

## Understanding Fan and Fandom: Not just a mere Crowd

Nayanika Das<sup>1</sup> and Suparna Jain Thakur<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Undergraduate student, Department of Psychology, Daulat Ram College, University of Delhi.

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Daulat Ram College, University of Delhi. Email address:  
Corresponding Author: Suparna Jain Thakur

---

**ABSTRACT:** The concept of fans and fandom is not new but has evolved and reformed overtime. In the era of globalization and mass media it has become convenient for people to have access to idols and fanbases. The area of entertainment has also expanded and has broadened people's choices and preferences. Fans in recent times are not merely known for their interests in their favorites, but also for their fan groups, collaborations and socializing. The present research strives to understand the psychological effects of evolving fanships and fandoms among the youth. For the study a sample of size 50 was taken from Delhi between the age range 16-25. A survey questionnaire was floated online. On the basis of their responses, few participants who claimed the highest intensity of fanship were interviewed. Thematic analysis was employed on the interview responses. It was found that Fandom has pervaded the lives of the youth today impacting their self-esteem and self-identity. It has become a means of socializing. Fanship and fandom is an immensely active part of youth's life today which is having both positive and negative impacts on their psychological well-being.

**KEYWORDS:** Fandom, Fanship, Fan Identity, FOMO, Psychological well being

---

Date of Submission: 01-03-2024

Date of acceptance: 08-03-2024

---

### I. INTRODUCTION

The world is full of interesting and amazing happenings, making people invested in many of them. Many people indulge in different interest areas - music, dance, literature, stories, animations, and much more. At times this indulgence brings together people with similar interests, where they discuss or may do certain activities together keeping in mind the similar goal interest. Some people even look up to certain others as inspiration, ending up making them their idol. Thus, in a way to describe this admiration or liking for a certain particular thing or person, the term 'FAN' emerged. However, claiming to be a fan was not just merely liking something or somebody. According to Merriam Webster, the Oxford dictionary (1843) fan is a shortened version of word fanatic which means marked by excessive enthusiasm and often intense uncritical devotion. The word Fanatic was introduced into English around 1550s. Fans are enthusiastic and ardent supporters of an interest (Reysen & Branscombe 2010). These fans at times form a group or become a part of the already formed group where they may identify themselves as an individual contributing to the group.

In recent years there is growing interest and involvement of people towards claiming themselves as fans and identifying themselves as a part of a fan group or fan community. There is considerable difference for the terms that are related with fans, like that of fan community, fanship and fandom. Reysen and Branscombe (2010) explained the concept of 'Fanship' as that of the degree of psychological connection with one's fan interest, while 'Fandom' is the degree of psychological connection with other fans. The fan community is where one identifies with others who share their common interest. However there are differences in the consumption and indulgence of people who identify themselves as a fan. There are people who actively participate in a fandom, are engaged in activities, watch a particular thing and have a religious discussion about it, they are not just the mere watcher they are 'Fans'. While people who simply consume the media and enjoy it, but don't claim themselves in any way as a part of the larger social identity, they can be understood as 'Followers' (Jenkins and Tulloch, 1994). In Textual Poachers, Jenkins (1992), distinguished between the participatory fans and following fans. According to people who self identify themselves as fans often display interest that extends beyond and is not limited only to that particular interest object. Jenkins described fans as that of poachers, as well as nomads who keep on changing from one text to another and the others following up the same.

There are first wave ethnographic works on fans by Henry Jenkins(1994), Camille Bacon-Smith(2000), Constance Penley(1991), and John Tulloch(1994). Some of the other researches done on fans are that of Chadborn, Edwards and Reysen(2017) who studied the functional benefits of being a fan. They brought to light the benefit of being a fan as the purpose and meaning of life, the escape from everyday life stressor and establishing and maintaining social connections. Laverie and Arnett (2000) developed an integrated model

discussing the factors that influence fan identity salience and sports fan attendance. They found that identity salience plays a very important role in fan behaviour.

Thus, these researches add on to give an idea of how the very happening social occurrence of the fans and other aspects that are very much related to it have changed and evolved with new generations and research. The very meaning and its need has been shaped by individuals differently across time.

However, not much research has been done on the growing fan bases in the Indian subcontinent. India with growing interest in social media has an exposure to numerous things, be it news, technology, education or entertainment. So with it the fans and their activities are also increasing simultaneously and is not only limited to sports or movies.

### **The growing Indian Fan base:**

In today's India, different people are acquiring different tastes and enjoying becoming fans or to participate in different fandom related activities. Fans who are commonly known as supporters and followers of a particular interest can be categorized depending on the different types of indulgence people engage themselves into. The book written by Chaturvedi et al. 2021, *Hero and Hero-worship: Fandom in Modern India*, tries to explain Indian fandom. It starts with the idea of how the very idea of "follower" can be understood in the Indian context as that of a "Bhakt" in the Indian discourse. Initially Bhakt can be understood mostly as that of spiritual or in the political sense, however the term Bhakt and their activities of Bhakti is not limited to particular specifics but has expanded and spread in different arenas as that in cinema and sports as well. The book also states that it is the entertainment industry in India that has the most fans and how it keeps on changing according to the times and the introduction of performances.

Fans and their fandom highlight not only their interest and investment in a particular field, person or thing but also somewhat emphasizes how they are connected through a common thread of connectivity binding them all. In her paper, *The Cult of Aamir Khan: A Cultural Study of Indian Fandom*, Vishakha Sen (2021) explains in the beginning how fandom is not limited to a celebrity or stars image but also how the very associated value of a star depends on the fans gaze, desire and expectations. It also highlights how Amir Khan being a famous Indian actor contributed in films which somehow also portrayed certain important topics concerning Indians. This highlights the fact that Indians are a passive audience.

In India the activities and fan clubs are very limited in numbers as compared to that of the West. However, for Indians the aspect of Cricket has always been something exciting and of keen interest. It brings the entire country together. After cricket it is that of Bollywood which excites the Indian audiences. However, the access to indulge with actors or their favourite celebrities is limited.

However, in recent times, with the availability of media consumption of people and the facilitation of social media the world is becoming global. Indian fans now have access to wider options. The OTT platforms like that of Netflix, prime video has opened an opportunity to dive into one's interest area and watch accordingly. Interestingly, India has always been an important audience because of its consumption and diversity of people and choices. Avengers co- director stated "Indian audiences are important, Indian fans motivated us to make a movie like that of Avengers endgame." He stated, the recordings of cheering for the initial movie of infinity war motivated them to work when they used to get tired. Online concerts and tour movies are bringing the audience together to see and hear their favourite artist without worrying about going to attend a concert physically.

Fans are now not restricted to solely appreciating their favourites but also a way of meeting people of similar interest. Social media platforms and their ability to follow the personalities and celebrities and also the live performances/reels by celebrities bring them a step closer to their idols.

The present research focuses on the present scenarios of fans and fandom among youth in India. How fans are not limited to solely liking and admiring, but has also become an attraction. The exchange of interactions and talks have also led to people-other than the fans to know and indulge in fan activities. People don't want the component of missing out on something and how their indulgence in wanting to know certain things end up giving birth to a new fan. The psychological impact of this growing fandom is assessed in the present work.

## **II. METHODOLOGY**

A mixed method approach was used in this study. Part 1 was quantitative and part 2 was qualitative. In the first part of the study, a survey questionnaire was constructed to understand the lengths of fan base among Delhi based youth. The questions also consisted of the intensity with which the participants are self-proclaimed fans. The sample size for the survey consisted of 50 participants between the age range 16-25. Out of 50, 36 were female respondents and 14 were males. The sampling technique employed was purposive sampling and the data was analysed at descriptive level.

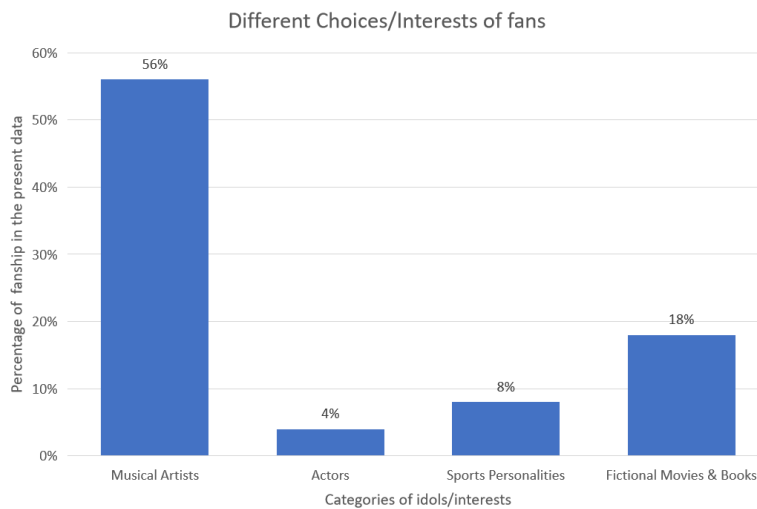
The participants who rated themselves as the most intense fans were interviewed in the second part of the study. The semi structured interview comprised of the following questions:

1. Since how long have you been a fan, and how did you initially come to know about them?
2. Why did you opt to be a fan of them/ or that person, in case what attracted you?
3. Do you have friends who have similar interests like yours?
4. When you claim to be a fan do you think it makes a difference or highlights something in you, your very standing as your fan among others?
5. Do you think at times people who are not fans or are unaware of the very much ongoing hype do feel left out, or the feeling of missing out happens?

### III. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

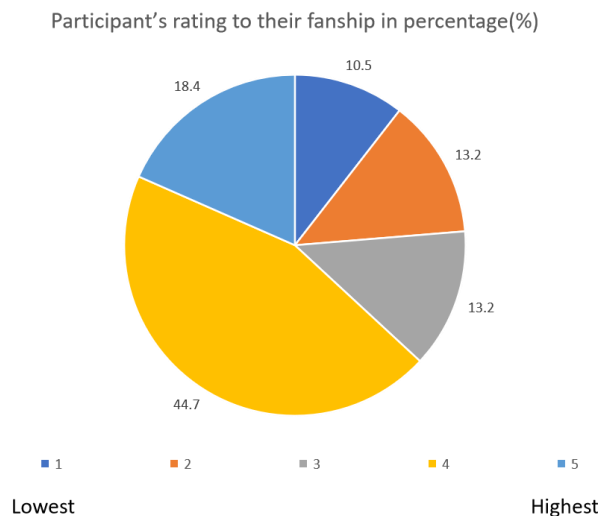
**Quantitative analysis:**

On the basis of the survey, it was found that participants had a broad fan base. However, the largest fanship emerged for musical artists from India and abroad.



**Graph 1: Bar Graph depicting the different choices/interests of fans in the present sample**

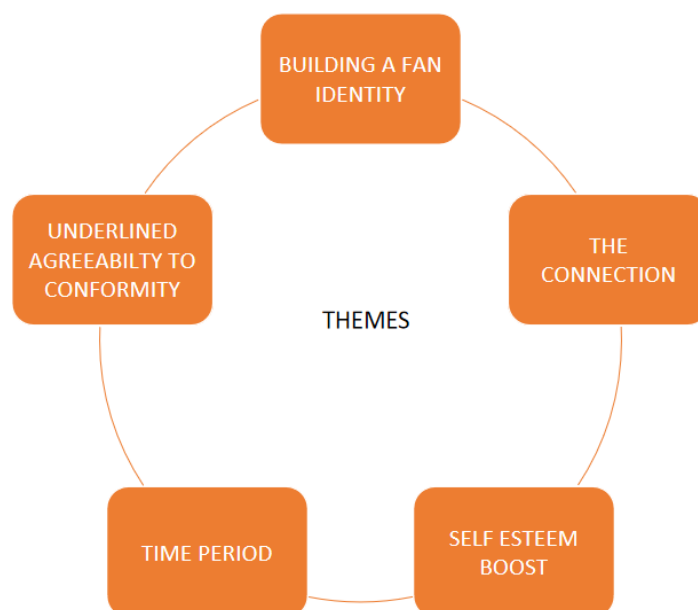
It was found 56% of the fans are interested in Musical artists, 4% for actors, 8% for sports personalities and 18% for fictional movies and books. Secondly, the participants rated their fanship. It was found that 18.4% of the participants proclaimed to be fans of highest devotion and only 10.5% had the lowest commitment towards their fan status as shown in the pie chart.



**Graph 2: Pie Diagram depicting the participants' rating to their fanship**

**Qualitative Analysis:**

Thematic analysis was employed to understand the psychological effects of fanship and fandom.



**Figure 1: Themes emerging from the participant interviews**

**Building a Fan Identity**

It emerged that Fanship has high importance in the lives of our participants. It gives them freedom to like, see and read what they choose to. It gives them an arena apart from the fixed socializing agents such as family and college, to participate in discussions of their choice. With an increasing degree of involvement in fandom, a fan identity emerges. Involvement has been defined as a state of motivation, arousal or interest toward a recreational activity or associated product (Rothschild,1984). There are two types of involvement: situational identity(SI) based on the temporary circumstances and enduring identity(EI) based on ongoing concern for a particular activity or event. When EI increases, it tends to lead to a situation where the fan identity becomes a part of the person's self-structure. Thus, it adds on to one's identity, as one feels positively related to the identity. EI is seen as independent and often highlights the individual's interest towards a particular activity or situation, unlike that of situational involvement (SI). The development of fan identity through EI is evident in a participants' response. She said, *"Being someone who used to make art, got into the habit of making posters and is interested in making merch in future, it gives hope in life to move on. The indulgence in making posters started because the k-pop band of which I am a fan of have posters which are a bit pricey to buy. That's why I started making my own posters and pasting them on walls."*

**The Connection**

This theme focuses on connection in two ways. Firstly, connecting with the idol and secondly fandom as means to connect with the masses. Beginning with the first, one of the interviewees said *"Being a fan of the series Good Omens is close to my heart. It highlighted some of my personal experience, which is relatable for me and thus holds value for me."* Another participant stated *"I like BTS as I am able to relate with their growth from the scratch. Even I had a difficult childhood in terms of financial issues in my family. BTS inspires me to achieve despite tough circumstances"*. One often becomes a fan of an idol who is relatable. It gives a sense of reassurance, hope and comfort. Moving to connecting with the masses, In today's time when there are virtual Fan clubs on social media, fan meets in real world settings, themed cafes etc, the feeling of belongingness and togetherness gets inculcated amongst the fans, bringing them together. This belongingness also provides a sense of security. According to researchers, optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer 1991), shows that displays of fan identity offer the benefits associated with ingroup belongingness (Haggard and Williams,1992) and a sense of uniqueness (Chan, Berger, and Van Boven 2012). Fan groups have become a place to seek self-acceptance and affiliation to reduce stress concerning their own social identities through interpersonal interaction. One of the interviewees who is a Taylor Swift fan talked about the bond and connection that the fans of Taylor Swift who are called "Swifties" have.

### Self-esteem Boost

All the interviewees showed a sense of satisfaction with their chosen idol. The enthusiasm with which the interviewees were mentioning every bit of their fandom, from major to the trivial of the things of what and why they are fans somehow reflected the aspect of confidence they have for their claimed choices. This devotion can be understood from the concept of “basking-in reflected glory” (BIRGing). People like and attempt to associate themselves with successful people in order to strengthen their own self-esteem. Wann and Branscombe (1990) displayed how higher fan identification can lead to an increase in the likelihood of BIRGing rather than CORFing (“cutting-off-reflected failure”). They concluded that die hard fans believe that being a “fan” is an important part of who they are and, as a result they persevere even when whoever they support is unsuccessful (Wann & Branscombe, 1990). In the present research, one of the interviewees stated - “*the fact that I am able to stick to my choices and likings makes me feel good.*” It shows the importance for a fan, when he/she claims that they stan someone or are proud of their choices. It then may become an integral part of a fan’s life and a boost to their self-esteem based on dedication that they show towards someone, in the present case the idol.

*The above themes depict the positive effects of fandom on one’s self esteem, identity, developing hopefulness and socializing. However, a downside that emerged in our interviews was related to the now commonly used slang FOMO. It has been described in the next theme.*

### Underlined agreeability to Conformity

On asking the last question in the interview, all of the respondents agreed that there is an underlying pressure amongst people to know things that are hyped and are famous, as otherwise one might feel left out. The component of FOMO (fear of missing out) comes in and at times people who are not fans or are not aware of the talk of the town feels awkward and at times bored during social gatherings. Thus, a unanimous agreement came to surface stating that people are often pressured to conform to the youth standards of being a fan. One of the participants’ shared an instance when she experienced feeling left out when in a group of friends there was a discussion of a particular show which was not watched by her. Later after watching the show, she falsely claimed that she is also one of the fans. Few other participants also narrated similar episodes.

### The Time period

Another interesting theme that emerged was that recent fans are more actively involved in fandom, as compared to those who have been a fan for a relatively long period of time. Further, the period during which one became a fan also matters. At times when a particular personality, music, movie, book are very much in talk there is a tendency of people to be more curious and interested in them. One of the interviewees said, “*When Harry Potter was famous and the fans used to claim themselves as potter heads, I was also very enthusiastic about them and used to keep track of everything. But now at present I barely indulge in anything related to Harry potter. Presently I am drawn towards music, especially that of k-pop.*” It appears that fandom is not long term as the hype about an idol reduces over time. However, the youth today doesn’t want to let go of the positive effects they experience from fandom, be it connecting with others, BIRGing or feeling in control of one’s choices. As a result they shift from one idol to another if the previous one loses glamor. This doesn’t imply that they are faking being fans, but it highlights the constant need of being a fan.

## **IV. LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Present research work is based on a small sample size, not representative of the entire Delhi. With a larger sample, more in depth understanding of the topic could have been achieved. The researchers are already working on the second part of the present work where they wish to focus on the detailed impact of Fandom on self-esteem of the youth.

Future research around this topic can focus on topics such as the ill effects of BIRGing among youth, Idol hopping reasons and implications, impact of fandom on academic performance, impact of fandom on intimate relationships.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

This research highlights the importance Fandom holds for the youth today. There are varied psychological effects that emerged in the interview responses. It was found that Fandom often boosts self esteem among the fans especially through BIRGing. Also, youngsters are developing a deep connection with their idols especially if their life circumstances are similar to them. These deep connections seem to provide hope, belongingness and a safe place to get inspired. Fans as a community are developing connections with each other through concerts, fanpages, fanmeets etc. The fan talk often works as an ice breaker in conversations. It’s becoming easier to find people with similar interests and thus form friendships. Further, the intensity of fandom

is sometimes to the extent that it provides a separate fan identity or fanship becomes an integral part of one's self.

However, it should be noted that the culture of fandom seems to be creating a fear of being left out due to which people are often forced to conform to the social norms of becoming a fan. This forced fandom might have negative long-term effects on the youth behaviour. They might become people pleasers, refrain from expressing their true choices, blindly conform to other social norms etc. Another interesting pattern noticed was shifting from one idol to another so that one is never 'not a fan'. This constant need to be a fan for social approval can be overwhelming. Thus, this study implies that fanship should not be forced and fandom should be enjoyed rather than simply being a means to socialize.

## REFERENCES

- [1]. Brewer, M.B. (1991). *The Social Self: On Being the Same and Different at the Same Time*. Sage Journal. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167291175001>
- [2]. Chadborn, D., Edwards, P., & Reysen, S. (2017). *Displaying Fan Identity to Make Friends*. *The Journal of Cultural Media*, [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Stephen-Reysen/publication/316856709\\_Displaying\\_fan\\_identity\\_to\\_make\\_friends/links/59145fa14585152e199dc6d2/Displaying-fan-identity-to-make-friends.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Stephen-Reysen/publication/316856709_Displaying_fan_identity_to_make_friends/links/59145fa14585152e199dc6d2/Displaying-fan-identity-to-make-friends.pdf)
- [3]. Chan, C., Berger, J., & Boven, L.V. (2012). *Identifiable but Not Identical: Combining Social Identity and Uniqueness Motives in Choice*. *Journal of Consumer Research*, Volume 39, Issue 3, 1 October 2012, Pages 561–573, <https://doi.org/10.1086/664804>
- [4]. Chaturvedi, B., Singh, H., & Singh, A. (2021). *Hero and Hero-worship: Fandom in Modern India*. <https://books.google.co.in/>
- [5]. Coppa, F. (2014). *Fuck yeah, Fandom is Beautiful*. *Journal of Fandom Studies*, JFS 2 (1) pp. 73–82. [https://doi.org/10.1386/jfs.2.1.73\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/jfs.2.1.73_1)
- [6]. Haggard, L.M., & Williams, D.R. (1992). *Identity Affirmation through Leisure Activities: Leisure Symbols of the Self*. *Journal of Leisure Research*. <https://www.tandfonline.com/>
- [7]. Jenkins, H. (1992). *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. <https://books.google.co.in/>
- [8]. Jenkins, H., & Tulloch, J. (1994). *Science Fiction Audiences: Watching Star Trek and Doctor Who*. <https://books.google.co.in/>
- [9]. Laverie, D.A., & Arnett, D.B. (2000). *Factors Affecting Fan Attendance: The Influence of Identity Salience and Satisfaction*. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 225–246. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00222216.2000.11949915>
- [10]. Merriam Webster Dictionary (1828). <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>
- [11]. Penley, C. (1991). *Close Encounters: Film, Feminism, and Science Fiction*. <https://books.google.co.in/>
- [12]. Reysen, S., & Branscombe, N.R. (2010). *Fanship and Fandom: Comparisons Between Sport and Non-Sport Fans*. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, Vol 33, Issue 2, p176, 0162-7341. <https://openurl.ebsco.com/>
- [13]. Rothschild, M. (1984). *Perspectives on Involvement: Current Problems and Future Directions*. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/>
- [14]. Sen, V. (2021). *The Cult of Aamir Khan: A Cultural Study of Indian Fandom*. *Hero and Hero-worship: Fandom in Modern India*. <https://books.google.co.in/>
- [15]. Smith, C.B. (2000). *Science Fiction Culture*. <https://books.google.co.in/>
- [16]. Wann, D.L., & Branscombe, N.R. (1990). *Die-Hard and Fair-Weather Fans: Effects of Identification on BIRGing and CORFing Tendencies*. *Journal of Sports and Social Issues*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/019372359001400203>