depict fans in one light or the other, choosing only to highlight the practices which they see as fitting within their conception of ‘appropriate’ or ‘inappropriate’.

It is worth noting that the television industry is one space of many where top-down appropriate fandom practices may occur. Other media industries, sports industries, and any other space where fan practices are visible to a commercially-driven industry are likely to

have their own set of strategies and tactics, intentional or unintentional, which guide fans towards industry-desired practices. These strategies may also differ in different national and cultural spaces, where attitudes towards commerce, fan practices, appropriateness, and engagement will vary significantly. By presenting a case study that draws solely on the US TV industry, I recognise that this serves as an example, rather than a paradigm, with significant work remaining to be done in describing the breadth of national, cultural and industrial variations which exist. Such work would do well to draw on the work of Bertha Chin and Lori Morimoto amongst others in order to ensure that Western or US conceptions of fandom and fan practices are not mistakenly applied to situations where they are not applicable (Chin et al., 2018; Chin and Morimoto, 2013; Morimoto et al., 2021).

As with so much of our modern society, the television industry's perceptions of fans and fan behaviour are shaped and guided by capitalism. Profit is the industry's primary driving force, directly or indirectly, and the industry will not risk a perception of the devaluing of their product. Here, it may be instructive to draw on a binary that fan studies has used for a number of years: affirmational versus transformational (obsession_inc, 2009). Affirmational fan practice is seen as "restating" the object of fandom, reifying the canon, and by extension, engaging in ways which privilege depth of knowledge and economic engagement. Transformational fan practice, conversely, is more commonly positioned within a productive space; a space of fan fiction, vidding, shipping, and slash; a space where the textual meaning sits in the hands of the fans, rather than the industrial producer. Other binaries are often used in order to distinguish the two: where affirmational fan practice is positioned as professional to the transformational amateur; affirmational fandom is seen as hierarchical to the flat or "messy" (obsession_inc, 2009) transformational; and, the maleness of the affirmational opposed to the femaleness of the transformative.² These binaries are useful in understanding the approach that the television industry takes in their definitions of 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate' fan behaviour.

Within the binaries listed above, economic generation for the television industry sits primarily within affirmational fandom. It is within affirmational fandom that we see practices of collection, curation, depth of engagement, and the producers' text lifted up as the ideal. These practices do not challenge the role of the industry or producer as the supreme knowledge on the object, and are most likely to generate economic value through viewership, corollary advertising, engagement with industry-produced transmedia and paratexts, merchandise sales, and the increased importance of the core text in fan-led evangelism. Suzanne Scott has noted that "fan legitimation and industrial incorporation are conceptually linked" (Scott, 2019: chapter 1) in discussions of the affirmational/transformational binary. Scott highlights the idea that obsession_inc refers to affirmational fan practice as "sanctioned", suggesting that this is because "[affirmational fans] are willing to enter into a relationship with both the text and its producers that is

² I would argue that a more useful approach would be to describe the affirmational as 'male-coded', and the transformational as 'female-coded', rather than explicitly reducing them to the sex or gender of the participants, but that distinction is not the work of this article.

ultimately more monologic than dialogic, facilitating the fan's industrial incorporation as a promotional agent" (2019: chapter 1).

Scott takes this a step further, looking at the ways that these terms, or at least the practices which underlie them, function within fandom discourses: "These categories quite literally *affirm*, albeit in sweeping terms, which fans and fan practices have been embraced by the convergence culture industry, and allow us to address industrial and intra-fannish attempts to discursively discipline impulses to *transform* intellectual property or fan culture itself". To restate this within the terminology of this article, the categories of affirmational and transformational become a framework for fans, the public, or in this case the television industry, to define what they see as 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate' behaviour, and to guide fans away from the 'inappropriate' towards the 'appropriate'.

Michel Foucault's invocation of the concept of governmentality is instructive in understanding the methods used by the television industry to present a conception of the 'appropriate fan', as well as the 'inappropriate', and to guide viewers towards the former. Foucault's conception of governmentality has been described as being "the conduct of conduct", or else "a form of activity aiming to shape, guide, or affect the conduct of some person or persons" (Gordon, 1991: 2). Critically, Foucault's understanding of governmentality included both the ways in which we structure and control our own behaviour, and the ways in which external structures and practices might be designed in order to encourage or shape particular forms of acceptable or appropriate behaviour. Rather than asserting authority through brute force, persuasion, both direct and indirect, is used to guide people toward particular behaviours and away from others.

Top-down depictions of 'inappropriate fandom' can be seen within a text such as the series *Supernatural* (2005 - 2020). A not insignificant amount of scholarship has been produced considering the characters of Becky Rosen and Sera Siegel within the *Supernatural* text, characters who are defined by their deep affective connection to their fan object, highly sexed and sexualised, and who participate in transformative fan practices (Cherry, 2011; Coker and Benefiel, 2014; Felschow, 2010; Gray, 2010). These representations are not viewed positively within the diegesis of the show, being played for comic effect, and with both the lead characters and the author surrogate avatar (Chuck Shurley) evidencing concern about the women's fan practices. There is a suggestion that these women have transgressed, have gone too far, and are failing by performing their fandom in an 'inappropriate' manner. By showing these women as deviant, unruly, and 'inappropriate', the text aims to guide viewers away from such practices, playing them for comedy, with the intention of bringing them back within practices deemed more acceptable or 'appropriate' by the industry.

Where the the depictions of inappropriate fandom in *Supernatural* might be seen as cautionary tales, *Survivor* (2000 – present) provides an interesting case study of a variety of ways in which television producers, here serving as proxy for the industry as a whole, might present positive examples of how they see 'appropriate' fan behaviour and engagement. I argue that part of this presentation works to corral the behaviour of fans (drawing loosely on

Mel Stanfill's domestication of fans metaphor (Stanfill, 2019)), guiding them towards practices seen as acceptable, generally those which present economic benefits to the producers or the industry.³

Depictions of the fan appear repeatedly throughout the run of *Survivor*; although, as might be expected, they increase in frequency the longer the series runs as the fandom coalesces into a definable object. The clearest depiction of *Survivor* fandom comes from the casting of *Survivor* fans as competitors on the series. This was made explicit in the seasons subtitled "Fans vs Favorites" which saw tribes of returning competitors put head-to-head with competitors who explicitly self-identified as fans. 2008's Season 16 (also known as "Micronesia") was the first season which defined itself as a "Fans vs Favorites" season, and it was followed by 2013's Season 26 (also known as "Caramoan"). However, outside of those seasons which label half their participants as such, there is also a history of competitors who identify themselves as fans, who discuss the ways in which their fandom is performed, and who use their knowledge of the series accrued through their fandom as a tool for enhancing their performance as a competitor.

John Cochran, who first appeared as a competitor in Season 23 ("South Pacific"), and then returned as a "favorite" to win the Season 26 "Fans vs Favorites" season, provides an excellent case study of the ways in which fandom is presented within the series, and how it creates a paradigm of the 'good' or 'appropriate' fan. However, Cochran is positioned slightly differently from many of the other viewers who become contestants, given his self-identification as a "super-fan". Cochran is very much presented as an 'academic' fan of *Survivor*, with the fact that he had used *Survivor* as a case study in an essay written at Harvard Law School being mentioned more than once in interview segments, and referenced in an onscreen chyron as a strength for him within the game. On his profile on the CBS website, Cochran describes the essay as being "one of the few times in my life where my personal interests and academic obligations coincided perfectly" (*Survivor Cast: John*, n.d.). Cochran is able to immediately identify Coach and Ozzy, the returning players, when they arrive, and he knows exactly how many times each has played. He also announces that he has a buff collection⁴, demonstrating to the audience the 'appropriate' economic engagement of a fan. His fandom is expressed right up to the end of the season; when he is addressing the final three as a member of the jury, his opening statement is "More than anyone else in this game, I am such a fan of Coach" (*Survivor: South Pacific*, 2011). His fandom, both of the series and of individual players, is presented as simultaneously excessive (as much fandom is in popular discourse), but also as an 'appropriate' channelling

³ Recent work from Cameron Lynn Brown has looked at the ways that fandom of *Survivor* has been rekindled with the release of older series on streaming platforms (2022). Brown positions this as 'residual fandom', a return to a previously held fan position; however, notably, none of the interviewees in his study mention fan engagement in modes that are recognisable as either affirmational or transformational.

⁴ Buffs are the headscarves worn to distinguish between tribes in the series, with names, colours, and designs differentiating seasons.

of these excesses. The message is clear: if you are going to participate in the excesses of fandom, this is the 'right' way to do it.

However, it is not just players who provide examples of performances of 'appropriate fandom' within *Survivor*. As host for every season of *Survivor* that has aired, Jeff Probst provides an interesting model for another mode of fandom. While the host of the series may seem like an unlikely position to perform fandom, as the series has gone on, Probst has explicitly described himself as a fan, and likened himself to fans that have appeared on the series.⁵ Probst first displayed fannish behaviours as a font of institutional knowledge, demonstrating a key element of affirmational fandom. At tribal councils, and prior to challenges, Probst often refers to the history of the game, whether what the players are experiencing is novel, or if the experience is one which the game has seen before. Probst can frequently be seen referring back to previous players, especially those which exist prominently within the fan imaginary, such as Coach, Boston Rob, Russell Hantz, Parvati and others. This near-encyclopaedic knowledge is likely to be seen as desirable by the television industry, as it demonstrates detailed engagement with the core texts. This can be used to highlight to advertisers the engaged nature of the *Survivor* fan community with the episodes as they air, and also repeat viewership for those advertisers who pay for product placement within the episode narrative.

In addition to providing examples of fan-participants who act in ways which the television industry would like to see fans behaving, *Survivor* can also be seen to direct fans away from what are seen as 'less desirable' fan practices. The combative relationship between *Survivor* producers and the spoiling fan communities has been well documented by Henry Jenkins (Jenkins, 2006: chapter 1). Again, it is Probst who presents an exemplar of how the industry would like to see the fandom behave. Probst holds a privileged position – he could easily be informed by production staff about discussions and discoveries on set during the run of the series, knowing if a tribe member is about to be blindsided, or if an idol is waiting to be played. However, Probst often explicitly states his lack of knowledge, and indicates his excitement at the potential of the eventual reveal. This is most evident in the final episode of each season, where Probst brings in the cannister containing the votes for Sole Survivor. These votes were usually cast at least six months prior, sometimes more than a year. Probst, however, appears as an unspoiled fan, indicating that he has no knowledge of the votes contained within, and his excitement and anticipation of the forthcoming reveal. Probst's excitement and privileging of the reveal can be seen as directly oppositional to the spoiling community, and strongly reminiscent of an economically-acceptable form of affirmational fandom.

⁵ An argument can be made as to whether Probst's positioning as a fan of the game/series is driven by series producers/writers who may be scripting some of these interactions for him. However, Probst has also self-described as a fan of the game outside of materials produced by the series, including in interviews, and as such has at the very least internalised this idea. While it can be difficult to distinguish between 'genuine' fandom and an intentional performance of fandom, the impact on the viewer is likely to be the same: a reading of an appropriate mode of performing fandom as demonstrated throughout the series.

The television industry, while clearly a member of the creative and cultural industries, is almost always inherently mired in its own economic realities. With the exception of public service broadcasting, television content is required to attract viewers and audiences, traditionally simply in their mass, and more recently speaking directly to audiences which are perceived to have more economic value to the broadcaster or their advertisers. As such, fan communities have been increasingly recognised as holding greater value for the industry, reliable as they are for the consumption of the core text, for proselytising, and for the economic consumption of paratexts. However, fan behaviours can also work counter to the desires of the industry, as they produce their own texts, critique the core texts, envisage textual possibilities which are frequently more diverse and accepting than the core text allows for, and utilising remix and parodic fair use exclusions in order to speak back to the text. The television industry utilises notions of what they deem to be ‘appropriate’ behaviour in order to try to guide fans to act in modes that are economically beneficial to the industry, and away from behaviours which the industry fears might limit their economic potential. By providing positive representations of one type of fan (and negative representations of other types), by using social media practices to guide fandoms towards economically beneficial modes, and by constructing convention spaces which reward and encourage ‘appropriate’ intra-fan and fan-creative engagements, the television industry creates a blueprint of ‘appropriate fandom’, and guides fan communities towards self-policing practices in order to become an industry-idealised model of the ultimate ‘appropriate’ fan.

Conclusion

Notions of ‘appropriate fandom’ are vast and outstrip the capability of delineation in a singular journal article. Instead, this article proposes a broad framework within which ‘appropriate fandom’ might be considered, highlights the rationale for needing the framework, and describes four directionalities along which ‘appropriate fandom’ exists. These are not to be seen as comprehensive; previous work has already highlighted some of the examples which do not sit comfortably within any of these four modes (Stewart, 2019). The ramifications of this model are already proving to be far-reaching, allowing new understandings of behaviours and incidents already being analysed and discussed. Future work will also analyse the relationship between ‘appropriate fandom’ and toxic fandom, especially those aligned with toxic masculinity, pushbacks against the perceived incursions of identity politics and representations, and the role of fandom of mainstream media texts in bringing these discussions to the forefront of popular discourse.

Acknowledgements

This work has developed from numerous discussions, debates, and cups of coffee held at academic conferences and over social media. It is indebted to those who have attended Fan Studies Network conferences in their various forms, as well as the members of the Fan and Audience Studies Special Interest Group of the Society of Cinema and Media Studies. However, it is most indebted to Dr Bertha Chin, who helped to develop the core ideas that I have finally expressed here. Without her, this work would not exist as it does, and she has my undying gratitude.

Biographical notes

Dr Mark Stewart's research is mostly in the fields of Fan and Audience Studies, Television Studies, and Media Industries. He has previously published in *Television & New Media*, the *International Journal of Cultural Studies* and *Flow* journal. His first monograph, looking at the shifting conditions of 21st century television, is under contract with Amsterdam University Press. Mark currently works as an independent scholar in Aotearoa New Zealand, having taught and researched in institutions in Aotearoa New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands.

References

- Ahmed S (2010) *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Brown CL (2022) Residual Fandom: Television Technologies, Industries, and Fans of Survivor. *The Velvet Light Trap*. University of Texas Press: 17–27. DOI: 10.7560/VLT9003.
- Cherry B (2011) Becky Rosen, Fan Identity, and Interactivity in Supernatural. In: *TV Goes to Hell: An Unofficial Road Map of Supernatural*. Chicago: ECW Press, p. 203.
- Chin B (2015) "Orlando Jones needs to GTFO of our fandom": Supernatural conventions and gate-keeping. In: *Popular Culture Association of Australia and New Zealand Conference*, Massey University, Wellington, 29 July 2015.
- Chin B and Morimoto L (2013) Towards a theory of transcultural fandom. *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 10(1): 92–108.

Chin B, Punathambekar A and Shresthova S (2018) Advancing transcultural fandom. In: Click MA and Scott S (eds) *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*. New York; London: Routledge, pp. 298–306.

Coker C and Benefiel C (2014) The Hunter Hunted: The Portrayal of the Fan as Predator in Supernatural. In: George SA and Hansen RM (eds) *Supernatural, Humanity, and the Soul: On the Highway to Hell and Back*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, pp. 97–110. DOI: 10.1057/9781137412560_8.

Coppa F (2014) Fuck yeah, Fandom is Beautiful. *The Journal of Fandom Studies* 2(1): 73–82. DOI: 10.1386/jfs.2.1.73_1.

Felschow LE (2010) ‘Hey, check it out, there’s actually fans’: (Dis)empowerment and (mis)representation of cult fandom in ‘Supernatural’. *Transformative Works and Cultures* 4(0). Available at: <http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/134> (accessed 24 August 2016).

Giddens A (1991) *The Consequences of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Gordon C (1991) Governmental Rationality: An Introduction. In: Burchell G, Gordon C, and Miller P (eds) *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*. London: Harvester, Wheatsheaf, pp. 1–52.

Gray M (2010) From canon to fanon and back again: The epic journey of ‘Supernatural’ and its fans. *Transformative Works and Cultures* 4. DOI: 10.3983/twc.2010.0146.

Hayashi AE (2020) Reimagining fan studies in the age of Covid-19 and Black Lives Matter. *Transformative Works and Cultures* 34. DOI: 10.3983/twc.2020.2029.

Hebdige D (2012) *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis.

Hills M (2012a) “Proper Distance” in the Ethical Positioning of Scholar-Fandoms: Between Academics’ and Fans’ Moral Economies? In: Larsen K and Zubernis L (eds) *Fan Culture: Theory/Practice*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 14–37.

Hills M (2012b) Torchwood’s trans-transmedia: Media tie-ins and brand ‘fanagement’. *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 9(2): 409–428.

Jenkins H (1988) Star Trek rerun, reread, rewritten: Fan writing as textual poaching. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 5(2): 85–107. DOI: 10.1080/15295038809366691.

Jenkins H (2006) *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press.

- Jensen J (1992) Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization. In: Lewis LA (ed.) *The Adoring Audience : Fan Culture and Popular Media*. London; New York: Routledge, pp. 9–27.
- Johnson D (2007) Fan-tagonism: Factions, Institutions, and Constitutive Hegemonies of Fandom. In: Gray J, Sandvoss C, and Harrington CL (eds) *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*. New York: New York University Press, pp. 285–300.
- Johnson D (2017) Fantagonism: Factions, Institutions, and Constitutive Hegemonies of Fandom. In: Gray J, Sandvoss C, and Harrington CL (eds) *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*. 2nd ed. New York: New York University Press.
- Jones B (2018) “Are You Ready for This?” “I Don’t Know if There’s a Choice”: Cult Reboots, *The X-Files Revival*, and Fannish Expectations. In: Click MA and Scott S (eds) *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*. New York, NY: Routledge, pp. 347–355.
- Kohnen MES (2018) Fannish Affect, ‘Quality’ Fandom, and Transmedia Storytelling Campaigns. In: Click MA and Scott S (eds) *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*. New York; London: Routledge, pp. 337–346.
- Lanckman L (2020) Fans, community, and conflict in the pages of ‘Picture Play,’ 1920–38. *Transformative Works and Cultures* 33. DOI: 10.3983/twc.2019.1745.
- Morimoto L (2018) Ontological Security and the Politics of Transcultural Fandom. In: Booth P (ed.) *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*. New York: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 257–276.
- Morimoto L, Booth P, Garner R, et al. (2021) Transcultural Fan Studies in Practice: A Conversation. *Transformative Works and Cultures* 35. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2021.1975>.
- obsession_inc (2009) Affirmational fandom vs. Transformational fandom. Available at: <http://obsession-inc.dreamwidth.org/82589.html> (accessed 8 July 2015).
- Pande R (2018) *Squee from the Margins: Fandom and Race*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
- Proctor W and Kies B (2018) Editors’ Introduction: On toxic fan practices and the new culture wars. *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 15(1): 16.
- Proctor W, Kies B, Chin B, et al. (2018) On toxic fan practices: A round-table. *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 15(1): 24.

Reinhard CD (2018) *Fractured Fandoms: Contentious Communication in Fan Communities*. Lexington Books.

Scott S (2019) *Fake Geek Girls: Fandom, Gender, and the Convergence Culture Industry*. New York: New York University Press.

Sedgman K (2023) *On Being Unreasonable: Breaking the Rules and Making Things Better*. Faber & Faber, Limited.

Stanfill M (2010) Doing fandom, (mis)doing whiteness: Heteronormativity, racialization, and the discursive construction of fandom. *Transformative Works and Cultures* 8(0). DOI: 10.3983/twc.v8i0.256.

Stanfill M (2019) *Exploiting Fandom: How the Media Industry Seeks to Manipulate Fans*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.

Stewart M (2019) Celebrities and Performative Fandom: An 'Appropriate' Anomaly. In: *Fan Studies Network Australasia Conference*, Melbourne, Australia, December 2019.

Stitch (2021) On Racebending and Seeing Yourself in Fandom. In: *Teen Vogue*. Available at: <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/on-racebending-and-seeing-yourself-in-fandom-fan-service> (accessed 4 January 2022).

Survivor Cast: John (n.d.). Available at: <http://www.cbs.com/shows/survivor/cast/62885/> (accessed 9 December 2012).

Survivor: South Pacific (2011) S23E15 - Loyalties Will Be Broken. s23e15. CBS.

The West Wing (2002) Arctic Radar. S04E10. NBC.

Williams R (2010) Good Neighbours? Fan/producer relationships and the broadcasting field. *Continuum* 24(2): 279–289. DOI: 10.1080/10304310903576366.

Williams R (2016) *Post-Object Fandom Television, Identity and Self-Narrative*. New York, N.Y: Bloomsbury Academic.

Zubernis LS and Larsen K (2012) *Fandom at the Crossroads: Celebration, Shame and Fan/Producer Relationships*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars.