



Fans, fandoms, or fanaticism?

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Abstract

Research in consumer culture focuses on the role of fans in creating social spaces or fandoms in contrast with larger society, where new cultural meanings and values are socially negotiated. Drawing on media and cultural studies, this article describes fandoms as a process rooted in the larger phenomenon of fanaticism and its interaction with the current society. The article posits the study of fanaticism as a fruitful lens for a deeper understanding of the role of consumption and brands in today's consumer societies.

Keywords

Fans, fandom, fanaticism, brands, consumer culture

Introduction

Fandoms are an increasingly widespread social and cultural phenomenon infusing many facets of current society and its consumer culture (Gray et al., 2007; Hills, 2002; Jenkins and Shresthova, 2012). In the last three decades, fandoms have turned from a marginal phenomenon into a sizable movement influencing larger society (Jenkins, 2006b). For example, fandoms give birth to professional fans by shaping existing professions – for example, journalism and academia (aca-fan) – or ushering in new professions – for example, commemorative writers, bloggers, and video gamers (Hills, 2007, 2014, 2015; Jenkins, 1992, 2006a, 2006b).

A considerable stream of studies in consumer culture broadly investigates collective phenomena emerging around consumption activities, products, texts, and brands (Carducci, 2006; Celsi et al., 1993; Cova and Pace, 2006; Figueiredo and Scaraboto, 2016; Kozinets, 2001; Kristensen et al., 2011; Leigh et al., 2006; Muñiz and Schau, 2005; Schau et al., 2009; Seregina and Schouten, 2017). Most of these studies focus on the role of fans in creating a consumption-related fandom, that is, a universe where cultural meanings and economic values are socially negotiated, produced, and exchanged (Guschwan, 2012; Scaraboto, 2015; Seregina and

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Weijo, 2016). Some studies broach the connection of fans and fandoms to the larger phenomenon of consumer fanaticism, which is “the level of investment one has in the liking or interest of a particular person, group, trend, artwork or idea” (Thorne and Bruner, 2006: 53). Fanaticism provides consumers with sources of meanings for their identity construction (Chung et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2007) and not only within the fandom. For example, consumer fanaticism also works at the intersection between fandoms and society by facilitating consumers’ sense of social belonging and status (Seregina and Schouten, 2017).

Despite that all these studies deal with fans, fandoms, and fanaticism, the boundaries of these terms still remain blurred. Drawing on media and cultural studies, this article attempts a conceptual organization of these terms. First, we discuss the relation between fans and fandoms, describing the conceptual dimensions of fandoms. Second, we posit fandoms as a historical and cultural process that interacts with society. Finally, we show the connection between fandom and fanaticism, arguing a conceptual shift toward the latter for new perspectives in research in consumer culture.

Fans and their fandoms

Cultural and media studies, as well as consumer and marketing research, pay a great deal of attention to the study of fans and, more generally, fandom phenomena. Fans are more than simply consumers in view of their commitment to construct elaborate interpretations of their cult objects of consumption (Guschwan, 2012; Jenkins, 1992; Kozinets, 2001; Schau et al., 2009). Fandom studies define fans as

a person with a relatively deep, positive emotional conviction about someone or something famous, usually expressed through recognition of style or creativity. He/she is also a person driven to explore and participate in fannish practices. Fans find their identities wrapped up with the pleasures connected to popular culture. They inhabit social roles marked up as fandom. (Duffett, 2013: 18)

These studies especially emphasize the commitment of fans to media texts – a particular star, celebrity, film, TV program, or band (Hills, 2002). However, Jenkins (2007) extends the term fans to all those active audiences who participate in the cultural elaboration of their cult objects, namely, “lead users” who adopt early new technologies and services (von Hippel, 2005) and “multipliers” who include market-generated materials in their lifeworld as a source of meaning (McCracken, 2005). Consumption research provides further definitions of these active audiences, such as “working consumers” (Cova and Dalli, 2009; Zwick et al., 2008), “fans creep” (Kozinets, 2014), “prosumers” (Ritzer, 2014), and “brand enthusiasts” (Schau et al., 2009) to cite but a few.

Although elaborated in different fields of study, all these definitions describe the same phenomenon, that is, fan commitment to a fan culture or fandom

(Jenkins, 2007). In consumer research, fandoms are mostly defined as subcultures of consumption (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), brand communities (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001), and consumer tribes (Cova et al., 2007).

All this research puts forward that fandoms are social and cultural universes of meanings and practices that support consumers in building their sociality (Michael, 2015; Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), their religiosity (Muñiz and Schau, 2005), their production activities (Dolbec and Fischer, 2015; Goulding and Saren, 2007), and their alternative ideologies (Figueiredo and Scaraboto, 2016; Kozinets, 2002; Ulusoy and Firat, 2018). Below, we provide a short description of these dimensions.

Sociality

Since the 1990s, studies in media and consumer research emphasize the role of fandoms in forging a shared identity and consciousness by providing members with a sense of collective belonging based on strong interpersonal bonds similar to family-like ties (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Jenkins, 1992; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). According to Jenkins (1995), fandoms turn into extended families as they provide mutual support and loyalty when people pass through extreme hardships in their life. Kozinets (2001) notes that the *Star Trek* fandom functions as a home, a place where fans meet like-minded people. Furthermore, fandoms help strengthen real family ties as it occurs in communities such as Jeep or Harley-Davidson where fans involve their families and reinforce, for example, the father-son relationship (McAlexander et al., 2002; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995).

Indeed, members of fandoms nourish a sense of “we-ness,” that is, the members’ “strong connection toward one another” (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001: 418). Furthermore, fans pursue the community’s survival by welcoming and integrating new members (Schau et al., 2009). In doing so, they show a moral responsibility or a “sense of duty or obligation to the community as a whole, and to its individual members” (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001: 413).

However, fandoms hold ephemeral and potentially dissipating social bonds (Cova, 1997; Parmentier and Fischer, 2015). Nevertheless, they are organized with an internal social structure in which social positions and hierarchies are clearly defined in accordance with the experience, knowledge, and know-how of fans in relation to their cult object (Cova et al., 2007). Generally, research identifies two main groups of fans that coexist within different fandoms: the full-time committed hard-core and the temporary committed soft-core members (Schembri, 2009; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995).

Religiosity

Studies on media fandom first explored the relation between fandoms and religiosity (Duffett, 2003; Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 2006b; Lewis, 1992), theorizing fandoms as new and alternative sources as religious-like phenomena (Doss, 1999;

Jindra, 1994). However, recent studies focus more on the deep and intense emotionality that stems from text consumption (Duffett, 2013). Jenkins (2006b) posits that often fans “use metaphors from religion to refer to intense emotional experiences of texts that our culture doesn’t give them an adequate vocabulary to talk about” (p. 21). In the same regard, Hills (2002) states that religiosity “occurs as an effect of fan discourses and practices, rather than relying on a preceding essence/ontology of religion” (p. 86).

Consumer research has especially focused on consumption-related religiosity emerging from discourses that consumers frame in supernatural, miraculous, and magical motifs (Muñiz and Schau, 2005), and practices of cult, devotion, and evangelization (Belk and Tumbat, 2005). In these studies, religiosity emerges from consumers’ adopting “pervasive and accessible leitmotifs and cultural scripts, primarily those of the magical, mythic, and religious to a marketplace phenomenon” (Schau and Muñiz, 2007: 160).

Religiosity can also take the form of a real experience of inner conversion “in which a religious conversion changes one’s ethical or moral behaviors” (Jenkins, 2006b: 21). The *Star Trek* fandom with its moral messages provides consumers with a “moral compass around which fans can center their lives” (Kozinets, 2001: 77). However, consumer research especially emphasizes religiosity in the form of sociality or the way religious beliefs, rituals, and traditions support communities to rise and thrive (Muñiz and Schau, 2005).

Productivity

Pioneering research in media studies shows that the productive activity of fans is a form of cultural economy in which people invest to accumulate cultural capital (Fiske, 1992). Fans turn their “semiotic productivity into some forms of textual production that can circulate among – and thus help to define – the fan community” (p. 30). Fans who actively consume and rework texts act as textual poachers, meaning they deliberately appropriate, take inspiration, and manipulate content for their own creations (Jenkins, 1992). Thus, in media studies, the main discussion is not about the difference between fans and producers – with their blurred boundaries – but what media studies mainly “map out in their account of the differences of modes of production is a distinction between collective, non-profit-making modes of cultural production and capitalist modes of cultural production” (McKee, 2004: 173).

In general, research on consumer culture has provided evidence on how the cultural production of fans leads them to turn into real professionals of their passion – for example, fans poaching texts (fanfic) or fans self-commodifying their own experiences with texts (fanfac; Hills, 2014; Jenkins, 1992) – and this can give birth to three main forms of working consumers (Cova and Dalli, 2009).

First, fans collaborate with the company – or the brand – providing immaterial content to improve the brand and its products. For instance, in the case of Alfa Romeo, fans turn into employees for the company by providing a voluntary unpaid contribution. In turn, the company takes advantage of the knowledge,

competencies, and skills of its fans (alfisti) to improve its products (Cova et al., 2015). Other examples are the Harley-Davidson and Jeep brandfests (McAlexander and Schouten, 1998), the LEGO collaborative program (Antorini et al., 2012), and the “my Nutella The Community” website (Cova and Pace, 2006).

Second, fans can emulate traditional industry professionals – for example, fashion bloggers versus traditional fashion professionals – developing their own production and marketing competencies (Dolbec and Fischer, 2015). For example, some *Star Trek* fans take inspiration from the TV show to produce their own series, LEGO fans organize events where they expose their own LEGO artifacts (Antorini et al., 2012; Kozinets, 2007).

Finally, fans can turn into real entrepreneurs (Goulding and Saren, 2007). In this case, the productive activity of fans may contrast with the companies’ strategies (Hewer et al., 2017; Muñoz and Schau, 2005). This was the case of *Warhammer* fans who felt doubly exploited once Games Workshop – the company producing the *Warhammer* game – asked them to pay a premium price after they participated in the improvement of their beloved product. These fans left the company and formed their own community – Confrontation – where they created and distributed a free *Warhammer*-like game. In doing so, they became a competitor of Games Workshop (Cova and White, 2010).

Ideology

Media and cultural studies depict fandoms as a form of popular culture that emerges in opposition to the dominant ideology of the capitalist market and society. According to Fiske (2010 [1989b]),

the popular culture, then, is determined by the forces of nomination to the extent that it is always formed in reaction to them; but the dominant cannot control totally the meanings that the people may construct, the social allegiances they may form. The people are not the helpless subjects of an irresistible ideological system, but neither are they free-willed, biologically determined individuals; they are a shifting set of social allegiances formed by social agents within a social terrain that is theirs only by virtue of their constant refusal to cede it to the imperialism of the powerful. And space won by the weak is hard won and hard kept, but it is won and it is kept. (p. 37)

Studies in consumer research show that collaborative networks of fans generate alternative practices of economic exchange, such as gift-giving, sharing, and bartering, which contrast with the dominant ideology of monetary transactions (Kozinets, 2002; Scaraboto, 2015). These studies posit fandoms as a sociocultural force shaping the dominant idea of the market as a capitalist system. An extreme case, such as the Burning Man festival, shows that consumers strive to escape the modern dehumanizing logics of the capitalist monetary-based market to experience new forms of social life where the economy – through practices of bartering, gift-giving, and sharing – fosters human ties instead of threatening these. This desire to

escape the capitalist market is especially due to the pervasiveness of the latter in many aspects of human life. As Kozinets (2002) explains,

throughout human history, markets have generally been constrained to particular places, times, and roles, and largely kept conceptually distinct from other important social institutions, such as home and family. With the rise of industrialization and post-industrialization, however, the influence of the market has increasingly encroached upon times, spaces, and roles previously reserved for communal relations. (p. 22)

However, contradictions appear when comparing “talk to walk.” In *Burning Man*, even if marginal, traces of the capitalist market are present in the form of entry ticket fees, the sale of goods (ice and water), and transport to join the festival that takes place in a temporary city – Black Rock City – in the middle of the Nevada desert.

Despite the moral nature of fandoms, forms of the capitalist market are evident in many communities where fans are used to producing and trading their innovations – for example, LEGO, geocaching, minimoto (Antorini et al., 2012; Martin and Schouten, 2014; Scaraboto, 2015). The coexistence within the same fandom of practices of monetary exchange and more moral practices of circulation generates new ways through which value is socially created and distributed (Figueiredo and Scaraboto, 2016; Pongsakornrungrungsilp and Schroeder, 2011; Schau et al., 2009). Indeed, fandoms challenge the capitalist ideology with new and more pro-social ideologies such as the “gift economy,” “moral economy,” and/or “sharing economy” (Jenkins et al., 2013; Scaraboto, 2015).

Fandom as a process

In last three decades, the literature on media fandoms has evolved from the idea of fandoms as entities with their distinctive dimensions to the idea of fandoms as a process that dynamically interacts and co-evolves with society (Jenkins, 2014; Jenkins and Shresthova, 2012). More specifically, Duffett posits that,

Scholars in this area may have been guilty of “reifying” their object: stopping the process of fandom and artificially trying to pin it down [...] “it might be useful to think about the work rather than the worth of fandom, *what it does*, not what it is, for various people in particular historical and social contexts.” (Cavicchi, 1998 cited in Duffett, 2013: 18)

Jenkins (2014) identifies three main phases in the evolution of fandoms in accordance with the development of the new communication technologies: (1) resistance, (2) participation, and (3) activism.

Pioneering studies on media fandoms emphasized the cultural resistance that audiences enacted against the unilateral communication of mass media (Fiske, 1987, 1989a, 2010 [1989b]). The 1990s were a turning point in fandom studies as

research unveiled how fandoms work as communal participatory cultures where fans are active participants who shape their own culture by interpreting texts in an unconventional way, taking what interests them and what they need (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Jenkins, 1992; Lewis, 1992). Finally, with the support of the web, fans turn into real activists using network communications to connect and mobilize scattered audiences around a cause with the aim of making a difference and having a political impact (Jenkins, 2012).

Research in consumer culture has gone through these phases by first emphasizing the role of consumer fandoms as resistance to the social and market ideology (Kozinets, 2001; Muñiz and Schau, 2005; Ulusoy and Firat, 2018), then highlighting the communal practices of alternative value creation (Cova et al., 2007; Schau et al., 2009), and, finally, broaching consumer activism – or “hacktivism” – aimed at making a difference in larger society (Carducci, 2006; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004). We detail these phases here below.

Fandom as resistance

Early studies on media fandom conceive fans as holding the political power to rework media texts and their meanings (Fiske, 1987; Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995). In this perspective, old and new media are a battlefield where underdog fans challenge the top-down messages of powerful elites (Fiske, 1993, 1996). Despite past representations of fandoms as subcultural groups of marginalized fans (Jenkins, 1992; Kozinets, 2001), today fandoms more often take the form of mainstream audiences (Robson, 2010). For instance, mainstream media generally represent fans as White-embodied, middle-class, heterosexual people, bearers of the dominant culture (Stanfill, 2010).

However, all these studies converge in depicting fandoms as “places of resistant reading and cultural production where ordinary people struggle against constraints placed on their creative expression by the culture industry” (Duffett, 2013: 71).

Studies in consumer research advance similarly by exploring how “fans consume resistantly while physically gathered together into communities using creative and subcultural participatory acts rather than the consumption of mass-marketed objects” (Kozinets, 2001: 69). Subcultures of fans collectively mediate the individual interpretation and negotiation of the mass-mediated meanings related to several consumption activities such as TV shows, but also sport, music, goods, and brands (Kozinets, 1997; Ulusoy and Firat, 2018). In doing so, they provide consumers with alternative values that challenge those of the current society (Kozinets, 2001, 2002). For example, Harley-Davidson fans use the brand as

the antithesis of all the sources of confinement that may characterize their various working and family situations. Similarly, symbols such as the tattoos, long hair, and bushy beards of many bikers, especially working-class members of the baby-boom cohort, signify liberation from mainstream values and social structures. (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995: 52)

Fans seek resistance to the capitalist system not only by escaping society, as occurs with media texts, but also by creating alternative, even if temporary, sites where they can experience more caring and less dehumanizing forms of sociality. Burning Man is probably the most remarkable example of temporary fandom with which consumers challenge the totalizing pervasiveness of the capitalist market. Camping in a city that appeared out of nowhere in the Nevada desert, fans of the festival spend a week sharing, giving, and bartering for the sake of emotional bonds, mutuality, and caring in opposition to a capitalist society where money “is used to persuade and exploit faceless others” and where “market exchange is related to passivity, social isolation, and joylessness, and defining consumers based on dehumanizing and deficiency-laden terms” (Kozinets, 2002: 24).

Fandom as participation

Jenkins (1992) emphasizes the role of fandom in promoting a participatory culture or the ability of fans to “construct their cultural and social identity through borrowing and inflecting mass culture images, articulating concerns which often go unvoiced within the dominant media” (p. 23). Participatory culture implies that consumers turn from mere spectators to fans engaged “in 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” (Jenkins, 2006b: 41).

Since the pioneering studies on fans, consumer research has pointed out the participatory culture of fandoms in renegotiating, shaping, and/or integrating the market-generated material. Fandoms

do not consume things without changing them; they cannot “consume” without it becoming them and them becoming it; they cannot “consume” a service without engaging in a dance with a service provider, where the dance becomes the service. Participatory culture is everywhere. (Cova et al., 2007: 4)

Fandoms sustain social formations – that is, communities – that coexist with society, instead of being in antagonistic contrast with it (Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001). In these communities, fans are more than passive spectators prone to consume texts, products, and brands as they are marketed and commercialized by companies. They use varied branded, mass-produced commodities, such as Jeep, Michelin tires, Zippo lighters, Coca-Cola, *Star Trek*, *X-Files*, first and foremost to share social bonds (Cova, 1997; McAlexander et al., 2002; Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001). An extreme example of how market-generated material serves consumers’ needs for social connections is the Apple Newton brand community where consumers’ participation in religious-like practices and narratives around the product keeps the community alive, despite it having been abandoned by marketers (Muñiz and Schau, 2005).

More in general, fandoms produce a range of practices, rituals, myths, and traditions with which fans create cultural and social value by interacting with

commercial culture (Cova et al., 2007; Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001). Fans traditionally create ritualistic stories and myths around community life to perpetuate its consciousness of kind. Telling and retelling these stories enables forging a strong tradition within the community and assists new members’ learning (Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001). Schau et al. (2009) detail the practices fans put into place to generate cultural and social value in the community: from social networking, where ties among members are enhanced and sustained, to impression management practices, where fans engage in creating favorable impressions of the brand universe by evangelizing and justifying their devotion; from community engagement practices that reinforce and intensify fan engagement within the community to brand use practices through which fans groom, customize, and commoditize their brand-related artifacts.

All these practices allow fans to collectively participate in material and immaterial productions through which they define their communities. In doing so, fans become a powerful resource for companies as they provide content for their marketing activities. *Harry Potter* fandom is an enlightening example of how fans can powerfully participate in marketing as well as research and development (R&D) activities by contributing with new content and texts to nurture the brand (Brown, 2007). This phenomenon can be glimpsed in several fandoms where fans participate side-by-side with companies and enhance the brand universe. For example, companies such as Harley-Davidson and Jeep take advantage of consumers’ participatory culture organizing sponsored events – that is, brandfests – improving their loyalty to the brand and attracting newcomers to join the brand universe (McAlexander and Schouten, 1998). Some years ago, Ferrero who owns the Nutella brand decided to steer all consumer-made initiatives it was unable to prevent toward an official website – my Nutella The Community. In doing so, the company empowered and incited Nutella fans to participate in content production around the brand (Cova and Pace, 2006). LEGO set a veritable collaborative program with its groups of fans. For example, “the LEGO Architecture sets, LEGO jewelry, and the robotics sensors for the LEGO Mindstorms NXT products were all initially proposed by adult LEGO users and co-developed with the LEGO Group” (Antorini and Muñiz, 2013: 22).

Fandom as activism

Since his pioneering study on textual poaching, Jenkins (1992) glimpsed fandom activism in the way fans sought to decide on the destiny of their favorite characters or save a series from being canceled. In more recent years, the development of networked communications has significantly empowered fan audiences – thanks to lower costs to work together on a common purpose, to organize collective petitions, crowdfunding, and similar activities (Earl and Kimport, 2009; Planells, 2017) – to influence companies’ decisions and/or the market evolution.

Consumer research shows that fans can undertake production activities through which they shape, change, and make the market evolve. For example, fashion

lovers can use their blogging competences to emulate the traditional fashion industry professionals – for example, stylists, photographers, and editors – and replace them in doing their work (Dolbec and Fischer, 2015). Minimoto fans created a brand-new market acting as entrepreneurs, overturning the traditional market model and ushering in the consumer-made creation of a new market (Martin and Schouten, 2014). Fans also lead the evolution of existing markets. For example, Giesler (2008) shows that in an intertemporal iterative tension opposing music fan downloaders and the recording industry, the market evolved between the contrasting logics of owning and sharing.

All these studies bring to light that fandoms generate value in the market through a hybrid economy of coexisting and/or contending modes of exchange, such as gift-giving, sharing, and the like which *de facto* change the dominant monetary exchange culture of the capitalist market (Figueiredo and Scaraboto, 2016; Scaraboto, 2015).

However, the market is not the only battlefield of fandom activism, social and political issues are also at stake (Jenkins and Shresthova, 2012). Fans use all their consumption-related skills, practices, and competences with the support of networked communications to make a difference. They identify a common cause, set up a mobilization strategy, educate and motivate their supporters to have a political impact that ranges from human rights to labor rights, gender rights, and so forth (Jenkins, 2012). In some cases, a celebrity can inspire fans to collectively engage in civic action. For example, Gillian Anderson – co-protagonist of the TV-series *X-Files* – involuntarily led the fans of the series (AXF – Aussie *X-Files* Fans) to engage in charitable fund-raising for some organizations she supports (Jones, 2012). In other cases, the community engages in civic activism with the aim of embracing a political identity. The Harry Potter Alliance is a fandom with over 100,000 members organized in 70 chapters across the world. It works with traditional charity organizations, engaging in humanitarian and political activities (Jenkins, 2012).

When brands have a politicized nature, they lead fandoms to engage in social and/or political movements that work as an “organized, politicized, and powerful social collective” (O’Guinn and Muñiz, 2005: 268). These “polit-brands” – such as Apple, Diesel, Ben and Jerry’s – catalyze fandoms around their political leftist and anti-capitalist ideas (O’Guinn and Muñiz, 2004). Conversely, when brands are perceived as the most unscrupulous expression of capitalism and consumerism, they can unleash anti-fan movements that work to boycott these brands (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Simon, 2011). Fandoms and anti-fandoms are oppositional communal phenomena rising from contrasting values (like vs dislike) toward a cult object or a brand. Gray (2003) posits that anti-fans “often form social action groups or ‘hatesites’, and can thus be just as organized as their fan counterparts” (p. 71). For instance, spontaneous and organized communities of Hummer and anti-Hummer fans play out a conflict – in the streets and on the web – where Hammer owners use the brand to state the authentic values of the American culture, while the brand adversaries use it to condemn its worst excesses (Luedicke et al., 2010).

From fandom to fanaticism

Fandoms have their roots in fanaticism, namely, “religious and political zealotry, false beliefs, orgiastic excess, possession and madness” (Jenkins, 1992: 12). These negative connotations are especially linked to the radical manifestations of religious and political fanaticism since early modern history – for example, religious war opposing Catholics and Protestants, political turmoil such as the French Revolution and its Reign of Terror, or the current opposition between the West and Islamism (Esposito, 1999; Haynal et al., 1983). As a result, research in fandom studies generally eschews the term “fanaticism” and prefer the use of “fandom” (Jenkins, 1992) to describe extreme commitment to TV series, music, or sports (Cavicchi, 1998; Crawford, 2004; Lewis, 1992).

Fanaticism is an intense emotional commitment toward a set of values (Bronner, 2009; Jenkins, 1992) and takes place as an individual process and/or a collective movement (Duffett, 2013). These values are radically in contrast with the dominant culture and generate such antagonism that it seems impossible to coexist with others’ values, so fanaticism gives birth to extremism, fundamentalism, and terrorism – that is, religious-like sects and similar activities (Bronner, 2009). On the contrary, when values are mostly easily accepted and/or shared by the larger population – such as the extreme passion for opera, movies, and the like – fanaticism can infuse and influence the dominant culture (Benzecry, 2011; Jenkins, 2007). We draw on this latter, less-radical meaning of fanaticism to argue its connection with fandom.

Studies on fanaticism depict it as a historico-cultural process leading to emerging values that shape the mainstream culture (Colas, 1997; Jenkins, 2014; Toscano, 2010). Religious and political studies illustrate how fanaticism arises from social enclaves culturally in contrast to the extant society in terms of social, moral, and material concerns (Toscano, 2010). They first take shape around common shared ideas and interests, then socially elaborate their own brand-new values, and, finally, challenge those they are in contrast with in the society (Colas, 1997). Similarly, fandom studies outline the same process for fanaticism emerging from cultural texts and, in general, from popular and consumer culture (Jenkins, 2014). As shown in the previous paragraph, fandoms first resist society, then participate in developing their own subculture, and, finally, challenge the larger society by shaping its traditional logics and values (Jenkins and Shresthova, 2012). For instance, as Jenkins (2007: 359–360) notes, although in the past fandoms were subcultural phenomena at the edge of society, today they have an increasing impact on mainstream culture “where fan tastes are ruling at the box office (witness all of the superhero and fantasy blockbusters of recent years); where fan tastes are dominating television; where fan practices are shaping the games industry.”

Consumer research emphasizes that consumption-related culture plays a paramount role in fostering fanaticism phenomena emerging around consumption activities, products, texts, and especially brands (Chung et al., 2018; Cova et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2007; Thorne and Bruner, 2006). More specifically, despite the evidence of a large variety of different fandoms, the literature also emphasizes their connection to the larger consumer fanaticism phenomenon (Seregina and

Schouten, 2017; Thorne and Bruner, 2006). Hence, fandoms can be conceived as visible and specific manifestations of the same larger phenomenon, namely, consumer fanaticism as individual and/or collective opposition to society as a whole. In the wake of this definition, we advance some considerations about past research on consumer culture.

First, fanaticism does not necessarily take shape as a communal phenomenon. Previous studies in consumer culture especially focused on communal forms of fanaticism where consumers generate their culture, their social roles, and their traditions (Cova et al., 2007; Kozinets, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002; Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001; Schau et al., 2009; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). More than that, these communities provide consumers with something to believe in and commit to, even in extreme cases when – such as for the Apple Newton – the company abandons the brand (Muñiz and Schau, 2005). This form of communal fanaticism provides an explanation on the role of fandoms as a context for social belonging (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). However, fans do not necessarily participate in fandoms for social ties and, in some cases, individually exploit fandoms as cultural resources. Drawing on Bourdieuan (1984, 1990) theories of fields and capital – according to which cultural based resources allow individuals to fit in a particular field, gain recognition within its members, and build social relationships with them – Seregina and Schouten (2017) show that fans engage with various specific fandoms – for example, book series, sports teams, video games, and musicians – to gain cultural capital accrual and use it to acquire status in the larger society. In the same regard, Jancovich and Hunt (2004) illustrate how in cult TV fandom – an imagined media-based community – fans develop tastes consuming their cult TV shows: “the selection of quality shows helps to create the rarity and exclusivity so often central to cult status” (p. 31). In doing so, fans justify their cultural distinction and superiority to those who have mainstream and commercial preferences “in a way that reproduces the authority of bourgeois taste over popular taste” (p. 28). As Jancovich and Hunt (2004) explain,

fans' frequent complaints about the industry most clearly illustrate the representation of the mainstream as the inauthentic other of the cult fan. While identifying with specific shows, cult TV fans often present the industry that produces these shows as representing everything they despise. (p. 30)

This use of fandoms by fans opens the door to many possible forms of individual – instead of collective – fanaticisms that are not accounted for in marketing and consumer research.

Second, consumer fanaticism can be entangled with political and religious ideologies but not necessarily related to any fandom. Fandoms can generate opposing communal fanaticisms of both fan and anti-fan consumers who use the brand for their contrasting identity and ideological struggle – for example, the Hummer community as a battlefield for the accusation of nationalism and anti-nationalism (Luedicke et al., 2010; Schulz, 2006). However, in some cases, politically related

fanaticism arises even when a high-contested brand, such as Nike or Starbucks, gathers together a social network of anti-fans united by their collective actions against the brand (Carducci, 2006; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Simon, 2011). When brands are entangled with a religious ideology, such as Islamism, they generate forms of fanaticism in which consumers – sharing the same ideology instead of belonging to the same fandom – boycott those brands that they see as threatening the Islamic identity. Izberk-Bilgin (2012) illustrates how this “brand jihadism” takes place against those global Western-like brands (e.g. Nestlé, Coca-Cola, Fanta) that anti-fans decry as collaborating with Jews, supporting war in Iraq, oppressing poor Muslims, and so on. These examples show that consumption-related fanaticism is a larger phenomenon than fandom also involving individual consumers, online networked consumers, and/or consumers sharing the same religious and political ideology. Thus, shifting the focus from fandoms to fanaticism could further illuminate consumers’ identity work at the intersection with marketplace cultures and ideologies.

Finally, fanaticism plays a proactive role through which consumers challenge society and its dominant ideology with alternative consumption-generated and brand-related meanings, logics, and values – for example, consumer communities resisting the national myth of milk as a pillar for a healthy life style (Kristensen et al., 2011). Prior studies in consumer culture have paid a great deal of attention especially to the role of brands in catalyzing communal forms of fanaticism (McAlexander et al., 2002; Schau et al., 2009; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). In these studies, brands are generally depicted as mediators providing a social and moral order among groups of consumers on the edge of mainstream culture (Kozinets, 2001; Luedicke et al., 2010; Muñoz and O’Guinn, 2001). However, many cases show that brands sustain consumer fanaticism infusing larger society and its dominant culture with new values and ways of functioning. For example, brand fanaticism shapes the economic value of money exchange with new forms of value creation and distribution – for example, gift-giving, sharing, bartering, and the like – pursuing first and foremost the social link (Giesler, 2006, 2008; Kozinets, 2002; Scaraboto, 2015). Brand fanaticism leads the evolution of traditional paid work to forms of volunteering (Cova et al., 2015). Brand fanaticism challenges the political status quo through activism that aims at changing the power relations with the traditional marketplace actors, that is, companies (Carducci, 2006; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; O’Guinn and Muñoz, 2005). Thus, exploring brand fanaticism as a historical and cultural process that dialogically interacts with the dominant ideology of the extant society could lead to understanding more about the role of brands in today’s societies.

Conclusion

This article provides a critical perspective on fandoms arguing that they are the expression of a larger historical-cultural phenomenon manifesting as consumption-related and brand-related fanaticism in today’s consumer societies.

In doing so, the article posits fanaticism as a promising field of study, considering the role of consumption and brands in consumers' identity work. Previous research on consumer culture examines fandoms as social spaces where fans create an alternative reality in opposition to the extant society (Kozinets, 2001; Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001; Ulusoy and Firat, 2018). However, cultural and media studies advance the idea that fandoms and their evolution describe a process rooted in the larger phenomenon of fanaticism in which new values and ideas are produced and finally infused in the current society (Jenkins, 2014; Jenkins and Shresthova, 2012). From this perspective, fandoms could be depicted as numerous active but different epicenters stemming from the same ongoing social tension in which the emerging values brought by fanaticism meet the dominant culture of the extant society (Colas, 1997; Jenkins, 2007). In this sense, all those constructs, such as subcultures of consumption, brand communities, consumer tribes, fandoms, and even hobby groups, collaborative networks, and online networked consumer activism (Carducci, 2006; Cova et al., 2007; Figueiredo and Scaraboto, 2016; Kozinets, 2001; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Luedicke et al., 2010; Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001; Muñiz and Schau, 2005; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Stratton and Northcote, 2016; Thomas et al., 2013) could be considered the epiphenomena of this ongoing tension.

Research in consumer culture indicates that high commitment toward a cult object or a brand helps consumers solve individual, communal, or social tensions (Holt, 2004, 2006; Kozinets, 2001; Luedicke et al., 2010). This article shows that rather than limiting the focus to fandoms and instead examining fanaticism could extend our knowledge on individual as well as collective identity tensions that arise at the intersection with sociohistoric patterning of consumption, marketplace cultures, and ideologies (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). More specifically, fanaticism can occur at an individual level (Duffett, 2013) before taking the communal form of fandoms. Likewise, fanaticism can entail social and moral movements uniting the antagonists, rather than the fan enthusiasts, of a product, text, or brand. Understanding one's fanatical tension against their extant society could shed new light on the role that consumption, and especially brands, play in consumers' identity work – experienced individually, communally, or socially – with larger society.

Marketing managers, business professionals, and academics are increasingly interested in knowing more about consumers' high commitment toward cult objects and brands (Kozinets, 2014), especially through an aca-fan approach, which provides a deeper understanding of the cultural meanings behind the fandom universe (Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 1992). Future research adopting fanaticism as a lens to investigate consumer culture could further contribute to the current theoretical and ethical debate on the aca-fan approach (Cristofari and Guitton, 2017), given that fanaticism represents a culturally and academically controversial issue.

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