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Exploring Identities in Online Music Fandoms: How identities Formed in Online Fan Communities Affect Real Life Identities

Aimee Ratka

Honors College, Pace University

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Exploring Identities in Online Music Fandoms:
How Identities Formed in Online Fan Communities Affect Real Life Identities

Aimee Ratka

Communications Studies Major, Marketing Minor

Advisor: Dr. Aditi Paul

Dyson College of Arts & Sciences

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Abstract

This thesis set out to explore the identities formed by members of online fandom communities, and to determine the ways in which those identities affect their real life, offline identities. This qualitative study encountered elements related to stereotypes of young women who are fans of mainstream pop music, and provided insight on their experiences through interviews with five long time boy band online fandom members. This study asked if fans prefer to keep their fandom identities internal or let them reflect outward, how one's online identity affects or translates to their real life identity, and what experiences in the online fandom were the most impactful to the individual's real life identity or led to new knowledge. It was revealed that online community platform is the place where fans gather to enjoy a similar passion, but it is the relationships and discussions held on the site between fans that truly affect an individual and their identity, rather than the more superficial elements of being in a fandom. Through fandom discourse, members found social support and solidarity with one another.

Keywords: fandom, online community, identity

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Introduction

In today's day and age of social media, we tend to put ourselves out there on the web and create desired personas, or perceptions of ourselves, on different social media platforms depending on the connections, friends, or followers that we have on each platform. When relating this to online music fandoms, users are usually very expressive, passionate, and backed up by a mass of other fans with a collective interest in something within the community; space ruled by fans as an outlet for their own self-expression. Being active in this environment with others having the same interests is bound to lead to shared behaviors that are found in real life communities, thus creating a certain identity specific to the group. Fans feel acceptance within the online communities that allow them to feel safe enough to be themselves, especially when it might be hard to do so in real life. With advances in the ways that we communicate through technology becoming more synchronous and personal, it is extremely likely to have an effect on the way fans participate in fandom activities and connect with others from around the world. Through this study, I set out to understand how the identity of active online fandom members corresponds to and affects their real life identity, as well as understanding what they consider the most impactful part of belonging to a fandom. Conducting interviews and surveying members directly from or familiar with online music fandom culture gave an immersive look into determining how fans' real life identities are a reflection of their online identities; the ones displayed by them on the online community. Through questions that ask the frequency of online fandom activity, conversations with other members, and adopted inward and outward behaviors, this analysis has been completed.

While obviously both men and women can be fans of music on the internet and belong to fan communities, this study focused on young women in mainstream pop music fandoms, specifically One Direction, both as a band and as individual solo artists, who use social networking sites such as Tumblr and Twitter as their platforms for self expression within the fandom. Young women creating accounts solely for the purpose of supporting an artist and forming a community around them is their way of making their presence known within the fandom on the internet; their way of making their voice heard, and their way of connecting with others based on shared interests.

Young women and teenage girls are of superior interest to this study because they are unapologetically passionate about the band or artist that they are a fan of, and are hardly ever afraid to show it. They are generally very dedicated to the fandom and usually post about them on their social media accounts to constantly support and promote their new albums/singles, as well as to communicate with other fans about upcoming projects and discuss their thoughts on many aspect of the artist's lives (Bury, 2005). While meeting online friends in person at a concert, for example, is a direct translation from online to real life, this study's aim was to analyze the more internal, behavior-specific translations that one brings from the digital environment to the physical surrounding. It is set out to understand the way that these and other fandom behaviors are brought into the user's offline social self, and to fill the lack of existing literature on the more internal meaning that fandom culture brings to users lives. The surprisingly large gap in research regarding fan studies, my interest in understanding fandom culture's impact on identity, and my curiosity on the extent that fans go to represent the fandom

in their real life identities has led me to this qualitative study with these research questions as the main focus:

RQ1: Do fans prefer to keep their fandom identities internal or do they let them reflect outward?

RQ2: How does one's online identity affect or translate to their real life identity?

RQ3: What was the most important thing fans have learned since being in an online fandom?

To answer these questions, I will review past literature on identity formation, subcultures and online fandom activity, and stigma surrounding the role of women as fans of popular music in the following pages.

Literature Review

Forming Identities

Since we are living in the digital age and we rely so heavily on technology to communicate with people all over the world, social media has a significant impact on how we express our identities and perceive others' as well. This is crucial to online fandoms because it is often how fans meet potential friends; they come across new profiles, see that they share similar interests, and assume that they would get along based on the way they present themselves.

Kietzmann (2011) presents a model of social media functionality called "the honeycomb of social media," in which identity is in the center, and presence, relationships, reputation, groups, conversations, and sharing all stem off from it. Identity is defined in the honeycomb as "the extent to which users reveal themselves," (Kietzmann, 2011, p. 245). Many people in fandoms use their real names on their profiles, but others may use a different username that does not give away their full name. This can be for reasons of wanting to keep the profile hidden from people they know in real life or just preferring a fandom-related username because that is how they want

to show their dedication. Either way, users use their profiles to show their dedication to the fandom and to attract other fans to follow or befriend (Kietzmann, 2011). Popular fandom websites like Tumblr have the option of allowing anonymous messages to users. While this masks certain identities, messages or posts of any type still count as participation, provide the sense of presence, and count as a form of discussion among fans on the platform. Identity being placed in the center of the model suggests that it is the core of all interactions on social media, whether professionally, or within online fandoms. All of the stems that come off of identity are crucial to someone's place in the fandom, and are based off of being active in an online community. The way that fans participate are representative of their presence in the space, where they in turn form relationships with others by sharing experiences and thoughts. The reputation is simply the way that they choose to express themselves within the fandom and the way in which people recognize them. Subgroups may also form within the group as a whole when fans share similar ideas and assign themselves with a more complex and idea-specific identity within the community.

In these fan communities, users curate their own identities and images based on their experiences as well as the inevitable relationships that form from enjoying their favorite artists and sharing the passion for music with others just like them. The ongoing argument of technology and social media making us antisocial can be debunked by understanding the ways that it allows us to connect with others while simultaneously granting us the ability to decide when and how we want to access it and how we are represented. Computer mediated communication (CMC) on social media allows for asynchronous communication and a platform readily available to edit, enabling users to have a delay in time to construct a more ideal version

of themselves; an attribute that is not present in face to face communication (Bury, 2005). While it can be argued that this negatively affects the strength of the connection or the richness of the conversation, when it comes to a participatory culture that is founded on user participation, as long as the presence of others interacting is strong, the sense of community can be translated successfully onto this digital platform (Jenkins, 2009).

When discussing identity based on people music fandoms, it is important to understand that there is a certain type of active fan whose level of passion for the fandom allows their identity to be affected by the community. Williams (2001) makes clear the distinction between ordinary music listeners and these other listeners that make up fandoms. “Subcultural theory and work on fans tend to oppose fans and subcultures to the ‘ordinary.’...It is not that fans and members of subcultures are *abnormal* or *extraordinary*... [these] fans can be used to describe particular instances of engagement rather than a type of person [who is an ordinary listener,]” (Williams, 2001, p. 230). Meaning, to properly study this area of research, one must be able to distinguish the difference between an average listener of a certain band or artist, and the fans that have dedicated large portions of their life to supporting a certain artist. Those are the users that are the focus of this thesis. An average listener hears a new song and continues on with the rest of their day. A fandom member hears the same song, but goes online to discuss and dissect the music with others in their community, who understand the importance and the impact this new piece of work has on their lives. According to Jenkins (2006), “ One becomes a "fan" not by being a regular viewer of a particular program but by translating that viewing into some kind of cultural activity, by sharing feelings and thoughts about the program content with friends, by joining a "community" of other fans who share common interests,” (p. 41).

Active online music fandom members usually feel the need to express their passions and connect with others similar to themselves since music has the ability to reach so many different kinds of people and affect them in their own personal ways. Martin (2006) explains that the reasons why music cannot simply be defined or given meaning to, rather it is the way people use the music and position it in their lifestyles that ends up giving its definition. When music is given a more personal meaning to everyone, it is more likely to have a strong impact on his or her life, thus impacting the way they identify themselves within and outside of the fandom. The interactions between members of the fandom can even help one learn more about themselves. When observing the way that fans interact and share in enjoying a certain style of music, it is apparent that they tend to band together and develop tendencies and behaviors based off of the experiences that they share together. Martin claims that there is a direct connection between social groups and the styles of music that they listen to; whether they are in direct contact with each other or not, the shared interest in music reflects and manipulates their lifestyles (2006). Going back to the notion that the internet allows fans all over the world to connect, without having found a certain online fandom, a fan might not have known that people like them were so easily accessible to them, and thus feel validated in their real life self now that they know they are not alone.

Subcultures and Online Fandom

The term subculture, as a sociological concept, is used to explain behaviors of certain social groups within a larger mainstream group (Leblanc, 2002). They are crucial to this study because fandoms are subcultures of their own; with specific beliefs, values, and sub-languages, or “fanspeak,” that are typically learned when entering and assimilating into the fandom culture.

There are mutually accepted rules within the fandom that are followed when posting or interacting.

According to Haenfler (n.d.), fandoms are a type of participatory culture, defined as involving “fans acting not only as consumers but also as producers and creators of some form of creative media,” (Web). Members of fandoms are actively involved in the group in some way. By creating content to be shared and consumed by other members, they are offering their voice and their participation in this online world in which they belong.

To expand more on participatory culture, Jenkins et al. (2009) offers a list of requirements found in participatory cultures, paraphrased in this paragraph. Participatory cultures are open to everyone in that any kind of artistic expression and community interaction are encouraged, as long as the intention is positive and it reflects well on the culture. There also must be strong support for anyone who shares creativity within the culture, whether that is art, writing, music, and so forth. Sharing each others creations is encouraged and members should be open to new contributions, because every member’s voice matters. There also must be “some type of informal mentorship” where long-time members pass on important knowledge about the culture to new members (Jenkins, p. 7). This makes acclimation to the culture easier and novices can learn from experienced members. Most importantly, members should feel some kind of social connection with each other to ensure that everyone’s contributions and ideas matter and are welcomed. This comfort is what makes members feel confident to participate and share their ideas with others that are interested in hearing them as well (Jenkins, 2009).

The need to participate, to be actively involved in something bigger than one’s self, is the basis of wanting to belong to a group of people one believes they relate to. While Greenland

(1999) discusses Jazz music, the similarities in his explanation about fan communities applies to the fandoms of today's mainstream pop music. Greenland claims that certain fans embrace and encourage camaraderie between each other (1999). They share knowledge and experiences from concerts and other interactions involving artists with each other and form bonds from something that they all appreciate and understand. Some fans can begin to generate their own sort of fandom-only language and quirks (Greenland, 1999). Without participation in a fandom, whether in online or offline locations, there would be no strong feeling of presence between the members, and with that, no reassurance that others are out there listening or supporting.

Fandom as a study is often passed off as being irrelevant or it is deligitimized because of the stigma of *super fans*, especially common in popular music, being too obsessed, or living in a fantasy world solely focused on their chosen musician. This is especially so when it comes to teenagers or young women who are deeply involved in being fans of a pop music star. To address certain stereotypes or dangers people might perceive of and look down upon these *super fans*, Lewis (1992) discusses fandom as pathology. She states that the line between being a normal fan and an excessive one can be quite thin, and it is broken when one has gotten so deep that they are unable to tell fantasy from reality (Lewis, 1992). Those two dimensions cannot be crossed without a "normal" fan becoming out of control. Thus, much of the literature that demonizes fans and their fannish behaviors stems from the idea that if you are "obsessed" with a band or are a member of a fandom, you are a danger to yourself and to others because of your inability to distinguish the fantasy and reality (Lewis, 1992, p. 56). This stigma exists, which contributes to the reason why fans feel the need for a sense of community and belongingness with other people who do understand them. That camaraderie validates their passion without

question. Once a member of a fandom and forms relationships with others, a fan tends to become desensitized to outsiders who claim they are “excessive” or “dangerous” because of their passion, gender, and/or selected genre of music, since they know that their interests are validated within the online fandom (Lewis, 1992, p. 56).

Joining online fandoms begins by fans becoming invested in music and artists that end up being crucial to their own formation of self-identity (Williams, 2001). Fandoms or communities being held in an online space compliments the unique new ways that fans discover new music. Many hear it from the radio, but with the rise in online music streaming platforms like Spotify and Apple Music, sharing and finding new music has become easier and more popular than ever (2001). In the age of social media, it was inevitable that music become incorporated into the very social atmosphere that thrives off of users needing to share what they are doing and what they are listening to (2001). Fans then share their recommendations with others online, which can influence more to listen, in turn creating conversations and possible new fans. The digital era has also only increased the symbiotic relationship between fan and fan object (Pearson, 2010). While it was possible for this relationship exist prior to this time, there is no question that the internet and social media has given stronger connectivity and richness to the communication between both parties (Pearson, 2010).

While the internet and social media can be the vehicle for meeting other fans and forming communities, fandom can actually be more about the fans’ identities and behaviors themselves rather than on the bands or musical artists that they are supporting (Greenland, 2016). The music was the common interest that brought them together, but the fandom was created out of the actions that are made by interacting with other fans. This is what makes these fandom

subcultures a form of an online community; the community aspect of banding together to appreciate something with others just as passionate as you ends up influencing the behaviors and identities of the individuals who are in the fandom (Greenland, 2016) The music is just the common interest that caused the members to meet in the first place. The behaviors and exchanges within is what creates the closeness and oneness, therefore defining themselves based off of a community with which they belong. Fans from across the world can communicate online to form online friendships, design fan projects (such as raising money for an organization for a band members birthday or for distributing posters that are meant to be held up at a certain moment in the concert), organize fan meetups at concerts and other events, all because of the digital platform that they call their community.

The micro-blogging website, Tumblr, as a platform for online fandom communities has scarce literature, but Hillman et. al (2014) offers great insight into the culture of the website based off of their observations and interviews with Tumblr fandom members:

Our participants reported being more themselves on Tumblr than ‘real life’ (not on Tumblr), feeling like they were part of something bigger than themselves, sharing a common sense of motivation and purpose for participating in the community, and sharing social experiences related to activities not on Tumblr, as well as the participation in online “social justice.” (p. 1)

The sharing of experiences both related to fandom practice on Tumblr and also activities not on Tumblr clearly shows that the relationships and bonds formed within the community go far beyond just enjoying the same band together. Fans discuss important global issues, especially when there are elements of them found in the music or show with which they are a fan. Fans feel

“ownership” over their fandom and are always encouraging each other to “critique the social elements” in the fan object to educate or call for change when necessary (Hillman, 2014, p. 8).

The usage of Tumblr for an online fan community in such unique and personalized ways makes fans feel like they are a part of something that is bigger and more meaningful than just a typical fan club.

Presence in Online Communities

Advancements in technology have opened up many doors to making online communities more personal than ever. Friends that have met online often end up meeting in person, integrating the community from online to real life. Wiatrowski (2013) argues that “cyber” communities are in fact true communities by stating that the social network in which the fandom gathers acts as “a proxy for the physical individual in an online world.” Williams (2001, p. 224) claims that young people tend to lean toward open armed and welcoming communities that assure them that their interests are validated and they are not alone. Lewis (1992) expands on this to say that fandom communities are more inclusive than exclusive because there is no turning anyone away online; New members are free to join and assimilate into the community among the rest of the members. Since there are no physical boundaries separating or excluding anyone from joining, the idea is that anyone can find their place within the fandom. Referring back to Hillman (2014), it was found that “belonging to a fandom” on websites like Tumblr do not have a concrete set of rules since there is no actual “group” to join (p. 4). Hillman says of Tumblr fandom members: “They are part of the fandom when they feel they are. Participation entailed ... posting about a show, regardless of whether others read the posts. There is no one who designates who’s in and who’s out,” (2014, p. 4).

Jensen (2017) brings into question the very important aspect of presence within the online communities. Since the platform is digital, on social media, how can we know that others are present in the discussion, and how can we make sure that others know that we are there and ready to participate? “Presence means to be seen and to see; to acknowledge the existence of the other fans and their contributions to fandom; and to be able to interact and socialize with and into fan groups,” (Jensen, 2017, p. 146). Jensen explains how the *Sherlock* fandom organized online watch parties, where everyone would watch the same episode at the same time while discussing the episode in real time on Twitter or on Tumblr. In the case of pop music fandoms, this similar phenomena occurs when users listen to albums for the first time together online, which will be expanded on later. In this case, “presence” is easier to gauge since it is at the same time in the same virtual space.

While presence feels stronger when users interact at the same time, that does not mean it cannot be felt asynchronously. Jensen sums up this action by claiming:

A user must be able to perceive the actions of other users within a given space across time differences, including if those actions happened before the user reenters the fandom space; and people must be able to perceive that a user has seen their actions and has been aware of their presence, even if this happens after people have left the fandom space.

(Jensen, p. 149)

On Twitter, presence can be monitored with “likes” and retweets; the same goes for Tumblr with “likes” and reblogs of posts, which notifies the original poster and giving them the notification and feeling of recognition of another’s presence no matter where they live in the world or if they are online or not. (Jensen, 2017). Presence must be felt in order to build stronger

bonds within the community, otherwise one might feel as though they are posting for no one, and thus, uninvolved. As for deciding which platform to use for which purpose, “Fans have moved from place to place, leaving technological shortcomings behind, discovering new features, establishing and de-constructing fandom spaces. Fans use the different sites to express different aspects of their fannish activities and fandom; they create and maintain a participatory community revolving around their passion,” (Jensen, 2017, p. 148). Each site comes with different functions, allowing both direct and indirect interactions. Websites such as Tumblr feature “queueing” of posts, which allows a user’s profile to be updated with scheduled posts even when they are not currently online, thus enhancing their presence by being seemingly active at regular rates.

Social media has made it possible to be able to control and improve the perceptions and presence of ourselves and other members of an online fan community. Geographic boundaries are no longer an issue when it comes to meeting new people and communicating to people from places all across the world (Wiatrowski, n.d.). While it may not ever reach the same level of presence that face to face interactions hold, it has made unique strides to come close and has still given users the communal identity that they desire.

Young Women, Pop Music, and Identity

This thesis is focused on young women and teen girls’ behaviors and creations of identities within pop music fandoms on the internet. It is imperative that gender stereotypes and inequalities are discussed and assumed to have a strong effect on the reasons behind much of their behavior and reasonings behind their fandoms and identities. The fandoms to be examined are all centered on the pop music genre, which is unique in that there are always the music

“elitists” who outlaw it as an inferior genre for those without their high class taste, thus dismissing the young women fans’ choices and casting it to the side to begin with (Whiteley, 2000). Also, popular music studies has very limited research in the communication field and is generally considered a minority in communication and media studies (Avant-Mier, 2014). To clearly define popular music studies for the sake of this thesis, I turn to Burns, who claims it is, “the serious, non-condescending study of all forms of music, including highly commercial, industry driven ‘product’” (2004, p. 205). Avant-Mier (2014) shared insight on his personal experience as a popular music scholar: “Popular music scholars in communication feel pressure to investigate forms of media that are more acceptable in the academy—more acceptable because they have a longer history, have been legitimated through past scholars and established paradigms,” giving a hint into the reason why there is so little focus on this genre within the large communications field (p. 9). As an interdisciplinary subject, popular music studies lies on the border of the broader realm of other communications related focuses, and is often neglected to be considered a legitimate study within the ever growing field.

Young women fans of pop music are often positioned as “animalistic,” “pathologically insane,” aggressive, and obsessive (Lewis, 1992, p. 49). Lewis paints a picture of a possible result of such a lack of research in pop music and fandom:

The fan is characterized as (at least potentially) an obsessed loner, suffering from a disease of isolation, or a frenzied crowd member, suffering from a disease of contagion. In either case, the fan is seen as being irrational, out of control, and prey to a number of external forces. The influence of the media, a narcissistic society, hypnotic rock music,

and crowd contagion are invoked to explain how fans become victims of their fandom.

(Lewis, 1992, p. 45)

Leblanc (2002) explains that adolescents are attracted to subcultures because it acts as a nihilistic rebellion against authority and dominant norms. While he is not describing this subculture specifically, it applies to pop music fandoms because they reject the idea that their music choices are invalid and remain loyal to their community in which they have decided to be a part of. Society tends to make these people feel like outcasts, so that urges them to feel like they need to join something to be a part of with others just like them.

Women being dedicated fans of artists is not a new phenomenon (think Beatlemania) but the usage of social media to host online fan communities has developed into an interesting environment to study, and it continues to do so. There are reasons to believe young women form identities differently than others because they take their fandoms quite seriously, they are proud of being a fan of the musician or band, and also tend to adopt a name or label for themselves as a whole specific to the artist, such as “Swifties,” “Beliebers,” or “Directioners.” They continuously challenge the perception people have of them; that they are vapid, or that they don’t appreciate “real music.” Their concern is not on what constitutes “real music,” or how that is even defined, but rather on collective support for something that has importance in their lives in one reason or another, and to express themselves through this passion (Bury, 2005). Young women are also typically still figuring out who they are as a person at this time in their lives, so allowing a fandom to have such a large role in their life would almost certainly have an impact on who they are and how they identify themselves.

Methodology

Procedure

The data from this study comes from interviews with five long-time members of online fandoms on social media platforms such as Twitter and Tumblr that is described in full below. The participants were found through classmates that knew others who are active in online fandoms. The data was collected in March 2018 from five 19-22 year old female participants who identify as members of online music fandoms on Twitter, and the micro-blogging website, Tumblr. These platforms were appropriate to study as the community “gathering area”, as many fans use these sites primarily as ways to stay connected with other fans and the artist themselves. They can communicate with each other, post original content related to the artist, share photos of the artist, discuss new music releases or other aspects of the artist’s life, and stay up to date on the latest news. Twitter is seen more as an “update” platform, where many accounts focus on posting updates of the artists, whether it be where they were last spotted, new paparazzi photos, fan photos, and other insider information. Twitter also tends to have majority of younger fans. Also, fans see Twitter as a more direct connection with the artist since they have the ability to reply back to the artist’s Tweets. Twitter often becomes the platform used for fans who are trying to be “noticed” by said artist, whether in the form of a Retweet, Like, or reply. This makes fans feel validated and close to the artist.

Tumblr offers a wider variety of content available for users to post and share, along with more options for creativity when designing one’s blog to be a representation of their interests. On both of these sites, users tend to have usernames that reflect their fandom, or they have information in their profile picture or bio that does, thus defining them as a “One Direction fan,”

in their online persona. Since Tumblr does not have the feature that Twitter does in which replies to an original post are turned into a thread of messages, replies and reactions to the post being “reblogged” are done in other ways. First, a reply can be posted by adding one’s own comment onto the post that will appear on their blog and to their followers. Second, a user may comment their reaction in the tags of a post, which does not alter the post like the first option does, thus making this option more specific to that user’s own blog. Last, a user may actually reply to the post if the original poster (OP) allows. According to Hillman et. al’s study on the Tumblr fandom experience, it was discovered that fandoms “thrive” on the website despite the limited chat features (2014, p. 1). Both social media websites are creatively utilized from every angle by fans participating in their online fandom. Twitter and Tumblr are both popular apps, therefore mobilizing the fandom, and allowing access from any time in any place that the user feels the need to check the latest.

Through the qualitative analysis of interviews along with quantitative analysis of short surveys, this research set out to examine the ways that music fans, in the case of this study, fans of One Direction as a band and as individual solo artists, translate their online identities within their fandoms into their real life identities. The variables studied were 1) Expression of Identity Online, 2) Expression of Online Identity in Real Life, and 3) Personal Connection to Fandom. These variables assisted in answering this study’s research questions because they address the relationship that fans have between themselves and the community, the ways they create their online identities, and the ways their online identities are expressed in real life.

Participants agreed to take part in an interview where they first state their age and gender (with the options of male, female, trans, non-binary, or other). The first part of the interview

involved a set of questions that assessed participants' expression of the fandom online in the community on Twitter or Tumblr. They were asked the frequency in which they log on to Twitter or Tumblr go participate in fandom activity, how often they make original posts, how often they Retweet or Reblog other's posts, how often they communicate with others in the fandom online, how often they post photos from concerts, and if they have separate accounts for personal and fandom use. Even though this was an interview and the participants were encouraged to elaborate on their answers, they were also recorded on a Likert Scale ranging from Never, Not Often, Sometimes, Often, and Every Day.

The next part of the interview consisted of questions that were meant to measure the ways fans' identities are translated into their real life identities, and to what extent they express their fandom identity in real life. Some questions that were asked include: Your friends and family in real life know you are a fan, You frequently purchase band merchandise (official or fan made), You frequently wear the above merchandise in public, You notice a difference in language or humor since being in the fandom, You have met a friend from the online fandom in real life, and You attend as many concerts that you can. These were also recorded on a Likert Scale ranging from Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, and Strongly Agree, to the best of my ability, just for extra quantitative purposes.

The last part of the interview was more of an open conversation focusing on what being part of a fandom means to each participant, what made them seek it out in the first place, how much of a personal connection they feel to the artist, and what has made them stay active for so long. The open discussion format was meant to allow participants to dig deeper in themselves and produce meaningful answers that would benefit the study.

Findings

RQ1: Do fans prefer to keep their fandom identities internal or do they let them reflect outward?

Based on the responses from the participants that were interviewed, located in the appendices of this thesis, fans do prefer to express their identities outward. Fans seek out the fandom space in order to express their passion for the band or musician online with people with similar interests. All five participants log onto Tumblr or Twitter to engage in fandom activity every day (Appendix 1). While a few participants preferred to keep their fandom account separate and private from their personal account, they still utilize the platform as a way of expressing and communicating with others, which then affects their behaviors and ideas as well. 100% of the participants have separate social media accounts for personal and fandom use and 100% of them also stated that their friends and family know that they are a fan in real life (Appendix 2). Participants also spoke about not being ashamed or nervous to express their identity as a fan to the outside world, exemplified here by one nineteen year old fan: “They make me happy and if people have a problem with who you like, then that’s their problem.”

RQ2: How does one’s online identity affect or translate to their real life identity?

When looking at the responses from the participants, 100% of them confirmed that they noticed a difference in the way that they think or speak after being in the fandom (Appendix 2). To expand on this further, all participants also stated that they frequently communicate with others online in the fandom, with many of them being from different countries, races, or backgrounds. Participants commented that they have tended to pick up on certain ways of speaking or other quirks that other fans online understand completely. Three out of the five participants have even met friends they have made online in person. All five of the participants

said that they go to as many concerts or events as they can, where they then meet up with other fans. Participants also noted that they will most likely post photos or other comments about these events on their social media accounts, both personal and fandom.

A common theme that was found from several participants was that they did not know many people in real life who also liked One Direction, therefore the friends made online were very important to them. One participant shared that there was a time that she wanted to go to a concert, but she would have had to go alone. This made her nervous since she was quite shy, but she made friends after following some other Harry Styles fans on Twitter, ended up meeting them at a concert, and ended up being so proud that she was brave enough to go with the help of her online friends . Another participant said:

I met my best friend through One Direction. I was in high school when I first started liking them, but none of my friends in real life liked them, so I never had anyone to talk to about them...I started following some other One Direction fan accounts on Tumblr and that's how I came across the girl who would become my best friend. We lived in different states but we met up at one of their concerts and have done that ever since. (Female, Age 22)

There were also instances of fans who previously felt misunderstood or outcasted, becoming more self-assured in themselves after seeing someone they look up to hold them in a positive light. For example, one participant said:

Seeing Harry [Styles] holding up a gay rights flag on stage in front of his huge audience of fans made me feel so happy and empowered. Someone I look up to so much supports

people like me and that in itself makes me feel so much more confident in myself and proud to be who I am. (Female, Age 22)

She noted that her sexuality never caused her any kind of severe harassment, but she also did not have anyone like her to relate to, often resulting in her feelings of isolation. Other participants also claimed that they have previously felt like an outcast for one reason or another before they became a part of the online community where they realized that there were people who understood them out there, even if they did live across the world.

There were of course, the more physical translations of identity into a fan's real life. All of the participants noted that they purchase merchandise, both fan made and official, to wear in support and solidarity with their fandom. One participant noted that as they have gotten older, they like to wear merchandise or clothing that has a more "subtle nod" to the fandom, possibly even only recognizable to another member of a fandom. What used to be wearing your favorite artist's face on your shirt the day after a concert has turned into incorporating certain quirks or signature looks that they have into a fan's every day style. Another participant even claimed to be following an account on Tumblr that is dedicated to finding the exact articles of clothing that a band member wears, as well as cheaper alternatives. She said that if she loves it enough and it is affordable, she will buy it and wear it all the time. The same fan noticed and described concert style as:

What used to be a crop top, high waisted shorts, and a flannel tied around your waist at One Direction's last tour turned into chic, expensive-looking, quirky, 70's inspired looks at Harry [Styles]'s first solo tour concert. (Female, Age 21)

RQ3: What was the most important thing fans have learned since being in an online fandom?

Many results of this research question overlapped with question two. Participants discussed issues regarding representation and appropriation within fandom texts, both fan made and produced by the fan object. Fans have not been afraid to critique or “call out” their favorite artist if they have done something offensive or in poor taste, with the hopes of educating them and other fans who might have been oblivious. One participant explained her eye-opening experience by saying:

Before belonging to a fandom on Tumblr, I will admit that I was so oblivious to so many social issues, not because I didn't care, but because I didn't live in a very diverse town; I was surrounded by people just like me, white and privileged. Just seeing other people's posts and conversations about cultures helped me to learn so much about what I was never taught. (Female, Age 19)

She also explained that one of her favorite parts of the community aspect is that there is a sense of belongingness that makes her feel a part of something “unique,” specifically referring to having “inside jokes” within the fandom. Other participants, as discussed in RQ2, stated that the biggest impact the fandom has made on them have been increased confidence, happiness, and acceptance of others and themselves.

Discussion

By asking fans how their online fandom identities affects their real life identities, what from the community has become most impactful to their identities and how they are expressed, this study has found significant evidence suggesting that fans hold their active fandom experiences close to them, thus playing a large part in their identities. The findings of my research have revealed some far deeper than expected connections from fandom identity to real

life identity. Fans gather on the online platform to share a common interest, but it is the interactions between fans that influence one's identity; Whether it be newfound confidence, education in social issues, or just simply expression of a favorite passion, all these factors play a role in identity formation of fans. When discussing the results, we must first remember the significance and difference between the online identity and the real life identity. The online identity is often much more carefully curated than the one presented to the real world, since there is more opportunity to edit one's self online rather than in person. The behaviors and interactions that happen within a fandom are bound to have some kind of impact on a frequent user's personality and real life identity, especially over a period of time. Fans tend to be very passionate and protective of their favorite band or artist, and often want to "own it," in regards to unashamedly and publicly supporting them in real life. Online, it is easy to show because the online community is full of fans who share the same interests and are eager to discuss music, news, and all things related to the band or artist. It can be a solace to an outsider, but the support from the online fandom can translate into a newfound confidence in the user's real life as well.

The participants' responses revealed that fans do choose to express their fan identity outward. Most of them have separate social media accounts for personal and fandom, but their friends and family know they are fans, which shows that even though there is a separation between the two accounts, it is not for reasons of hiding something or switching between separate identities. The fandom activities affect who they are online and offline. The findings for the variable in question of how fans' online identities affect their real life identities covered a wide range of responses. Being invested in an online fandom can start off simply as a hobby or for entertainment, but it can end up turning into something much more impactful in the long run.

Some answers were about the fandom itself impacting one's identity, but many more were about the relationships and discourse within the fandom having a more internal effect on the way one sees themselves and the world around them. The discourse that happens instills new understandings and more well rounded thoughts on matters that one might not have previously been aware of.

In the responses that referred to the physical representations of fandom in real life, many participants spoke of the meanings of wearing fandom merchandise. Fans still purchase and wear merchandise, but as time has gone on, it becomes more likely for fans to wear clothes that are more inspired by the band or artist, as opposed to clothes that blatantly feature a name or photo of them. The participant who described the change in fans' concert fashion explained that even the fans' taste grows and shifts with the artist, it seems collectively, as they both grow up and explore new territory. The outfit described at the One Direction concert is seen as more youthful or even juvenile compared to the outfits at Styles' concert, a symbol of growth and maturity, along with him, post-boyband life.

The findings that helped answer RQ3 emerged from the conversational interview questions and revealed reasons why being a member of the online fandom was so important to the participants. This research question garnered the most interesting responses. Participants claimed that being a part of their fandom affected them for the better, in terms of being more confident or comfortable with themselves whether it be about sexuality, race, gender, or other personal identity. In the case of fandom life, the online platform is simply the place where members gather as one to support an artist or band, but the conversations and connections made inside are what have the most significant impact on users' lives and identities outside of the online community.

Participants frequently brought up the impact the online fandom has made on them in terms of learning about other cultures and other social issues. This reflects on the individual fan's character; that they are not a robot programmed to worship everything that the artist does. This reflects the commentary that takes place within fans online. This type of behavior ultimately translates into the way the fan acts and thinks in real life. The social media platform for fan communities, which is open to people all over the world, offers this open minded outlook and can give insight from people who experience oppression to open the eyes of those who are not quite as educated. Individuals' own research on issues is encouraged and necessary before believing everything you see on the Internet, but the online community offers many new personal perspectives.

Experiences made in this online community, both involving fans and the fan object, can clearly have a significant effect on someone's confidence and happiness. Participants have shared experiences of making friends who understand them and give them confidence, with some not knowing what they would be like had they not joined the fandom. For example, a twenty-two year old participant felt understood for the first time because she met other LGBTQ fans through the community and saw her favorite artist show solidarity with her by holding up a pride flag. Of course she knew that she does not need a celebrity to tell her she is valid in order to know her worth, but the idea of having such a personal aspect of her identity represented not only in other fandom members, but also by the fan object, affirmed her sexual identity as accepted and thus reinforced her confidence to express herself to the world.

Conclusion

Online fandoms are indicated to be a community that is constantly evolving with the times, along with technological advancements that continue to make the experience even more personal for every user. The fans that were studied for this thesis were not casual fans for a reason; they were the passionate and participatory fans that actively took their online community platform and utilized it as space for discussion and solidarity that goes beyond just talking about updates in their favorite artist's life. This study has shown that interactions within the online space and the behaviors between fans have a significant impact on users' identities online and in real life, and it surpasses the superficial level of simply sharing a love for a musician. Through the interview process, this study uncovered many meaningful testimonies from long time online fandom users' personal experiences. These fans used online fandom communities to express their passions with people just like them, and in turn they interact with users all around the world. This social media platform has shown its usefulness in educating members through fandom and social discourse that leads to open minded ways of thinking and behaving. The fandom object, in this case, members of pop music band One Direction, is the commonality in interest that brought the fans together, and the passion that keeps them excited to be present and active in the community. It is then the experiences shared and learned from each other within the community that create the most impactful effects on real life identity within members.

This thesis has concluded that fandom member's identities on the online community platform affect their real life identity in several ways. It is important to keep in mind that the sample, young women is crucial to the findings of the study because of the stigma present against them that denounces their choices in music, especially when it comes to mainstream pop

music. Through the interview process, this study found that this rarely affects the way these fans choose to express themselves about their passions, and certainly does not convince them that what they choose to invest their time in is invalid. Also, young women are at the age where they are still learning about who they are, so being so involved in a fandom that takes up much of their lives is likely to have an impact on how they identify themselves. With a massive community behind them and the sense of understanding for the individuals that make it up, fans are not bothered by the outside world's opinions when they know that they are a part of something more than meets the eye. The unique and worldwide online fan community's impact is present in their daily lives, closer than the physical distances between them, and is a crucial part of what makes them who they are.

Limitations and Future Directions

There were many limitations in this study, especially due to the small sample size. The number of participants was limited due to the small scale of the study, and the results could benefit from a larger number of participants. Another limitation was my method of finding participants. I had to go through local friends to find people that I could meet with directly because of the difficulty of finding fandom members to survey.

There are many future directions that this study could go. This study was about young women in pop music fandoms, but another way to go would be to study the same gender in different music genres, or to research how men behave differently in online music fandoms. This study did not require a certain race, but four out of five of the participants were white. Future studies could focus on how fans of color's experiences differ from white fans.

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Appendix 1

Responses to Questions Regarding Expression of Fandom Online

Likert Scale: Never (0), Not Often (1), Sometimes (2), Often (3), Every Day (4)

	Fan 1	Fan 2	Fan 3	Fan 4	Fan 5
Separate accounts (personal & fandom)	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Twitter & Tumblr fandom usage	4	4	4	4	4
Post photos from concerts/events/meetups	3	4	4	3	4
Make original posts/content	2	3	2	2	3
Reblog/Retweet others' posts	4	4	4	4	4
Communicate with other fans online	3	4	3	2	3

Appendix 2

Responses to Questions Regarding Expression of Online Fandom In Real Life

Likert Scale: Strongly Disagree (0), Disagree (1), Neutral (2), Agree (3), Strongly Agree (4)

	Fan 1	Fan 2	Fan 3	Fan 4	Fan 5
Friends/Family in real life know	4	4	4	4	4
Frequently purchase merch	4	3	2	3	3
Frequently wear merch in public	2	2	2	3	2
Difference in language/humor	4	4	3	4	3
Has met online friend in real life	yes	yes	no	yes	no
Attends as many concerts as possible	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes

Appendix 3

Participant 1 Interview (Age 21)

I: Now I'd like to ask a few more conversational questions to get a better insight into your experience in an online fandom. What made you seek out an online fandom in the first place?

P: I already had a Tumblr account that I used to post about my favorite shows and celebrities when I started getting into One Direction, so I just slowly started following more One Direction blogs and soon my blog became all about them and it felt like my life had become all about them [laughs].

I: Was it easy to find other fans online?

P: Oh, totally. Tumblr was, and is, saturated with One Direction member fan blogs.

I: Was it easy to make friends with them?

P: Yeah, most people were pretty open to being friends. Over time I kind of figured out who the people were that I actually wanted to keep in touch with, though. There are always some people who rub you the wrong way, but you just unfollow them!

I: How important is the community aspect to you compared to just being a casual fan of something?

P: I like having the community of people because when something big happens, you can go to a whole group of people who are equally as excited about it as you. It makes it more fun to have people to share it with.

I: Did you know anyone in real life who was as big of a fan or as dedicated as you?

P: Not really. A few of my friends liked One Direction's songs, but they weren't as invested in the band members' lives as I was [laughs].

I: How would you say you benefited from the online platform?

P: I guess this goes back to what I said before about having a whole group of people readily available to freak out about things with you. I never felt alone and I loved the energy.

I: What about ways that you show your love for them in real life? You said you buy merch, but are there any other physical ways that show off your identity as a fan?

P: I don't know if this counts but, whenever I can find something that they have worn, and I can afford it, I buy it and wear it all the time. [Laughs]. I think a lot of us like to try to dress in a way that reflects the way, like, Harry dresses.

I: So you think there is a certain “uniform” that you can identify other fans by?

P: I mean every fan is different, but there’s definitely a look people wear, at least to concerts, where you know you’ll be around other fans. What used to be a crop top, high waisted shorts, and a flannel tied around your waist at One Direction’s last tour turned into chic, expensive-looking, quirky, 70’s inspired looks at Harry’s first solo tour concert.

I: You “strongly agree” that you noticed a change in your language or humor since being in the fandom. Can you expand on that?

P: It’s kind of hard to explain [laughs]. I feel like there’s a certain way of speaking that we have online and soon it spreads and everyone starts talking that way just because it rubs off on you. I think it’s funny if I catch myself say some fandom lingo in real life because it sounds so weird saying it out loud instead of typing it.

I: How important is it to distinguish yourself as a fan in real life to you?

P: I don’t think it is the most important thing. Like, One Direction, well, more Harry now, is such a huge part of my life and I’m proud to be a fan, but it’s not like I need to tattoo it on my forehead. [Laughs] I do have a One Direction lyric tattooed on my arm though.

I: No way, what is it?

P: “Girl Almighty” [points to her forearm]

I: I love it! Last one: what has changed the most about you since you have been in an online fandom?

P: Aside from just growing up in general, I think I’ve become a more free spirited person. I’m not ashamed of being a fan of anything. Life is too short to pretend that you’re too cool to like something. Being a part of this community has just made me a happier person, I think!

Appendix 4

Participant 2 Interview (Age 22)

I: Now I'm going to ask a few more conversational questions to get a better insight into your experience in a fandom. What made you seek out an online fandom in the first place?

P: None of my real life friends liked One Direction when I discovered them, so I wanted to find people who did.

I: Was it easy to make friends with fans online? You said you've met an online friend in real life. How was that?

P: It was easy to find people, but I was more selective with who I wanted to be friends with. I actually met my best friend through One Direction. I was in high school when I first started liking them, but none of my friends in real life liked them, so I never had anyone to talk to about them. I started following some other One Direction fan accounts on Tumblr and that's how I came across the girl who would become my best friend. We lived in different states but we met up at one of their concerts and have done that ever since.

I: How important is the community aspect to you compared to just being a casual fan of something? And why?

P: The community aspect is so, so important to me. I'm bisexual, and I was out before I joined the online fandom. I was never bullied that hard or anything, but still, I had never met anyone like me before until I joined Tumblr and Twitter and found so many fans who were gay or bi. All of a sudden I felt like a part of something more than just a group of people who like the same singer.

I: How would you say you benefited from the online platform, or how would you say you used it to benefit the most?

P: I benefited from it because it allowed me to reach LGBTQ fans from all around the world when I had never met anyone gay before. Some of us even started a group chat a year or so ago and we still talk in it, like, every day.

I: What about ways that you show your love for them in real life? You said you buy merch, but are there any other physical ways that show off your identity as a fan?

P: I like wearing merch, especially fan made things that you find on Etsy or something. For a while I had "Directioner" in the bio of every one of my social media accounts, but I took it off now [laughs]. I have a fan Twitter and a personal Twitter, but I still talk about Harry [Styles] and Niall [Horan] on my personal occasionally, so people in real life definitely know I love them.

I: Do you think there is a certain style or "look" that you can identify other fans by?

P: Umm, maybe sometimes. I actually see so many “Treat People With Kindness” t-shirts on my college campus, which is a more obvious choice of clothing to show you’re a Harry fan. I know people who like to get their style inspiration from their favorite artists, but I’m not sure if I think there is a 1D-specific style.

I: You “strongly agree” that you noticed a change in your language or humor since being in the fandom. Can you expand on that?

P: I think I use way more internet slang in real life now. It’s a little embarrassing [laughs]. I might use some fandom related terms but I think it’s mostly internet lingo in general, since that’s where most of us spend most of our time talking to each other, especially if we live in different places, which many of my friends do.

I: Last one, what has changed the most about you since you have been in an online fandom?

P: I think I’m so much more confident than before. Meeting people like me and going to concerts has been the best time of my life. Also, things like seeing Harry [Styles] holding up a gay rights flag on stage in front of his huge audience of fans made me feel so happy and empowered. Someone I look up to so much supports people like me and that in itself makes me feel so much more confident in myself and proud to be who I am.

Appendix 5

Participant 3 Interview (Age 19)

I: Now I'd like to ask a few more conversational questions to get a better insight into your experience in an online fandom. What made you seek out an online fandom in the first place?

P: I actually found fans on Twitter by accident when I saw a funny One Direction-related Tweet on my timeline, so I started following fans on there. Then I saw people sharing their Tumblr URLs, so I decided to make a Tumblr blog to be a part of the fandom there, which personally, I think is way more fun than Twitter.

I: Was it easy to make friends with fans you found online?

P: It wasn't hard, but you had to make the effort to reach out to people who might be more popular or who have more followers than you in order to make friends. I'm a little shy in real life, and I'm apparently also a little shy online as well [laughs]. Some people have large circles of friends online, but I have a few really good ones.

I: How important is the community aspect to you compared to just being a casual fan of something?

P: I think the community aspect is so cool. I mean not every single person gets along, like, we don't sit around singing kumbaya with every single person who has a Tumblr account [laughs], but it's fun to comment and share posts with each other and make jokes about stuff. It's like there are fandom inside jokes that people outside wouldn't understand; especially the jokes that only people who have been in the fandom for a long time would get.

I: Did you know anyone in real life who was as big of a fan or as dedicated as you?

P: I have a few friends in real life who have become bigger fans of Harry [Styles] because of me [laughs]. It started off with just me, though.

I: How would you say you benefited from the online platform, or how would you say you used it to benefit you the most?

P: Before belonging to a fandom on Tumblr, I will admit that I was so oblivious to so many social issues, not because I didn't care, but because I didn't live in a very diverse town; I was surrounded by people just like me, white and privileged. Just seeing other people's posts and conversations about different cultures helped me to learn so much about what I was never taught.

I: Oh that's interesting. Can you explain what you mean by that more?

P: Yeah, I mean I guess this could happen to anyone on Tumblr, not just someone in a music fandom. But because there are fans on there from all over the world, and we are all behind a computer screen, we're all seen as equal together online, right? I found that when a social issue

was relevant in the news, there was so much talk about it online, too, and I got to read comments from so many people of different races and cultures. I guess it was how I become more “woke” when I thought about things from different perspectives.

I: You “agreed” that you noticed a change in your language or humor since being in the fandom. Can you expand on that?

P: For me this sort of goes back to the fandom inside jokes, or just Internet humor in general. I think Millennials and Generation Z people have this certain sense of humor because we grew up with the Internet and we enjoy irony. When you’re online interacting in the fandom every day, you’re going to pick up on each other’s humor.

I: How important is it to distinguish yourself as a fan in real life to you?

P: Are you pretty much asking if I’m embarrassed to be a huge fan of a boy band in public? [Laughs]. No I’m not. They make me happy and if people have a problem with who you like, then that’s their problem.

I: Last one, what has changed the most about you since you have been in an online fandom?

P: Just that I’ve become more socially aware and that I care a lot about equality and social justice. It’s weird to thank a fandom for that, but if I had never joined, I’m not sure when or if I would have ever stopped to think about important things like that. Also, I have some pretty awesome friends who like to go to as many concerts as I do!

Appendix 6

Participant 4 Interview (Age 21)

I: Now I'd like to ask a few more conversational questions to get a better insight into your experience in an online fandom. What made you seek out an online fandom in the first place?

P: Well I'd actually already been part of a fandom for a TV show on Tumblr, so I was pretty familiar with how things worked. People I already followed started Reblogging posts about One Direction, so naturally I got sucked in, too.

I: Was it easy to make friends with other fans online?

P: I found it pretty easy. I'm so much better at talking to people online than in real life, so it was nice to get to know people there first before they met me in person and thought I was just a really awkward person [laughs].

I: How important is the community aspect to you compared to just being a casual fan of something?

P: I can't imagine being just a casual fan of something [laughs]. When I like something, I *really* like that thing. It's way more fun to have people to enjoy it with.

I: Did you know anyone in real life who was as big of a fan or as dedicated as you?

P: Nope. My real life friends didn't mind 1D, but they also didn't care to be fans either.

I: How would you say you benefited from the online platform, or how would you say you used it to benefit you the most?

P: Definitely because of the friends I made. Three or four years ago, One Direction was finally playing a concert near me and I wanted to go, but I would have had to go alone. Not going to lie, I'm pretty shy and going to a big event like that made me pretty nervous. My online friends knew about my situation, so we ended up planning to finally meet at that concert! I felt like I overcame something really big by traveling to the show alone, and got to meet my friends in real life for the first time.

I: What about ways that you show your love for them in real life? You said you buy merch, but are there any other physical ways that show off your identity as a fan?

P: I like wearing clothes that are like a subtle nod to the fandom, especially since I've gotten older and I don't really want to wear shirts with their faces on the front [laughs]. I like things that might be recognizable only to another fan who gets the reference.

I: You "strongly agree" that you noticed a change in your language or humor since being in the fandom. Can you expand on that?

P: First off, I think I'm kind of better at talking to people since meeting my online friends in person and getting to know their friends as well. For humor, I think we all have developed a similar sense of humor that's kind of weirder than I'd had before. It's like impossible to explain, but I think we turn to humor to relate to each other.

I: Last one, what has changed the most about you since you have been in an online fandom?

P: Hmm. I'd like to think I have a better perspective of other people and I have more respect for them as well. I think I'm a little more confident in myself, too, both physically and mentally. I hate saying it because it might come off as cheesy, but I think the fandom and the people I've met through it have made me a better person.

Appendix 7

Participant 5 Interview (Age 21)

I: Now I'd like to ask a few more conversational questions to get a better insight into your experience in an online fandom. What made you seek out an online fandom in the first place?

P: I already had a Tumblr account that I used occasionally, but when I first heard about One Direction, I looked up stuff about them on Tumblr and the rest is history.

I: Was it easy to make friends with other fans online?

P: Sure! I mean I've never met anyone from online in real life, but it's easy to bond with someone online when you like the same stuff.

I: How important is the community aspect to you compared to just being a casual fan of something?

P: I don't know why the first thing I thought of here was how everyone reacted when Zayn left One Direction [Laughs]. A casual fan might be sad or confused, but everyone online - it was a whole other ordeal. Of course we were all devastated, but having the community of fans as a support system was helpful. It might still be a sore spot for some fans, but over time, it seemed like we all learned to have a sense of humor about it because we went through it together. Oh, this sounds so dramatic [laughs].

I: How would you say you benefited from the online platform, or how would you say you used it to benefit you the most?

P: My favorite thing about the Tumblr fandom is that I follow people from all over the world, but we all get excited about the same things. It makes it feel like there is no boundary between us. I can talk to another fan on there and act like I've known them for years.

I: What about ways that you show your love for them in real life? You said you buy merch, but are there any other physical ways that show off your identity as a fan?

P: I'm not sure if this counts because it was a few years ago, but during One Direction's tour for their second album, I was a coordinator of a fan project with a few other girls on Twitter. We tried to reach as many people on social media as possible to let them know we were going to hold up a paper heart during a certain point in a song during our concert. Also, a few years ago I made T-shirts with fan-favorite lyrics on them and sold them on Etsy. Mostly because my friends and I weren't the biggest fans of the official merch, but you didn't hear that from me [laughs].

I: You "agreed" that you noticed a change in your language or humor since being in the fandom. Can you expand on that?

P: It's actually that I'm more aware of other people's language. I mean, fans can have a specific discourse over topics that range from what a celebrity wore that day to discussing something

potentially problematic that the celebrity did. I've noticed a shift to being more aware of representation and calling out appropriation or mistakes when necessary.

I: What do you think this says about the fandom?

P: I think it is good that there can be open discussion and that most fans are able to take their favorite person down from their pedestal and give them some constructive criticism when it's necessary. This could also be because we are growing up and learning more about the world around us, but, I don't know, I like that we can still talk about important things even when it involves a celebrity we like in a not so great light.

I: Last one, what has changed the most about you since you have been in an online fandom?

P: I'm not sure if this is the answer you're looking for, but it made me so much more aware of how the media paints a picture of what they want you to see, and how they try to portray stars a certain way. I got so involved in the lives of pop stars, so of course I read plenty of articles - legit and gossip. I'm studying journalism and media studies right now, so I think underlying messages and the way things are twisted is so interesting. I feel like I already have a bit of knowledge after seeing these things for all these years now.

