



FITTING INTO FANDOM

BY RYAN SHOWN

HOW THE INTERNET GROWS
FANDOM BY CONNECTING
MARGINALIZED GROUPS

Everyone has created a friendship because of a shared interest. It's easy to recognize that eureka moment, a shared excitement that two people have discovered something that can bring them a little closer together. It's these shared passions that create lifelong connections and impactful relationships.

Though there are a multitude of interests that people can share, the most identifiable in both pop culture and the real world is the interest in activities and franchises that are often deemed as "nerdy."

While "Nerd Culture" is commonly associated with the general appreciation of obscure media, many things that were

once deemed uncool are now commonly loved by the public. Activities such as participating in a Dungeons & Dragons campaign or cosplaying as a fictional character are becoming more normalized hobbies in mainstream media.

Media franchises dismissed as weird in previous decades are now popular. Franchises such as Star Wars, Lord of the Rings, and Marvel Comics are now well-loved pieces. The shift from obscure to popular has transformed the idea of nerd culture into the general concept of "Fan Culture." As these once obscure interests became more normalized, the need for specific communities centered around one activity or franchise was created.

Within fan culture is the idea of fandom, a subculture that focuses on a specific activity or franchise. Fandom is often seen as a community of people who, all appreciating and devoting their time to the same interest, build a sense of unity and friendship with those around them. Fandom pushes individuals to seek out others who are passionate about their interests and that passion creates bonds that are strengthened by a shared devotion to the community they've put themselves in.

The appreciation of "nerdy" media is outwardly perceived as a male dominated space. A love for science fiction, fantasy, and comic books are male associated interests, an association that isn't entirely unfounded.

↑WHILE THESE CONNECTIONS CAN OFTEN BE EASY TO DEVELOP, EVER PRESENT SOCIETAL PREJUDICES CAN QUICKLY TURN INTERACTIONS IN FANDOM FROM FRIENDLY TO DEMEANING.↑



Viewing the lists of most famous science fiction or fantasy authors and comic book writers yields a very similar, all white male result. Even as men dominate the creation of this media, the assumption that men are the sole consumers of these pieces of media is incorrect.

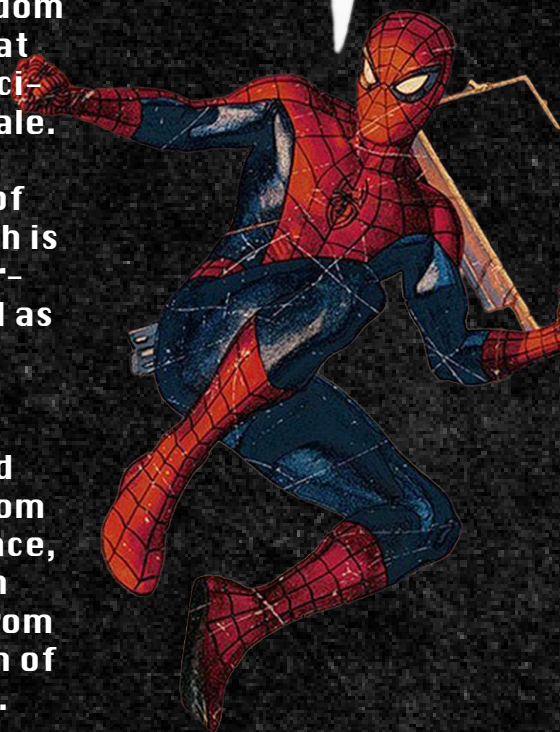
In “Fandom and the Development and Literary Lives of Young Adults”, a study done in 2013 by Kristen Street about online fandom spaces, Street found that 80% of the survey participants identified as female. 12% of the participants also identified outside of the gender binary, which is more than the 8% of participants who identified as male.

Although fandom spaces in real life still uphold this stereotype of fandom being a mostly male space, the fandom presence on the internet deviates from the preconceived notion of men being the majority.

This contrast begs the question, “Why have women and other marginalized groups gravitated towards the internet to provide them a community instead of seeking it out in the real world?” The easiest answer to this question is the recurring theme of invalidation that women and other marginalized groups experience when interacting with men in fandom spaces.

The Great Escape is a chain of shops that have been selling

comics, records, and other pop culture merchandise since 1977.



the only female they'd ever had direct contact with. So, on the one hand, they enjoyed seeing a girl at the comic shop, but they didn't quite trust me.”

She adds, “If I answered a question for them, they'd slink away and ask one of the guys the same thing. Answering the phone, the same thing would happen, they'd say, ‘No offense, but can I talk to one of the guys?’”

A dismissal of women's knowledge in fandom spaces is not uncommon. In the 2018 academic essay “Don't Mess with My Happy Place: Understanding Misogyny in Fandom Communities” written by Gwendelyn Nisbett, a thematic analysis showed a recurring theme that while women enjoy and participate in fandoms, they feel as though they are not seen as genuine fans.

The essay continues to list major themes brought up during the analysis, stating that women are perceived to be not as knowledgeable or dedicated as men in fandom spaces. In the analysis, one respondent noted that “most men are surprised to hear a woman know just as much as the males.”

In addition to men undermining the passion women have for their interests, women in fandom spaces

When asking Krystal Moore, who has been a clerk and buyer at the Louisville location, if there was any difference in how she was treated when discussing her interests because of her gender, she replied that, “When I first started working at The Great Escape, I was one of the only girls here. Guys would come in the store, and it seemed that I was

blatant sexualization. This is true for both the female characters in pop culture and the women present in fandom communities. The almost constant sexual perception of women's bodies, and subsequently men's assumption that they hold power over women's bodies, is a dilemma that permeates all of society; the fandom space is no different.

Sonya Linser, the manager at The Great Escape for 12 years, has worked at multiple Comic Cons and other various pop culture related events. When asked if women were more heavily scrutinized in fandom spaces, She remarked that "In a nutshell, women in fandom are typically viewed as the eye candy."

Linser's opinion is not baseless. This rampant sexualization is especially obvious in regards to cosplay, a fandom related activity in which individuals dress up as characters from their favorite media franchises.

Women's participation in cosplay often leads to objectification, and male fans struggle to separate the fictional female character from the woman in the costume.

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Nisbett's academic essay goes on to say that "It is as if women are discouraged from being the nerdy "know-it-all" fan and encouraged to objectify themselves through the practice of cosplay."

This unwanted attention would be a substantial reason that women would shy away from real life fandom interaction, fearful of being subjected to sexualization without the ability to ignore it.

Though the dismissal of opinions and sexualization are issues that almost all women face in fandom issues, there are still possibilities for women to build heartfelt connections with others that share their interests.

The internet allows individuals to curate their fandom experiences, making it so that they have a safe space to freely discuss what they love. It can let marginalized groups find like-minded people with an ease that would never occur in the real world.

This can be very true for both women and people in the LGBTQ+ community. Felix Whetsel, a trans man who works as a sales associate at The Great Escape, said that he engaged with others that shared his interests, "Pretty much exclusively online via Discord communities and Tumblr."



When discussing the specific online spaces he found himself in, he added that “I more or less only partake in spaces jam-packed with queer people, and it usually involves a lot of trans headcanons.”

The internet gives both women and individuals that are a part of the LGBTQ+ community the ability to discover others that have not only similar interests, but similar life

they have attended fandom-specific events together and even try to see Marvel movies on opening night with each other. Moore remarked that “The internet, of course, opened up a whole new world for nerds. We found out we weren’t the only ones into these fandoms.”

Having an already developed community that provides support makes the idea of real-life fandom

to report that the “nerd” community has started to change for itself and I am sure it will continue to grow in that same direction. Women, LGBTQ, and other minority groups are being given the spotlight as characters and creators.”

As the internet continues to aid in the growth of positive fandom spaces for women, those positive



PHOTO BY
THE GREAT ESCAPE

experiences as well. The internet can be a jumping-off point for marginalized groups to feel seen when discussing what they are passionate about before bringing their fandom interactions out into the world.

Krystal Moore shared that she has a group of friends that she often hangs out with, saying that

interactions much less daunting, even if more obstacles can arise. This security has already

allowed the normalization of women and LGBTQ+ individuals being both creators and consumers of content so commonly associated with men.

Sonya Lisner stated that “Ultimately I am happy

influences can be seen more and more frequently in the real world. Though societal prejudices are not likely to vanish anytime soon, the internet can provide communities that push these biases to the side and highlight what really matters in fandom, a shared love for something that brings joy to people’s lives.