The Power of Fandom

Report
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I. Introduction
WHY SHOULD BRANDS CARE ABOUT FANS?

In today’s ever-shifting landscape, consumers have access to an endless array of content, products and services. They can engage with any brand they like whenever they like, however they like. And as the power shifts into the hands of the consumer, their expectations of these brands are higher than ever – from immediate accessibility to ongoing engagement to personalization.

With so many options just a click away, brand loyalty is harder to attain and harder to earn. To make an impact in this consumer-driven market, it is imperative for brands to understand that consumers have needs, passions and expectations – and to deliver against them. It’s no longer enough to build awareness. The most successful brands are powered by fans: highly engaged, loyal users that will return, day in and day out.

For brands, the benefits of fandom are clear. Fans are the most avid of all consumers – investing more time, spending more money, and sharing more of what they love. Fans can be a brand’s greatest asset and the most genuine form of advertising there is. Fans evangelize with authentic passion. They build fervent communities and form tribes. They can bond one generation to the next, and they conspicuously display their fandoms with pride.

To build fans, a brand must learn to be a fan-centric organization that meets the consumer’s psycho social needs and expectations. A fan-centric organization has several advantages that allow it to succeed in a crowded landscape – from deeper engagement to richer analytic insights to increased loyalty.
But what do we really know about fans? What does it mean to be a fan? What makes fandom different from other relationships? Why do fans care so deeply? What makes fandom flourish? How is fandom sustained? How is fandom fractured? Most importantly, how can brands tap into the value of fandom?

In an effort to understand the fundamental drivers of fandom, Troika embarked on a yearlong, anthropological study that connected us with fans of all walks of life. We sought to understand fans holistically, respectfully, and authentically, and we realized that fandom is, in many ways, similar no matter what form it takes - whether we are fans of Star Wars, the Yankees or the Grateful Dead.

At its core, fandom is driven by three basic human needs: identity, self-care, and social connection. By tapping into these needs, brands can begin to understand their consumers on a much deeper level and use these insights to engage them in more meaningful ways.

However, building a fan-centric organization doesn’t happen overnight. It requires a radical shift in the way brands think about and approach their consumers, moving beyond a transactional relationship to a more authentic one. To build a long-lasting relationship, brands need to put fans at the center of everything they do. That can mean re-shaping organizational culture to foster a genuine respect for fans and the value they create for the brand. It means developing products and delivering experiences that meet fans’ core needs. It means connecting with fans both as individuals and as a community.

Far from simply transactional, fandom is a deeply meaningful relationship, one that helps people find their place in the world. And one that has the power to engender true loyalty.

Dan Pappalardo
Troika Founder & CEO
II. The Power of Fandom Overview


**OBJECTIVES**

The Power of Fandom study was designed to understand fans and fandom from the inside out. In turn, that understanding would provide a foundation upon which brands could build more fan-centric businesses. Our research was centered around a series of core questions:

- What does it mean to be a fan and how does fandom differ from other levels of appeal?
- Why do fans care so much and what value does fandom bring to their lives?
- What role does fandom play in everyday life?
- How is fandom born, sustained, and fractured within the individual?
- How does fandom spread and reproduce?
- What makes fandom the same no matter what form it takes (sports, entertainment, music, etc.)? What makes it different depending upon what form it takes?
- What, if anything, makes social connections rooted in fandom unique?
- What sustains, strengthens, and weakens fan communities?
- How should we define fandom in order to build brands that successfully leverage its benefits?

**METHODOLOGY**

Answering such foundational questions required a yearlong, multimodal research approach, including qualitative and quantitative, observational and directed, ongoing, periodic, and stand-alone research methods. From March 5, 2016 through February 24, 2017, we conducted:

- **Netnography**
  12 months of netnography, an ethnographic approach to social listening, among 60+ online fan communities (qualitative, observational, ongoing)

- **Digital Ethnography**
  6 six-week waves of mobile ethnography, in which research participants used a mobile app to share moments in everyday life when fandom proved important, meaningful, or relevant; 100 fans/wave (hybrid qual/quant, hybrid directed observational, periodic)

- **Quantitative Survey**
  Quantitative survey among 8,000 American fans, ages 13-65, fielded in June 2016 (quantitative, directed, stand-alone)

- **Personal Narrative Analysis**
  Personal narrative analysis in which 600 fans shared the origin stories of their fandom, 100 fans explained the role fandom has played throughout their lives (qualitative, directed, periodic)

- **Focus Groups**
  6 focus groups in Los Angeles, Calif., among fans of sports, entertainment, video-games, and digital creators, fielded in February 2017 (qualitative, directed, stand-alone)
WHO ARE FANS?

Well, almost all of us. We asked 10,250 people to consider what it means to be a fan of something, including how being a fan may or may not differ from liking something.* With that definition in mind, we asked them whether or not they considered themselves to be fans of anything. Seventy-eight percent answered ‘yes.’

*Allowing research participants to draw upon their own definitions of the concept in question highlights the anthropological nature of this study. Cultural anthropology is the study of shared meaning, an effort to illuminate how the shared understandings that emerge within groups of people shape human experience. In *The Power of Fandom*, we sought to understand how people organically apprehend and experience fandom in the United States at this moment in time. If we had defined fandom for our participants in advance, we would have sacrificed our opportunity to learn about the range of meanings fandom holds.

And, when we consider ourselves ‘fans,’ we are most often describing an avid attachment, one marked by loyalty and active investment. Forty-nine percent of the fandom we captured in the quantitative survey fell at the highest levels, with fans describing themselves as being ‘as avid as a fan can be.’ Another 45% hovered in the mid-high range. And only 6% fell in the low range, with fans describing themselves as being ‘as casual as a fan can be.’ In other words, fandom isn’t casual – at least not from the fan’s point of view.

Using an 11-point scale, where ‘1’ represents being ‘as casual as a fan can be’ and ‘11’ represents being ‘as avid as a fan can be,’ we asked fans to rate their avidity for up to two specific things that they are fans of the thing they are most a fan of, as well as a randomly chosen second, if they offered more than one.
Avid fans report higher rates of engagement in a wide array of behaviors, from passive behaviors like watching and listening, to more active ones like buying merchandise, attending events, and participating in online fan communities. **Avid fans invest in their fandoms – they invest money, energy, time, and emotion.**

But avid fans don’t just do more and spend more than less avid fans. They get more. Avid fans derive significantly greater benefit from their fandoms. They are almost twice as likely to credit fandom with ‘giving them something to look forward to in daily life,’ ‘helping them experience a wide range of human emotions,’ ‘helping them get through tough times,’ and even ‘making them feel part of something bigger than themselves.’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>SIGNIFICANT BENEFIT OF FAN</strong></th>
<th><strong>AVIDS</strong></th>
<th><strong>LESS AVIDS</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Give me something to look forward to in my daily life</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps me experience a full range of human emotions</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps me get through tough times</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makes me feel like I’m part of something bigger than myself</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>28%</td>
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When we look at the relationship between avidity, behavior, and fandom’s benefits, we can see that avid fans are engaged in a virtuous cycle of Fan ROI: the more they invest in their fandom, the more they get out of it, which then drives additional investment and additional reward. And on and on it goes.
First and foremost, fans establish relationships with the things they are fans of. We call the ‘thing’ that someone is a fan of an ‘object of fandom’ – or an ‘OOF’, for short. Fans consistently describe their connection to their OOFs as being “in love,” often even “blind love.” They use the language of love to differentiate fandom from “just liking something,” and fandom as a love relationship explains the loyalty, intensity, and enduring nature of fandom.

When we understand fandom in this context, many of the behaviors associated with fandom come to make sense. What do we do when we’re in love?

WE SPEND TIME WITH OUR BELOVED.

We make time to watch, listen, read, and consume our OOFs, often prioritizing them over other things in our lives. We spend time with our OOFs in everyday ways, often watching/listening/reading/playing repeatedly for the sense of comfort, structure, and familiarity it provides. We also plan big events around our OOFs. We stop everything to watch live when a new episode airs; we plan vacations to visit important sites, attend conventions, see them play live; we stand in line at the bookstore overnight to purchase the new book. Special occasions like these can allow us to demonstrate our devotion to the OOF, spend time with like-minded others, and even feel like we’re part of something bigger than ourselves. As in any relationship, spending time together – in both everyday ways and on special occasions – deepens the bond, creating meaningful memories and inspiring ongoing commitment.

WE WANT TO KNOW ALL WE CAN ABOUT OUR BELOVED.

The more we know about our OOF, the closer we feel to it. From social media feeds, to Wikis, to on-the-ground research, fans seek out information about their OOFs. Knowledge allows fans to build self-confidence through mastery, to acquire social capital within fan communities, and to prove their devotion to the OOF. Seventy-six percent of avid fans report keeping up with “everything there is to know” about their OOFs (compared to 18% of less avids).

WE TALK TO OTHERS ABOUT OUR BELOVED.

We want to share our experience with other people. We actively ‘efangelize,’ encouraging others to appreciate to special nature of our beloved. Twenty-nine percent of avid fans report ‘efangelizing’ at least once a month. And when we meet other people who share our feelings for an OOF, we experience a special sense of connection. Fans often use the term ‘like-minded’ to describe fellow fans, as if sharing love for the OOF predicts a similar overall outlook on the world. This sense of like-mindedness builds trust and deepens social bonds.

WE FANTASIZE ABOUT OUR BELOVED.

When we’re in love, we can’t stop thinking about the one we love – we imagine all the things we can do together, our futures, what would happen if…. Fans do something similar when they engage in creative acts of fandom – writing fan fiction, making fan art, creating costumes, developing memes and GIFs, etc. Through these creative and imaginative acts, fans find opportunities to explore alternate realities and meanings, exercise their prediction skills, understand themselves and their own potential, and ponder moral questions, including questions of social justice and representation.

WE MAKE A HOME WITH OUR BELOVED.

Fans collect a wide array of merchandise to infuse their daily lives with reminders of their OOFs. These OOF-related items helps fans materialize their identity, reminisce and mark time throughout their lives, create a personal “happy place,” and motivate self-improvement towards goals represented by the OOF.

WE WEAR THE RING.

Sixty-five percent of avid fans say they ‘proudly tell others about their fandom’ (vs. 30% of less avid fans). Representing fandoms on their bodies and through language helps fans declare their identity to the world, attract like-minded others, and feel deeply bonded to the OOF.
If fandom is love, what are we in love with? Well, lots of different things. Most participants in the study identified as fans of more than one thing. The average number of fandoms across the 8,000 participants was 5. Only 19% of fans listed only one OOF, and, most often, that one thing was related to sports.

*We asked 8,000 people the simple question, “What are you a fan of?” Asking the question in this open-ended way allowed us to capture an incredibly broad range of things that people call themselves fans of. The methodology surfaced a number of valuable insights, including one of our most important findings surrounding the underlying drivers of fandom – its role in the navigation and expression of identity.

Based on the array of OOFs captured in this study, fandom is astonishingly broad: sometimes widely shared, sometimes highly idiosyncratic.
So, what drives the love relationship of fandom? What inspires this depth of connection?

Fandom takes on this depth of meaning because, like any meaningful relationship, it fulfills a set of core human needs surrounding *self-care*, *social connection*, and especially *identity.*

*Fandom meets a set of psychosocial needs that scholars frequently compare to religion and certain political ideologies. As patterns in religious and spiritual practice, as well as political ideology, shift, we should watch for concomitant changes in the prevalence and importance of fandom.

**I. SELF-CARE**

Fandom fulfills needs surrounding self-care by:

Allowing us to experience a wide range of emotions.

Fandom gives us opportunities to feel dramatic highs and lows: the exhilaration of watching our team win a championship or the heartbreak of a loss; the satisfaction of seeing our favorite relationship (‘ship’) become an element of the story, or the resentment at seeing that relationship endlessly teased but never seriously considered; the profound appreciation of our favorite artist’s new song or disappointment at change in style. Fandom’s dramatic ups and downs give us exposure to emotional range that we rarely experience in everyday life. But when real life does send such dramatic emotions our way, the exposure we’ve gained through fandom makes it slightly more familiar, just an inklng less strange. In other words, the emotional range we experience in fandom helps to prepare us for the emotional range we encounter out of fandom.

Providing comfort and helping us cope.

Our fandoms operate as safe spaces. When we come home from a difficult day, we can turn on a favorite episode, movie, or song, read a favorite poem, watch a beloved fan-vid, etc. and make ourselves feel better. The familiarity, appreciation, and predictable emotional experience we gain from repeated consumption of our OOFs makes fandom a powerful tool for self-care.

Serving as a positive mental focal point.

One of the primary benefits of fandom is its ability to give us something to look forward to in daily life. Like a beacon in the daily current of thought and emotion, fandom can bring our minds back to a positive dimension of our lives, remind us that our fandom is there for us, promising comfort upon the next interaction.

**2. SOCIAL CONNECTION**

Fandom fulfills needs surrounding social connection by:

Helping forge new relationships.

Fandom can help us identify people with whom we are likely to build successful relationships. Throughout the study, we heard stories of fans meeting their best friends, girlfriends/boyfriends, and spouses through fandom. Wear your Ravenclaw t-shirt on your first day of freshmen year, and you’ll have a good shot at attracting a friend or two. Drop that insider reference about
MMA at a cocktail party, if someone else gets it, you might just have met your soulmate. Join in the online conversation about *Orphan Black*, you’ll find yourself a member of a community called Clone Club.

**Helping us deepen existing relationships.**
Sharing fandom with others allows us to share meaningful experiences, discuss the range of emotions we encounter, process the ups and downs, and have a go-to topic of conversation. Even when – perhaps even especially when – the relationship is strained, shared fandom can serve as a reminder of commonality, a starting point for reconnection.

**Allowing us to feel part of an imagined community.**
When we are fans, we often feel a sense of belonging to a broader group. We may not know all of them personally, but we can feel like we are part of a community of people who also call themselves *Harry Potter*, *MMA*, or *Orphan Black* fans.

### 3. Identity

The most common, yet perhaps least obvious, need that fandom fulfills are those surrounding identity.

**Identity is complex.**
The facets of identity don’t always appear to fit together and neither do our fandoms.

**Identity is performed.**
We pull various facets of our identity to the surface depending upon the situation we find ourselves in. Identity is displayed in many ways. We see it in fan merchandise, tattoos, and language.

**Identity is dynamic.**
Identity is not fixed. It changes over time as our life experiences shape and re-shape us, causing our fandoms wax and wane over the course of our lives.

**Identity is tied to others.**
Finally, we cannot make sense of who we are as individuals except by comparing ourselves to the people around us. Fandom can make us feel similar to – and different from – other people.

Fandom provides a particularly excellent palette for the experience and communication of identity, because it helps us understand and express who we are.

- Fandom can express identity of people and place, as it does when we are fans of a local sports team.
- It can express our moral identity, as it does when we are fans of a book, show, movie, sport, or news brand that possesses a strong moral or political POV.
- It can express gender and sexual identity, whether by aligning with or upturning conventional fan gender stereotypes.
- Moreover, it can express the nuances of identity – our sense of humor, our struggles, our values, our fascinations, our unique way or seeing the world.

**But what really is identity?** Simply put, identity is our understanding of who we are.

**Identity is multidimensional.**
Identity has numerous facets, which is why we can be fans of many things.
HOW DO WE BECOME FANS?

We asked 600 fans how their fandom began: were they born into it? Was it love at first sight? Was it a slow-burn? Or something else? Across all types of fandom, 72% started as love at first sight.

Among sports fans, a greater proportion (33% compared to 15% overall) report being born into their fandom. Indeed, the language many sports fans use when describing how they became fans draws heavily upon the language of inheritance (e.g., I inherited it, it’s natural, it’s my destiny) and biology (e.g., it’s in my blood stream, it runs through my veins, it’s part of my genetic makeup). Sports fans’ origin stories often reflect a sense of communal identity – of family, of tribe, of place – and revolve around moments of social connection, bonding with dad at a baseball game, watching football on Sundays with family, or remembering what it first felt like to feel part of something bigger than oneself.

Fans of entertainment are much more likely to say they fell in love with their OOF at first sight. When they describe becoming fans, they use the language of instant, irrefutable love. They felt butterflies. They were grabbed. Captivated. Hooked. (A full third used the words hooked, addicted, or obsessed in their origin stories.) And what is it that hooked them? Being stimulated – morally, emotionally, intellectually, visually, even spiritually – in a way that made them feel instantly seen and understood.

When it comes to becoming fans, neither sports nor entertainment fans feel they had much of a choice in the matter. An OOF takes hold because it speaks to something deep within us. It speaks to some part of our who we are – some facet of our identity.

When we are fans of more than one thing, those things together tell a story of who we are – of what matters to us, of what we hope for and who we aspire to become. If fandom is sparked initially because an OOF aligns with our identity in some way, then as we age and our identity evolves, so may our fandoms. But because our OOFs represented, at some point in time, a part (even if only a small part) of who we used to be, they remain special to us. They have become part of our life story, part of the narrative we create to make sense of and give meaning to our life experience. Those fandoms that stick – the fandoms that become deeply meaningful to us – are those that best allow us to further the story of who we are.
CAN FANDOM BE BROKEN?

Well, for most fans, it can’t. Most fans say, once a fan, always a fan. Because fandom becomes integrated into one’s sense of self over the course of one’s life, the love-relationship endures – though its intensity may wax and wane.

But some things do cause irreparable harm to the relationship. The first, and perhaps most destructive, involves moral transgression. Fans and their OOFs share moral values. Loyalty and perseverance are widely shared values among fans of sports. Social justice is of paramount importance to the Harry Potter fandom. Fandom can fracture when fans feel their OOF has in some way violated the moral values they share, e.g., when a baseball player is caught doing steroids (violating principles of fairness), or when a football team moves cities (violating principles of loyalty). In the words of one fan research participant: “If the brand doesn’t carry values that match mine, I’m gone.”

The second thing that can cause irreparable harm to the fan-OOF relationship is the taint of commercialism – when it becomes clear that TPTB (The Powers That Be – in other words, those in legal and financial control of the OOF) are prioritizing commercial interests over the perceived interests of the OOF itself.

In both cases, whether it is a result of a moral violation or the taint of commercialism, fandom fractures when fans can no longer allow an OOF to represent who they are.
THE WAY WE THINK ABOUT
FANS NEEDS TO CHANGE

Fandom is frequently misunderstood. Fandom is sometimes defined purely in terms of behavior – ‘a fan is a person who watches X number of games in season.’ But when we only define fandom behaviorally, we overlook how fans feel.

Fandom is sometimes defined purely transactionally – ‘a fan is a person who spends X dollars per year on our brand.’ But when we equate fans with consumers, we overlook the depth of meaning OOFs bring to fans’ lives.

Fandom is sometimes defined as people who are being excessive, irrational, and difficult to please. But when we see fans as problems to be dealt with, we overlook their value as partners and advocates.

So, how should we understand Fandom?

Fandom is, first and foremost, a beneficial relationship between the self and an object of fandom. This relationship is beneficial because it meets core human needs: it allows us to better understand and express who we are, connect with others who are similar to us, and feel safer, stronger, and more grounded in the world.

Because it meets these needs so effectively, fandom inspires devotion and active investment. And while the intensity of the relationship between fan and OOF may wax and wane over time, it’s rarely broken altogether.

*Throughout this yearlong study, we asked thousands of research participants what they believe it means to be a fan. We observed the ways fandom operates in people’s lives. We assessed the nature of discourse among groups of people who define themselves as fans. But we, quite deliberately, held off on defining the topic we were studying until the very end.*
III. Afterword
IDENTITY BRANDS – HARNESSING FANS AND BRANDS

When we call ourselves ‘fans,’ we are communicating something special. Not only are we expressing a sense of loyalty, active engagement, willingness to invest, and desire to connect with others who feel the same way – we are also expressing key dimensions of who we are.

Why does this matter for brands? It matters because identity operates as a filter, allowing certain brands in and keeping other brands out. The brands that we bring most deeply into our lives are the ones we believe most effectively represent us. And in turn, those brands connect us to others.

Today, it’s no longer enough to be a “lifestyle” brand. We don’t choose brands based on a prescribed lifestyle, but rather because they speak to a facet of ourselves.

In the face of this changing paradigm, the most compelling brands have been able to rise above the clutter to create highly engaged and loyal fans. These brands are able to connect with consumers on a deeper level because they don’t just focus on product or service value or “lifestyle.” They reflect self-image.

We call these identity brands – brands that don’t just shape our lifestyles or what we do but connect to who we are and what we believe. These brands get closer and fulfill a deeper role in our lives – reflecting our personalities, aspirations and beliefs. They embody the identities of those who buy into them and create a social connection between those who share their beliefs.
Three exemplary brands that have achieved this level of identity branding include Blizzard, the legendary gaming publisher, Equinox, the upscale gym and Tesla, Elon Musk’s revolutionary electric car brand. In their respective ways, each has been able to establish true brand loyalty through a single-minded purpose and clear sense of the identity they reflect.

**Blizzard – Badass gaming community**
Blizzard has set the benchmark for serious gamers worldwide, and has built a thriving community of players and competitors.

**Equinox – Committed healthy lifestyle**
Equinox is a luxury gym that stands above its competition by celebrating and championing individual "commitment" to physical and mental goals (*Equinox’s Provocative New Campaign for 2017 is all about Identity," Adweek, Jan. 3, 2017).

**Tesla – Cutting-edge consciousness**
Tesla has earned its position as the most valuable car company in America by becoming the standard-bearer for alternative energy and innovation.

Across multiple touchpoints, identity brands such as these create a consistent and enduring connection with their fans by listening to them, responding to their needs, and building a holistic community. They maintain a two-way dialogue that is sincere and empathetic, making consumers proud to associate themselves with these brands.

Most importantly, these brands tap into core values among their fans, and as long as they stay true to these values, they can stand the test of time. They understand that they are in a long-term relationship with their fans, and this relationship may ebb and flow, but if a brand continues to respect and grow with its fans, the loyalty will be mutual.

As brand marketers, we are always looking for better ways to connect with consumers and create true loyalty that can transcend fads and market trends. In understanding the power of fandom and its role in identity, we can truly start to build authentic lifelong relationships with consumers.
Troika is a strategic branding and marketing agency that partners with the world’s leading brands to build meaningful experiences for audiences and fans. We offer clarity and leadership in changing times, finding every opportunity for our clients to thrive in an uncertain media landscape. Leveraging our entertainment expertise, we combine the power of design and strategic thinking to deliver the most innovative solutions for our clients.

Troika’s client roster features top brands such as UFC, Riot Games and Hulu to longstanding media giants, like Warner Bros., Turner, CBS and Starz and innovative consumer product and service brands, including Topgolf, Pechanga Resort and Casino and Canada Goose.

For more information, visit www.troika.tv.