

Impact of Fan Loyalty in Popular IPs: The Case of Harry Potter

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Abstract. In the context of such developed digital media, many old and hot media IPs have been maintaining stable and good fan communities for several years after their initial work had come to an end. The psychological processes that are behind the production of such fan loyalty deserve additional studies. Considering a case of a relatively worldwide popular Harry Potter IP, this paper probes into how fan loyalty in the digital era is created and maintained by forming the constant interactions between fans, texts, platforms, and communities. The paper explores the issues of official ritualization design, interaction between fan communities and aspects of culture reproduction online. It uses a mixed method of both case analysis and textual analysis, which relies on such theories as participatory culture, imagined community and affective energy. Studies have established that digital rites and symbolic systems assist the fans with a starting point of identity creation. Communal communication over an extended period accumulates emotional energy that propels fans to interact at a shallow level, a stage of commitment rather than just an attraction level. In the meantime, the structural conditions that allow the continuity of the fan culture in the long-term are established through the media accessibility of the digital platforms. This paper argues that the result of passive consumption as a factor in the development of fan loyalty is not true, as it is a dynamic process, which is fueled by the agency of fans, constantly triggered and restructured in the environment of the digital platform.

Keywords: Fan loyalty, Harry Potter, participatory culture, digital platform.

1. Introduction

In the digital era, many traditional popular IPs continue to be of high public presence and fan following decades after their original productions ended. This enduring vitality is directly connected with the active and imaginative work which their fan communities put into it. Nonetheless, this relationship is frequently perceived as the exploitation of fan communities by IP holders, treating fan participation as unpaid cultural labour or a source of data for monetization. This study primarily shifts its analytical focus inward, exploring the intrinsic generative logic that empowers fan communities. The logic of this study can build a top-down framework that helps IPs better understand and build their own fan base, further consolidating fan loyalty. Harry Potter, being a classic media IP in the own right and almost 30 years of development, has become an international cultural phenomenon as it is adapted and spread through the film police and television, and having a

fanbase with ardent and sustained supporters. The Harry Potter fandom is chosen by this paper as its main case study to show that fan loyalty is not a null state of consumption, but an active condition, which is built, strengthened, and maintained over time by referring to the continuous interaction between fans, text, platforms, and communities. These three dimensions are the main axis of the impact through which this paper addresses the aspects of production and sustenance of the fans' loyalty in the digital era, as well as the discussion of the agency and the perseverance of fans in the modern media culture.

2. Ritual foundations and the formation of fan identity

In the digital age, mainstream IPs attract readers with prolific worldview, rich characters, and the protagonists experiencing a journey of growth, thus writing strong fan bases. In this case, fan loyalty is regarded as a stable and enduring emotional state that influences intellectual property. However, such loyalty is not intrinsic because it is produced in gradual stages at the very moment fans interact with the textual content, the medium and the community. This part thus explores the processes behind the fan loyalty by answering three major questions: how popular IPs fans are created, how they declare their identity and how they build their community and create emotional attachments.

The initial formation of a fan sense of belonging is a symbolic integration process, achieved through rituals in digital media. In theory, participatory culture puts more importance on the fact that fans are not passive observers but are active participants who take the initiative to participate in the process of creating intellectual property [1]. The first creation of belonging to the fans is symbolic integration process that is carried out through rituals of digital media. This type of participation is usually ritualised like quizzes, challenges and check-in. These rituals allow the fans to perform identity affirmation on a symbolic level and develop the feeling of belonging to the IP as such. The official Harry Potter site has introduced a House Sorting Ceremony, where Patronus and wands tests can be taken to gain a feeling of the ambiance of the magical world of fantasy that exists outside of the books and movies. This may increase the knowledge of the visitors of Harry Potter world. These digital rituals are practices that define transitional spaces that are controlled in the context of the theory of social performance developed by Erving Goffman where participants momentarily detach their daily social identities to play provisional and experimental roles. This aids in the conversion of the readers and the viewers to fan identities [2]. The fans are being assigned to various houses by an algorithm, which makes them Gryffindor, Slytherin, Hufflepuff, or Ravenclaw, which constitutes an institutionalised role-assignment that accords fans with narratively recognised identities. It has been shown that official channels and digital platforms offer rituals that are important conditions of the fast formation and growth of fan community. Online fans exhibit fluidity and performative characteristics through multimodal self-presentation [3]. This process aligns with Goffman's idea that individuals quickly assume appropriate roles when entering new social situations. This ritual provides the foundation for role-playing and lowers the barrier to participation.

The strong effectiveness of this ritualised integration is preconditioned by the fact that it is integrated into a whole system of symbols. Having affirmed their original identity, the fans use certain symbols to find other fans who have the same interests or positions and who subsequently confirm their identity. In his idea of the imagined community, Anderson assumes that societies are not based on actual interaction with each other but, instead, on mutual exchange of symbols, discourses, and conception of solidarity [4]. Fan culture has transcended geographical and linguistic boundaries, forming a thriving transnational community based on emotional resonance and cultural exchange [3]. Popular IPs encode encoded, particular attributes into abstract versions. e.g., Hogwarts four houses have got its own colours and animal symbol. The fandom of Harry Potter has its own

symbolic system comprising of particular house emblems, common discourses and characterizations. This mutual symbolism, which is achieved internationally through online performance, is the product of the conceptual framework of Anderson. In fan culture, fans from Tokyo and Alaska can accurately identify each other on digital platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and X by sharing symbols, ultimately forming a cross-cultural and cross-regional community. These symbols are taken by fans to identify themselves with each other on social media, searching a community that will tolerate them, which further reinforces the emotional platform within the fanbase. Any belongingness within the community is created through common rituals and symbolic systems. When fans consistently receive positive emotional feedback within the community, their loyalty to the IP itself continues to increase.

In addition to ritualistic participation and symbolic identification, fan loyalty is also directly influenced by the textual meaning conveyed by the IP itself. It has been argued by some scholars that Harry Potter has been able to have such a cross-cultural and cross-regional fanbase due to the fact that the actions and scenarios in the books closely resemble the experiences of most fans [5]. In the Harry Potter circles that exist in the media, the character of Ron Weasley appeals to fans more than Harry or Hermione because it closely resembles what most fans are living. Fans relate fantastical storyline to their lives whether searching the characters in Harry Potter with whom they can relate themselves and those who they project their desired traits to. Such is an example of imaginative identification as proposed by Anderson. When the fans import to the text the values which reflect their own lives, such a text turns out to be not only entertainment but a system of expression. This will foster additional discussion and recreation amongst the fans, which will contribute to obtaining more emotional attachment to the IP, as well as revitalizing it.

3. The accumulation and transformation of emotional energy

After the fans have acquired their preliminary sense of identity, emotional gratification and accessibility come with their involvement can decide the issue of whether they will stay in the fan community of the IP or not. Collins proposed in his theory of emotional energy that individuals gain emotional resonance and affective emotional response during interactions, forming an intrinsic motivation for sustained participation. This ongoing collective action creates emotional power, which brings the group attachment and shapes the formation of identity. This theory is important in the way it explains how the fans develop beyond merely being members of communities and becoming dependent on them and re-creating. Emotional energy is not just the fondness of fans towards a work, it is the emotional status that is the cumulative and constant long-term energy. Members are more likened to participate in text and intellectual property debates with fans resulting in excitement and confidence. This high emotional energy leads to the propensity of individual fans to autonomous action, which translates to more propensity to repeat the similar activities. The fans of Harry Potter (who, during their initial interaction with popular hashtags on Twitter or Instagram, frequented fan-control-carrying websites like MuggleNet and The Leaky Cauldron long since they started discussing the original works in large scale) can show how fans can establish stable emotional connections by establishing a community. Fans affirmed each other as fans and share information and resonated emotionally.

Research indicates that the frequency of interaction and the degree of emotional feedback within fan communities are positively correlated with members' sense of belonging and identity formation [6]. When fans are regularly addressed and honored by interacting with the community, they do not just provide occasional involvement in the events but are more likely to be involved in the IP on a regular basis, thus enhancing the emotional connection to it. Participatory culture theory proves that

the subjects of the participation in culture are not weak receivers of the content, but active players. The amount of energy that accumulates in the emotions of the fans will lead to a developmental curve of the superficial to the profound level of engagement with the team. Fans at different participation tiers also experience distinct differences within IP fan communities, with deeply engaged members typically exhibiting higher levels of identity investment and loyalty [7]. At this point, the element of fan loyalty turns into more than a mere existence position into an action that can be developed and mobilised. The gist of this process is in the systematic transformation of the values underlying the narrative of the community like values of justice and solidarity into practical in the larger society. The fans have ceased to be satisfied with the interaction on social media but have redirected their emotional power into the physical world. In Potterhead, the outward to inward movement of interest is all the more dramatic. Following the original series book titles, The Harry Potter Alliance was the name spontaneously given to the fans, who used it to create the Harry Potter Alliance (since renamed Fandom Forward), and to launch the Accio Books! initiative of creating and donating books to needy communities. When people pay attention to such actions and support them morally, they amass popularly recognised authority and prestige. This, in its turn, enhances the cultural and social capital of the community and establishes a virtuous cycle. Other than this, other fans do fan fiction that involves them rewriting endings as they wish some characters that they associate themselves with and thus gain psychological compensation. During the process, the fans will spend a lot of time, energy, and emotion, and attach themselves to the IP unconsciously [8]. These measures have helped build stronger loyalty among the fans and allow individual fanatics to get personal fulfilment and common cause.

As the fanbase keeps growing, Fans' interpretations of characters and scenes vary. Subcommunities are formed in the larger group, which are people who share common interests, character preference, and narrative inclination. According to Hill and Ayuningtyas, the Marauders sub-fandom did not harm to the fan culture in general in their research on the sub-fandom. Instead, the positive encouragement of the IP enhanced the loyalism of the fans by giving them more spaces to be identified with it [9]. In more specialised groups like MuggleNet or fanfic archives like Lofter and Ao3, fans discuss individual characters and create smaller subcommunities (like the one that discusses the Predator or that which talks about the main three characters of the books). These subcommunities are critical to the enhancement of the fan engagement in order to prevent clashes of the various fan groups in the larger fandom, including the development of competing fanbases. By re-understanding sub-texts, the sub-community members gain an extremely cohesive internal cultural identity. This mechanism of differentiated identification enables fans to find a sense of belonging within the vast fandom ecosystem that aligns more closely with their personal interests. The emotional security and sense of belonging provided by sub-communities foster stronger loyalty among fans within the IP culture.

4. Support and extension of the platform environment

IPs cultivate emotional identification through specific rituals and symbols to foster fan loyalty, which is then reinforced through community interaction. However, emotions and interactions have a certain amount of fluidity and instability, making them inadequate to describe how the sustained loyalty of fans is maintained and ceases once the official texts on a given IP have been changed at a slow rate over the span of almost thirty years. More than the IP or fanbase, per se, the continued viability of the fan culture is also a phenomenon that requires a media angle of analysis. Through the mediating accessibility processes, the digital platforms turn the emotional investment of fans into

long-term culture of sustainability thus delivering the technological and structural resources that facilitate long-term loyalty of fans.

Compared to the traditional offline gatherings of earlier times, where printed textual content was disseminated, digital media has lowered the threshold for fans to participate in the reproduction of IP textual content. Through innovative avenues and responses that digital media bring, the cost of making fans commodified through the digital media is lowered, enabling them to become more flexible and free in their decision of which medium (text, image, or video) to disseminate to audiences. The media affordances theory underscores that media technologies and the structures of the platform determine the modes of engagement and routes of practice that users will follow [8]. The site offers the opportunity to do secondary creation and creates the environment of reposting and commenting. The artistic outputs by fans can be bi-directionally seen and given feedback as soon as possible and generate positive reinforcement. This, in its turn, motivates fans to take part in reproduction of culture [10]. Through this feedback mechanism, the emotional investment by fans will become in a two-way investment instead of a one-directional disposal which will become rewards and hence this is the base of the long-term fan loyalty.

Although digital platforms offer fans a platform to express their creativity and keep IP fan bases vibrant, IPs, in turn, generate a healthy amount of traffic and revenue to the platforms. The topicality of the IPs as such is that the creators of fans are encouraged to create some content on the derivative platforms, thus attracting more users to read and comment to consume the works. The strength of this relationship is a mutually empowering one between the platform, IP and the fans, which is the force that constantly results in fan loyalty.

The culture of the fans is no longer based on the perpetual production of official texts in the new media environment. Rather, the community interaction, cultural remembering and redefinition of meaning are the means through which it achieves the generation of the new content, continuing to keep fans loyal [11]. Early fan loyalty was heavily dependent on the release of new books or films, but in the new media environment, the community itself generates buzz for the IP. Since the series of films that adapted the original Harry Potter novels ended, the fan discussions did not cease many years ago. Issues surrounding the connection between the creators of the franchise and the author J.K. Rowling are one of the subjects on which fervent discussions are maintained in the social networks of devotees. This is a show that the culture of the fan has moved towards being more textual to a communal individual in the new media paradigm.

Outside of that, even on video sites, like Bilibili and YouTube, it is still possible to find fan-created videos with new interpretations of selected characters in Harry Potter, collections of world-building of the series or analysis of small details. This secondary creative content has the effect of encouraging the long time fans to go back to the original works and encouraging new audiences to explore those works. Through implementing the consistency of updating older texts with new relatability and new reading frameworks, fans keep making old IPs continue to resonate today. The effect of this process is to ensure the performances remain loyal to fans creating a rich fan culture ecosystem, which does not rely on an official IP update.

5. Conclusion

Within the digital era, fan loyalty becomes an effective force helping sustain the long-term sustainability of intellectual property. The paper will extensively explore the processes behind creating and ensuring loyalty between the classic, popular Harry Potter IP and fans. The results of the research also suggest that the phenomena of fan loyalty is based not only on a single-directional appeal to text and passive consumption, but adult interaction between fans and textual messages,

electronic environments, and communities which constitutes the development and enhancement of loyalty. By engaging in the ritualised involvement and symbolic identification, fans obtain the first confirmation of their position and construct a transregional, transcultural community. Being emotionally charged through the constant communication among communities, the fan involvement increases and converts the feeling into something concrete, which will help the society and enhance the impact of the IP. Simultaneously, the media space offered by digital media, offers structural conditions to the continued reproduction of the fan culture that provides long-term stability of the fan loyalty to textual shortage. Thus, the research results of the study conclude that the loyalty of fans is not a passive or a one-time emotional attachment but an active state at the fan agency, which is continuously maintained by various interactive processes. At this, the fanbase develops a symbiotic relationship with the IP and the platform considering that textual and emotional content is delivered by the IP and the platform to the fanbase and the latter furnishes the former and the latter with an unstopping flow of enthusiasm.

The research presented in this study provides a quality insight into the study done on the subject of the fan culture in the digital era. The paper is more concerned with the generative logic that affects fan communities in terms of highlighting the autonomy of fans in identity-building processes, the emotional investment and cultural reproduction. The paper contextualizes theoretic ideas like participatory culture, imagined community and affective energy in the real-world context of digital platforms, providing a complex lens of an analytical approach that could be used to elaborate how traditional intellectual properties still retain their pragmatic relevance in modern media conditions. The study of the mechanisms that have been discovered as part of IPs and their fan communities may be further developed in the future by extending the analysis of other cultures and platforms and, therefore, exploring the applicability of the results of this study. In addition, one more focus can be made upon the interaction of fan empowerment with platform governance and capital logic in the long term, how fan loyalty, activated continuously, is threatened to be directed, punished or even alienated. This would create a more holistic perception of the diversity of the fan culture in the digital era.

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