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Mugisha, Darlene, "A Rhetorical Criticism of Fan Culture on Social Media Platforms" (2021). *Student Research Submissions*. 416.

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COMM 460- Seminar in Digital Rhetoric

5 May. 2021

A Rhetorical Criticism of Fan Culture on Social Media Platforms

Abstract:

This Rhetorical Criticism investigated and critiqued the rhetoric of fan culture on the social media platform Twitter. Twitter is a popular social media platform used for people to communicate with each other, and it is a useful tool for fans to interact with their favorite celebrity in a way that was not possible before. I picked three celebrities from sports, music, and film and tracked fan accounts dedicated to them. The celebrities I used are NBA basketball star LeBron James, the popular boy band One Direction, and the American actor Chris Evans. In doing this, I answered the question; how do the interactions between fans on Twitter differ between fandoms? In doing this research, I found common themes of humor, memes, fan art, activism, politics, and updates on celebrities. The purpose of this analysis was to discuss and compare how three major celebrity fandoms in the genres of sports, music, and movies interact and communicate with one another. In this paper, I argued that examining the history of fandoms, their impact on social media, and the communities fandoms form is key in understanding the rhetoric of followers within fandoms.

Keywords: Fan, Fan Culture, Fandom, Twitter, Social Media, Rhetoric

“About” the author: Darlene Mugisha is a senior at the University of Mary Washington majoring in Communications and Digital Studies with a minor in Business Administration. In the course of her studies, Ms. Mugisha took courses on research methods with Dr. Goldman and previous communication courses with Dr. Crosby and other professors. Those including an introduction course to rhetoric and communication, small group communication, and professional communication.

Literature review:

Fandom is a recent term brought to light to explain and categorize people who are obsessed with specific books, tv shows, movies, video games, comics, and musicians among other groups of entertainment (JennaTheKiller). Fan culture is not something that is recent, but it is something that has become more popular primarily because of social media. Social media introduced a platform for people to talk to other people from all over the world, spanning across the globe from various continents. People were finally able to find others who have similar interest in common on a mass scale, changing the game in the world of fandoms. Specifically, fan communities have used their power to spread information about their favorite celebrities through the use of hashtags. “A hashtag—written with a # symbol—is used to index keywords or topics on Twitter. This function was created on Twitter, and allows people to easily follow topics they are interested in.” (Twitter).

Historically, fandoms have been prominent since the 1960s (Hellekson and Busse 43). Back then, fandoms consisted of only sports fans and theatre fans. Fandoms did not begin to emerge in the realm of science fiction media until the 1960s when they started to grow in popularity (Hellekson and Busse 43). This time period marked the rise of Star Trek and the Man

from U.N.C.L.E. In fact, “whether the first media fandom was U.N.C.L.E. or Star Trek, the woman who built those fandoms tended to fit the profile of science fiction fans: they were better educated than most, heavy readers, and scientifically literate” (Hellekson and Busse 45). This created the stereotype of the ‘science fiction nerd’ we still see to this day. Star Trek created a creative form of discussion, parallel to their typical form. This discussion form consisted of fan art, poems, plays, stories, and drawings. These creative outlets served as the first introduction to the rhetoric of fandoms in contemporary media.

Social media played a major role in how fandoms interact today. One primary example includes Twitter functions, in which the company introduced new features that allowed users to interact with each other more easily. The introduction of the hashtag was a revolutionary tool in the social media world when it came to Twitter in 2007 because the hashtag became a symbol that allowed people to easily follow their favorite topics on Twitter. This feature is still used today and represents one way in which people interact with each other and find people who share similar interests as them. Thus, it is evident that the inclusion of this feature was revolutionary in practice by expanding fans’ ability to reach large audiences, as well as discuss their varied interests surrounding each celebrity fandom, they participated in.

Gleick provides insight into his opinion on the role of social media regarding the history of communication tools (Misa). He confronts social media such as Twitter, describing it as “banality shrink-wrapped, enforcing triviality by limiting all messages to 140 characters.” (Misa). Twitter does have a function where you can only type 140 characters per tweet. Many people may think of this function as potentially limiting creativity by restricting the quantity of what each user can say per tweet, but this feature was instead used as a method of self-expression and creativity—quickly becoming an innovative tool that allowed people to be creative. Thus,

this feature has caused the spread of a different form of language which is known as slang. Slang originated in the 1800s but was popularized in the early 1900s. Social media has provided a platform for slang to be spread to other communities of people.

In terms of fan culture and fandoms, Twitter has taken over the world with them. Twitter changed the way fandoms interact and communicate with each other, and it allowed fans to interact with their idols. One user noted that they “discovered Lady Gaga used Twitter to combine the public and private elements of her personality, as well as to communicate directly to her fans as fellow partners, and they are positioned as making vital contributions to her work” (Bennett). This back-and-forth communication from the celebrity to their fans helps to create a relationship between them. This will reassure the fans' relationship to their favorite celebrity and in a way enable them to want to constantly show support for that hope of recognition. This is also beneficial to the celebrity because they are able to collaborate with fans in order to help improve their work.

Not only has social media provided that fan to celebrity communication channel, but it also created a new form of communicating between fans. “As the Internet continues to blur the line between media users and fans, the fans and the fan communities are trying to distinguish themselves from others through ‘fan talk.’ In the online world where there is no face-to-face interaction and no clues from fan accessories, language and sign is the only way to express and detect one’s fan identity.” (Smutradontri and Gadavanij). Fan talk makes it difficult for non-fans or even casual fans to interpret a fan tweet because it includes vocabularies and communications that are specific to various cultures, some of them including fan culture, the fan community, and the national culture of the country the fans live in. Thus, one would require knowledge about the source text to understand what is being said. This form of fan talk evokes a sense of community

within fandoms. However, it can also cause feelings of alienation because of how specific fan culture and language can be. Overall, fan talk can combine local fandoms on a global spectrum.

When discussing fan talk, others describe it as simplistic, not capable of true human expression and emotion. It is something that is more complicated than non-fans could ever understand because they do not have the source text to help them. “Labov showed, using traditional sociolinguistic variationist analysis, that in fact it was as complex, as highly structured, as consistent.” (Wang). Fan talk is more complex than non-fans realize which is something that is able to globally connect fans with the help of social media as a platform.

Fandoms create communities on social platforms such as Twitter and have established identifiers relevant to their prospective celebrity follower. It brings like-minded people together and social media provides a platform for them to communicate no matter how far they are. This sense of community creates a form of internet culture. “These tribes comprised the sphere of internet culture known as “stan culture,” a portmanteau of “stalker” and “fan” derived from Eminem’s song “Stan” (2000), which narrated the one-sided affections of a fan invested in Eminem’s stardom.” (Reinhard). The term is used across social media as another way to describe a dedicated fan. This was the start of names for fans such as “little monsters” for Lady Gaga fans and for Justin Bieber fans it was “beliebers.” These celebrities have given their fans a safe space to celebrate who they are. “For in Gaga, they saw an artist whose music video productions and avant-garde fashions mirrored the growing acceptability of explicitly queer and LGBTQ+ themes in popular culture. Some of these fans invested in the performer as their “Mother Monster” because her celebrity made them feel uniquely visible as gay and queer subjects.” (Reinhard). Social media is where fans can express themselves in their communities and celebrate that with like-minded people.

Activism and Politics in Sports-

An interesting movement that is starting to get more attention on social media is politics and activism in sports. When one thinks of sports, they usually do not think of things such as social issues but in recent years, the topic has become more apparent on social media and in the news. Dating back to Muhammad Ali in the 90s, activism in sports is not new but it is becoming more of a hot topic in popular media. A popular instance of this was in 2016 with Colin Kaepernick. He sat down and kneeled for the Star-Spangled Banner in protest of the oppression against people of color in the United States (Graber and Figueroa and Vasudevan). This caused a commotion where NFL fans began to rebel and boycott because they were angry that he refused to stand. This started a large debate on social media if sports stars should have the right to express their political opinion. While this debate was happening, more athletes started to take a stand and express their opinions on topics that they typically would not. “Black athlete activism transgressed the mainstream notion that professional sports were an egalitarian and meritorious space that provided a model for racial progress. Protests that followed were similarly “unambiguously condemned and rejected by an overwhelming and powerful segment of American society” (Graber and Figueroa and Vasudevan).

On the side of political movements, the most recent example is the US Women's National team fighting the gender pay gap. The WNT has won four World Cups and four Olympic gold medals (Feldman 255). They have continuously outperformed the MNT. Even with all of this the US Soccer Federation (USSF) continued to underpay them. They filed a complaint about this to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and were not listened to. Hope Solo and several WNT players sued the USSF for unequal pay and inequality. During this time, they were advocating for themselves on social media and inspiring their fans to do the same. “Inspired by

the WNT, other professional female athletes have solicited their advice, including members from the Canadian National Soccer Team, the US National Hockey Team, and the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA). As such, female professional athletes are enlisting the help of one another and the court system to rectify the pay disparity that they have faced for years.” (Feldman 255-256). This has created a sense of community and a revolution by talking about these issues publicly and subsequent public support.

Seeing activism emerge in sports like the WNT or with Colin Kaepernick inspired many young athletes to use their platforms for social justice. For example, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) was not providing equality to their women sports. This was in the form of the food they were receiving, and the gym equipment provided to them by the NCAA being less compared to what the men's team received. The athletes of the women's team, especially the Women's College Basketball teams, used their social media platforms and large followings to spark debate and were able to better their situation. It is still not equal, but it is now being talked about and noticed. “Authenticity is one of the central concepts in fan studies. In the conventional “incorporation/ resistance” paradigm of fandom research, the codes of authenticity are often directly linked to the resistant and productive nature of some fan practices.” (Gong). Sports fans have this authenticity when they share these social issues that celebrities talk about and can turn them into social movements. Social media has provided a platform to quickly spread their views to others.

Fan Loyalty-

Fans demonstrate a sense of loyalty to their favorite celebrities. Fans tend to remain loyal to their celebrities even long after they are no longer performing or releasing music. This is an

interesting sentiment that is not talked about enough. Ever since Beatle mania, fans of boy bands have an undeniable loyalty to the band. “The analysis shows that music fans mobilize particular discursive resources in constructing loyalty in the digital context, specifically length of time spent as a fan, obsession and the opposition of obligation and choice.” (Obiegbu and Larsen and Ellis and O’Reilly). These are resources that are embedded in brand loyalty which extends through attitudes and behaviors in music consumption. More recent examples of this are with boybands such as NSYNC, Backstreet Boys, and One Direction. “Twitter has changed the band fan experience from a manageable part-time obsession to a raging all-consuming addiction.” Because Twitter has become a direct link between One Direction and its fans, it allows Directioners to keep track of the band members and makes them “feel like personal witnesses to the boys’ thoughts” (Santero). Social media has provided a place for fans to constantly fuel their addiction. “In the documentary, fans described being in the fandom as a cult and compare their love for One Direction to a drug addiction” (Santero). This is the same way fans love for the Beatles was described back in their prime time. Fans today still celebrate their career because it is timeless which is the case for most boybands. Fans use it as a reminder of the time they were obsessed with their favorite band.

Television and Movies-

Social media plays a major role in television and movies. Fans come together on platforms such as Twitter to plan and communicate about their favorite shows and movies. One dedicated movie fanbases in the digital world is the Marvel fandom. Captain America (who is played by Chris Evans in the films) represents this idea of the all-American superhero which is a trope constantly seen in movies and films. “Consumers engaged with brands on social media tend to exhibit higher levels of trust, satisfaction, emotional bonding and loyalty to the brand”

(Fernandes). This brand of the male action star that has been on media for a long time has developed this loyalty to the brand which is the star playing that role. It is like the star is only seen as the superhero. “Their longevity can be attributed to their universality and relatability. As much as these characters may be all powerful, they’re simultaneously representative of the common man and all that he stands for in a world that can be inherently corrupt and dangerous.” (Romagnoli and Pagnucci). The fanbases have a way of validating this longevity of superheroes with fan accounts dedicated to these characters. They are seen as real people and not characters in a movie or book.

Role in the Community-

The role fans hold in community is to show support for their favorite celebrity. The way social media has impacted that is using the support of the fans to capitalize for a show or movie. “Convergence creates a process of watching that encourages an association between commodities and characters. That association produces, without any direction from the producers = advertisers, a situation where fans become a source of free marketing labor.” (Wood and Baughman). These fans are not simply customers but instead they actively participate in the narrative for the program. The use of social media and fans can be used as a marketing tool for their celebrities.

Method:

For the method, I decided to do a rhetorical criticism of three Twitter fan accounts. I picked three celebrities from sports, music, and film. I decided to track their fans' involvement on Twitter to answer my research question which is, how do the interactions between fans on Twitter differ between fandoms?

In order to do this rhetorical criticism, I followed three popular celebrities in their respective field on Twitter, including LeBron James, One Direction, and Chris Evans. These celebrities have dedicated fans on all social media platforms. I also followed three fan accounts for the respective celebrity. Those are the accounts I analyzed and critiqued in this rhetoric criticism. The requirements for the fan accounts are that they had to have over 10,000 followers and had to be recently active.

Lebron James is a professional basketball player for the Los Angeles Lakers of the NBA. He is constantly compared to Michael Jordan as the greatest basketball player of all time. He has a very dedicated fan base which shows on social media. I decided to look at @LeBronTeam on Twitter for this rhetorical criticism. This fan account has over 100,000 followers and is currently followed by Lebron James.

One Direction is an English- Irish boy band that has taken over the world. They became a band in 2010 on the TV show, the X-factor. They are technically on a break from being a band right now and are focusing on their solo careers, but they have left a lasting effect on their fandom. All of their success is dedicated to the loyal fans they have. I decided to look at @slylatorarmy for this rhetorical criticism. This fan account has 1 million followers and is followed by One Direction.

Chris Evans is an American actor best known for his role as Captain America in the Marvel films. He is very popular on social media and that is reflected in the fan accounts for him. I found a Twitter account, @ChrisEvansphoto, which has over 13,000 followers. This social media account is not followed by Chris Evans.

I looked at these social media fan accounts in order to answer my research question and to see if I can find the difference between the fandoms.

Findings:

During my research, I found that the accounts had different approaches with the language they used on Twitter. They were all there to show support for their favorite celebrity, but it was displayed in different ways. There were many common themes throughout the fan accounts. The most common ones were humor and memes, fan art, activism, and celebrity updates.

The use of humor and memes was very common on the fan accounts. I found the inclusion of funny videos and memes to be very persuasive on the accounts. Those were the tweets that garnered the most attention and interaction from followers. The Chris Evans Fan account did this well, with every other post being a humorous one.

Fan art was another persuasive tool used on the social media fan accounts. Most of the fan art I saw on the accounts was retweeted from other fan accounts. This created a source of community for and with fans because of the common interest being able to share their talent with the community. There is a lot of interaction between the fans accounts which is interesting to see how they interact with each other because they are always showing support.

Activism and politics, as well as their interactions, were two interesting themes I found and highlighted. When I think of fans and fan culture, I personally do not think about social issues. The social opinions of the celebrities are translated on their fan accounts. Usually, their fans agree with them and share what they have to say. This is opening up more opportunities for

people to learn about social issues. The fan accounts have an open space to discuss social and political issues and creates a space for like-minded people.

The last common theme I noticed was celebrity updates. On all of the fan accounts there were updates of what the celebrity is doing, the awards they won, the interviews they have done, and it even went as far as live tweeting Lebron James basketball games. This surprisingly created a sense of community because if one person said something new that the celebrity has done, then others would comment on it or add to it. This is a very persuasive way that fans stay connected on social media.

The rhetoric of fandoms is very persuasive on Twitter. Humor, memes, fan art, activism, politics, and updates on celebrities have helped form this sense of community between fandoms on social media. There is not a major difference between sports, music, and movie fandoms. They all have a very similar style of rhetoric.

Discussion:

The results show the ways fandoms connect on social media. When studying the fan accounts, I noticed the common themes of humor and memes, fan art, activism, and celebrity updates. These were used as different ways for fans to communicate with each other on Twitter.

Humor and Memes-

The use of humor and memes was very common across the three fan accounts. Humor is referring to the use of funny pictures or videos of the celebrity in order to make a joke. This was very common among the @ChrisEvansphoto account because 75% of the tweets had humor in them. The use of memes was more common on the @slylatorarmy fan account. The use of

humorous pictures of the celebrity and a witty caption to go along with it was majority of the memes on the fan pages. Occasionally, there would be a video with a caption, or the fan account would quote a tweet and make a joke using the captions.

Fan art-

Fan art has become a creative outlet for fans to display their talent and for a way for them to express their devotion to their favorite celebrity. The use of fan art is a way for fans to get noticed by their favorite celebrity. This can include drawings, paintings, music, visual clips, literature, and much more. The fan accounts retweet the work of their fellow fans in a way to communicate with other fans and to draw more attention to the art. Not all fans do it for the attention of their favorite celebrities, as some do it just because they enjoy creating art and a celebrity, so they decided to combine the both of them into something creative.

Activism-

Activism among fans is something that is more recent to the online fan community. Celebrities are more likely to share their opinions on social issues that are happening in the world because of social media. Before social media became so accessible to celebrities and fans, the world of politics and activism was not displayed unless the celebrity went out of their way to make a statement. Now, with the use of social media platforms such as Twitter, celebrities are able to communicate their opinions to their fans. This in a way starts a conversation with their fans and makes them more willing to speak out if they see their idol doing so. It is an interesting phenomenon that has happened, especially more recently since the start of COVID-19. The world stopped but the political and social issues did not. Fans put this sort of pressure on

celebrities to share their opinion on what was happening in the news. It sparked more activism on social media platforms.

Celebrity Updates-

Celebrity updates a new phenomenon that has happened through the evolution of social media. Live tweeting is using Twitter during an event to update followers on your reactions to what is happening. This is done during TV shows, movies, concerts, and sports games. It is a way fans update other fans about how the celebrity is doing. The @LeBronTeam account does this during the Laker games, but their main focus is usually on how LeBron James is doing. Another way fan account keeps other fans updated on their favorite celebrity is when they accomplish something or win an award. It is similar to what the paparazzi do which is constantly tracking the celebrity to find out what they are going to do next.

The common themes of humor and memes, fan art, activism, and celebrity updates are used in today's fan culture on social media platforms. This is important to study because there is not enough research done on the topic. The theme of fan culture on social media is a subculture to the larger discussion of digital rhetoric in media. This topic shows the influence that social media has on fandoms in order to create this community with a rhetoric that has not been seen before.

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