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Shared enthusiasm : social cohesion within anime fandom

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ABSTRACT

SHARED ENTHUSIASM: SOCIAL COHESION WITHIN ANIME FANDOM

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This thesis examines the function of shared performances of enthusiasm within the North American anime fandom beyond simple shared interests. Specifically, it analyzes how these performances foster the creation, solidification, and dismissal of complex social cohesion within the greater fandom. The researcher made use of in-depth interviews at both an anime convention and university anime club, with an additional observation period of the club to supplement the primary method. It was found that fans experience and perform enthusiasm displays in three primary ways, each with its own properties. These expressions of enthusiasm represent social cohesion beyond incidental grouping based on mere shared interests. The researcher hopes that further studies on fandom could focus more upon why fans work themselves into these groupings, and hopes that this project may facilitate such research.

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SHARED ENTHUSIASM: SOCIAL COHESION WITHIN ANIME FANDOM

BY

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Dr. Kerry O. Ferris

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CHAPTER 1

FANDOMS AND FUNCTION

Introduction

The North American anime fandom has a history and character that sets it apart from other media-based fandoms that have come and gone in the past few decades. Unlike other fantasy and sci-fi fandoms such as *Star Trek* or *The Lord of the Rings*, anime fans have had to acquire their media of choice from another country and in a language they do not speak. This was particularly significant in its early years before the Internet made it possible to communicate and distribute media in a timely manner. I believe that these unique roots set the stage for a fandom community that has its own unique sociological character and needs to be studied as such.

Through a series of subject interviews, this study explores the ways that shared enthusiasm and passion can build, reinforce, and define social bonds and cohesion within anime fandom. This shared interest creates a social group armed with new lingo, esoteric facts, in-jokes, and generalized knowledge. It is a complex landscape of shared interests that fosters a great amount of performances that are constantly bouncing off one another across the fandom. From the outside, it would seem that these are all purely neutral to positive displays of enthusiasm, effectively no more than very loud water cooler talk. My own experiences in fandom led me to

believe that it is not so simple, and that the anime fandom in specific required more investigation.

Regarding the literature, base discussion on how groups build cohesion through shared interests (Durkheim 1893, 1912; Goffman 1959), positive shared likes (Napier 2015), and negative shared likes (Dunlap and Wolf 2010; Jindra 1994) will be established. Given the openness and innocuousness of anime fandom, the ways that forms of enthusiasm bring them together can be studied in a more honest and frank fashion. Through their own stories and experiences, I wanted to know how their performances as fans affected their perceptions of community. Before all this, however, I will set the stage for investigation by exploring the history of the anime fandom in the West.

A Brief History of North American Anime Fandom

Media fandoms existed well before the North American anime community was anything more than a few scattered groups. It is generally agreed that the first real fandom was the one surrounding *Star Trek* (Jindra 1994). Following the original run of the TV series, dedicated fans began communicating and gathering to discuss their favorite parts of the show. Conventions were soon to follow. This very vocal community is what led to the TV series becoming more than a briefly remembered show that got canceled due to below-average ratings. The formation of the anime fandom has similarities, but the international nature of the media caused it to take a different path.

As all anime media has its production origins in Japan, getting ahold of the media was a much more involved process for early North American fans than it is today (Leonard 2005). Decades ago, aside from the few series that *were* localized to some extent, fans had to rely on getting TV recordings from people in Japan to get their ‘fix.’ These were often 3rd, 4th, or beyond generation copied VHS recordings. Sometimes someone translated and subtitled the copies, but not always.

Fandoms were centered around anime clubs that sprung up around the country. Communication between these groups was done via mailing lists, newsletters, and limited access to what electronic bulletin board systems existed at the time. The very first North American anime convention is believed to have been *YamatoCon*, in 1983 (Merrill 2013). A mere 100 people attended, but it was the first time that anime fans managed to organize a gathering in the same vein as the general sci-fi and comic book conventions that existed at the time. *Project A-Kon* is another early con, having started in 1990, that is still running to this day. The success of these early cons served the dual goals of creating a more cohesive community, and showing the Japanese media creators that there was a large enough audience/market to officially localize and release more properties overseas (Leonard 2005).

The next major event that allowed the anime fandom to grow even further was the increasing importance and usability of the internet. Not only did it allow for much easier communication between fans, it was also a new way to distribute media in a convenient fashion. Digital tools and eventual high-speed internet allowed for unofficial subtitled anime, or fansubs, to be distributed very easily. This availability of media catapulted the fandom forward in being able to share and discuss their favored shows. The general fandom started using their own lingo

and terminology more regularly (see Appendix A for a sample of this). Communities could discuss current content without having to wait until a company decided to license a series for release, which often took months before the first episodes would be available. In addition, the fact that series were being distributed freely with no regard for copyright certainly didn't hurt. Regardless, the fandom was now able to consume the media to a never before seen degree.

Today, reliance on fansubs is much lower. Thanks to the mass availability of very high-speed internet and mobile devices, several streaming services are available. The service Crunchyroll is now the primary online source of anime (Crunchyroll 2017). Akin to Netflix, it often has series that can be watched within hours after the original Japanese broadcast. Modern conventions have gained significant corporate sponsorship, which has allowed for even larger conventions. For example, the largest anime convention in North America, Anime Expo, exceeded 100,000 attendees over four days in 2016 (Society for the Promotion of Japanese Animation 2016). This has led to fan claims that things just 'aren't like the old days.' Regardless, anime fandom is larger and broader than it's ever been, and it is likely this growth will continue for the foreseeable future.

Literature Review

Social Cohesion and Shared Values

Fan communities may not have the same depth of broad social elements that the greater society has, but many elements of social cohesion and solidarity can be applied. The exact definition of social cohesion is something that the social sciences have debated for some time.

Emile Durkheim (1893) had perhaps the first significant discussion of social solidarity. Chan, To, and Chan (2005) believe his foundation of the idea is sound, but needs to be clarified and expanded upon to avoid a definition neither too narrow nor too broad to be useful. In light of over a century of discussion, they (p. 290) think that social cohesion can be summed up as:

Social cohesion is a state of affairs concerning both the vertical and the horizontal interactions among members of society as characterized by a set of attitudes and norms that includes trust, a sense of belonging and the willingness to participate and help, as well as their behavioral manifestations.

Chan et al. define the vertical as the hierarchical relationships from the state down to the individual, and the horizontal as the relationships between social groups. This is a working definition in which explanations of social cohesion and its relation to shared values can be built. Simply *having* shared values does not guarantee strong social cohesion or even any social cohesion at all. An occasional water cooler discussion about a mutually enjoyable TV series does not constitute a fandom, after all. The process in which these shared values transform into a functional social group is more complex than that and requires further explanation.

The core of social cohesion is in how people manage to come together and stay together despite inevitable conflict. In trying to understand this glue that holds society together, Durkheim (1893) explains that social solidarity is of two natures: mechanical and organic. The former, based upon an element of ‘sameness,’ is of a more primitive nature, applied in less-developed societies. The latter is based upon complementary differences, wherein people seek out those that cover for their own shortcomings and weaknesses. Durkheim considers organic a stronger and more stable form of solidarity because it inherently involves cooperation and the creation of

unions greater than the sum of their parts, and doesn't rely on circumstantial similarities as a long-term binding agent to hold society together.

Durkheim also speaks of social solidarity and shared values when speaking of religion. Conceptions of *sacred* and *profane* define the boundaries of the religious grouping (1912). The profane must be kept away from the sacred. People form bonds of trust and understanding based upon agreement of these terms. Often, violations of these boundaries come with the price of committing sin. Fear of sin and adherence to the faith give a sense of shared values which religious groups use to maintain order within their ranks. *Collective effervescence* can also play a role in creating a sense of social order and will to action. Durkheim believed that there was a sort of collective 'energy' when enough of a group has the will to act a certain way. It can allow group action in ways that an individual would never do by themselves. This kind of cohesion further cements a group as a cohesive unit that can behave as a singular being, beyond just a group of individuals.

Social cohesion is also applied at the interpersonal level, often based upon appearances and performances on a theoretical stage (Goffman 1959). Every time someone interacts with another person, their 'performance' is judged in accordance with the social expectations of the audience. This goes both ways, as it is impossible for anyone to be solely a performer or audience. For example, a doctor is supposed to act like a doctor, with all the visual aids and expressions of esoteric knowledge that prove that they deserve to play the part of a doctor. Social cohesion is formed by acceptance of performances and belief in authenticity according to Goffman. The cohesion breaks down when the performance is found to be fraudulent, especially when it seemed convincing enough to pass for the real thing.

It is possible for a sufficiently convincing stage to create assumptions about other actors' performances. For example, a church congregation has its own social cohesiveness built in simply because of the shared theological nature of the group setting. Glock and Stark (1965) argue that interpersonal conflict is rare in such groups because of the assumed shared values due to the stage setting, despite the possibility of significant differences of opinion on faith. Stauffer (1973) expands on this idea by analyzing a field study in Chicago Methodist churches, in which churchgoers were questioned on their own faith and how they feel about their fellow faithful. From the data, he believes that the strength of the social cohesion allows the members to believe that their specific values are found in other members. Merely being an active member of the church group is a convincing enough performance that further questioning is unnecessary.

Social trust is an important part of forming and maintaining social cohesion. Heuser (2005) expands on the idea of trust and authenticity being a key component of social cohesion, growing beyond a personal level of trust. People are willing to trust one other not simply because it benefits them directly, but that it carries actual *value* to themselves and their social group. Heuser (2005:11) states, "The element of mutual trust is exactly that upon which genuine organizational unity is founded." As time passes, social change is inevitable. Likewise, social change is difficult and is often resisted unless there is a very compelling reason to do so. Social trust is the key to accepting change, as it requires not only that the change seem socially beneficial, but calls for change come from a trustworthy individual or group. Without this trust, stagnation would set in and the social cohesion would fall apart.

In summary, social cohesion is initiated and perpetuated by some amount of shared values and trust. Shared values and mutual trust feed into each other as trust itself establishes the

authenticity of another person's values. Relations within the social hierarchy and interpersonal relations are both integral to maintain social cohesion.

Shared Values Within Fan Communities

Much like in other communities and organizations, shared values play an important part in establishing social cohesion and solidarity in fandoms. Sometimes this is in a very direct manner, such as sharing the ideals proposed by the media in question (Napier 2015). A group such as the Miyazaki Mailing List manages to gather together people from all walks of life who share the same interest in a series of animated films. The running theme of respect for nature and life as a whole acts as the shared values to center on. Here, Napier finds that cohesion is achieved through a positive expression of shared values, with very little discussion involving negativity beyond minor self-deprecation.

Dunlap and Wolf (2010) explain how performances of negative enthusiasm can also bring people together, similar to how cohesion is formed through positive performances. The Fandom Wank Internet community builds a stable sense of social cohesion through the humorous bashing of low quality expression of fandom from elsewhere on the Internet. This can lead to an almost religious level of organization of 'canon' that effectively establishes sacred and profane values (Durkheim 1912). The targets of this 'wank' are mocked, and through this mockery are deemed profane enough that they are to be avoided and only used as targets for the sacred to take shots at.

Fandom analogues to religion are not out of place when it comes to the social cohesion expressed by large fandom groups. Jindra (1994) explains how fans of the media franchise *Star Trek* often behave in very similar ways to any given religious group. A plethora of knowledge involving characters, stories, starships, and chronologies all form an official canon that establishes what is and what isn't 'true,' despite the entirety of the knowledge being ultimately fictional. The cohesion is not absolute, as there are always disputes on various properties of the media in question. However, a greater sense of community has endured despite these frequent factional splits in opinion.

Even the full knowledge that their favored media is ultimately a consumer product designed to generate profit does not keep fandoms from enduring and thriving (Kozinets 2001). The establishment of a religious-like quality to a fandom might even function as a distancing effect, allowing the fans to separate themselves from the original purpose of the media. *Star Trek* in particular presents a utopian future in which many of today's contemporary problems have been eliminated. As Jindra (1994) explains, this created an ideal that one could conceivably strive for. It established a set of ideas and values that people could center upon and form communities based on shared values. Kozinets found that these shared ideals allow fans to consider themselves devoted to the media and the community *without* having to consume the media in way proportional to their zeal (2001:76). This does not mean that fandoms can thrive in the complete absence of the media, but that fandoms can grow in enthusiasm even if the amount of media to be consumed doesn't match this rate of growth. Again, expressions of mere shared interests do not constitute a fandom.

The strength of identity within a fandom is somewhat tied to one's ability to invest themselves in the work. Taylor (2015) surveyed two groups of fans and found that a person's willingness and ability to transport themselves into the fictional narratives correlated with the prominence of identification with the fandom, less so with actual community involvement. However, fans that *did* become invested for reasons of stronger social ties and a sense of community are more likely to become fans of other works to the same degree (p. 184). A desire for social cohesion seems to drive those fans to seek out other ways to experience such a feeling. In this way, fandom enthusiasm can 'jump' to adjacent fields, assuming some level of continuity.

In summary, fan communities use shared values to create a sense of social cohesion and solidarity that manifests itself much like religious groups, complete with rituals and canon. It creates a belief structure that people can rally around and explore in a stable and cohesive manner. Both positive and negative shared interests can bring people together, both playing their part in the collective performance. The sense of shared values also allows fandom to create meaningful bonds through enthusiastic performances.

Theoretical Focus

The primary theoretical focus of this project is Erving Goffman's dramaturgical perspective, with which I will analyze and explain the use of performed enthusiasm within the North American anime fandom. It is ultimately a symbolic interactionist approach, as I believe that fandoms are rife with derived meanings of actions and people acting upon their perceptions of a symbolic and subjective reality. I have two primary reasons for using Goffman. First, this

fandom is a media fandom, based around the consumption and shared experiences of a nominally artistic product. Series are often crafted to send *some* kind of message and are loaded with stories, information, experiences, and other objects for the viewers to invest themselves in. In turn, this allows people to surround themselves with a myriad of markers and symbols to identify themselves and others. Fans craft themselves a persona around what they consume and are primed to share this with others.

Constructing a sense of self based upon consumption alone would not be enough to use this approach, as the unique social aspect of anime fandom is too large to ignore. This leads to my second reason. Much like other prominent fandoms, this one engages heavily in large conventions, clubs, discussion groups, and social media. Unlike many other fandoms, the North American anime fandom couldn't rely on easy access to the source media in its beginnings. Hand-circulated VHS and Betamax tapes with dodgy subtitles were hard to come by and fans *had* to rely on social bonds, groups, and some kind of enthusiasm to make sure this fandom ever got off the ground. Enthusiastic performances by members of these originally small groups were how the fandom lasted long enough for the media publishers to pick up their end of the availability problem. While acquisition of media is not much trouble today, the mindset of necessity of outward enthusiasm still exists. Anime fans have had a performative streak from the very beginning, so I believe that the metaphor of the stage is ideal for analyzing how the fandom uses these performances to form social bonds.

Aside from the primary stage metaphor, it should be stated that I also make minor use of Durkheim's explanations of social cohesion and collective effervescence. In their simplest form, fandoms (and most groups) develop due to both shared interests and some sort of collective

'energy' to facilitate action and motivation. Aside from these base concepts, I believe that Goffman's perspective explains the actual interpersonal social developments in a way that Durkheim's cannot. The fandom is a sort of subjective reality that the participants are both acting on and reacting to. It is formed by the performative enthusiasm and passion of the fans, not preexisting roles filled by fans that come along. The structure is fluid and the social groupings are often erratic. To this end, Durkheim's views on social cohesion apply to this project in only the most basic of ways, while Goffman's performative perspective establishes how the North American anime fandom develops from within.

CHAPTER 2

STUDYING FANDOM FROM WITHIN

Methodology and Reasoning

The decision to use ethnographic methods in studying anime fans is based upon Jack Katz's (1997) descriptions and justified use of several 'warrants' of ethnography. He describes several, but two in specific are relevant to this project. The first is the logical use of a strategically useful site for exploring a more general phenomenon. A specific location or group can put certain traits or behaviors on prominent display, making them easier to observe. Anime fandom's gatherings and open discussion of their groupings are an example of this. The use of performative enthusiasm to create social cohesion is openly put on display in these groups when they discuss the series, characters, and genres that they love, hate, and love to hate. Like Katz, I believe the argument that these 'ideal' research sites can contain a more pure version of what is performed elsewhere in other social groups.

Katz's (1997) second warrant is the need for narratives. In general, social behaviors such as the building of social cohesion require some manner of observation and understanding to craft the story of how these relationships happen. Single slices of the size or enthusiasm of a fandom can be useful in a general informational sense, but seeing how individuals go from showing interest in a group to becoming fully accepted members demands building a narrative. There is a

story to be told that can bring light to the little things that connect each notable event in subtle ways. This can be done via outside observation with interaction with subjects, but I believe the direct approach can get to the heart of these social interactions in a way that other methods cannot.

Locations of Data Collection

I made use of two location for data collection. The first was the meetings of the Anime Association of Northern Illinois University. This club meets in McMurray Hall on the NIU campus and has been running nearly continuously since 1999 (AA of NIU 2013). It started with simple public viewings of popular anime series, and over the years grew to the point where it recently started holding its own small annual anime convention called Karoshi-con. At present, meetings occur twice a week and include TV series or movies chosen by members' votes, general discussion, and often playing of table-top and board games. Occasionally, meetings are focused on specific club matters such as voting on officers. I was present for one such meeting, the details of which I will cover later within the Analysis section. I chose the club as a data collection location due to the ease of access as an anime fan and an NIU student.

The second location was the anime convention Anime Midwest. It is an annual convention held in July in Rosemont, Illinois, at the Hyatt Regency O'Hare hotel. It has been running since 2011 and has changed locations twice before landing at its current space (AnimeCons.com 2013). Being held in July, it is only two months after the larger anime convention held in the Hyatt Regency O'Hare hotel, Anime Central, which has been held

annually since 1998 (AnimeCons.com 2017). It is the latter of these which with I have extensive experience, having attended Anime Central for the last 17 years. Familiarity with the location and attendees was the primary reason I chose Anime Midwest as a data collection site. Based upon personal experience, Anime Midwest is treated as both an overflow and alternative to Anime Central. Due to this, there is a large overlap in attendees, allowing me to apply my knowledge of Anime Central to Anime Midwest.

The atmosphere of an anime club and convention are not the same. While both are filled with fans, there is not a perfect overlap. The potential age range for a convention is much larger, as anyone who considers themselves a fan may attend. The atmosphere is also much more hectic and exciting, which could translate into a much more enthusiastic interview. On the other hand, a university anime club is restricted to students of the university. While this hypothetically has a high potential upper age, more realistically attendees will be in the 18-24 range. The club also has a much more subdued atmosphere. The collective energy of a convention simply cannot happen there. However, a more intimate and calm location can lead to more open discussion of viewpoints during an interview. There are advantages to both. I will note that almost every subject at the club had some level of convention experience, be it Anime Central, Anime Midwest, or their own Karoshi-con. This informed me that there was notable overlap between my two sites and I did not feel that I was effectively studying two different populations.

Procedure

I attended Anime Midwest on Friday, July 7 and Saturday, July 8, 2017. For weekend-long conventions, Friday and Saturday tend to be more popular, yielding more potential subjects. I attended six meetings of the Anime Association of NIU during the months of April and May 2017. The final meeting is when I directly observed officer elections. When at Anime Midwest, interviews were conducted either where the subject was currently sitting or somewhere nearby that would allow for easier recording. While at the anime club, interviews were conducted in the hallway of McMurry Hall, often away from the high traffic areas to avoid problems with recording. Interviews ranged from 25 to 40 minutes in length, were recorded using a dedicated electronic recorder, and were transcribed after all data had been collected.

In analyzing the data, both open and focused coding were employed to gain insight into how the subjects spoke specifically on their experiences and emotions surrounding social groups (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011). Open coding was used first to find the primary narrative strain that tied these discussions together. This was key to refocusing this project from shared hatreds and dislikes to its current form. After identifying this common strain of performative enthusiasm, more focused coding was employed to tie together the themes and ways this enthusiasm was functioning. Integrative memos were later used to tie together the revealed situations and themes present in the data. The different forms of performative enthusiasm sprung from these memos, as the subjects' descriptions and experiences began to tell stories about performances they were involved in.

A single interview can yield an enormous amount of information if done correctly. This biographical data can provide specifics and narrative to the discussed interactions, filling in the gaps that an unfiltered text response to a question cannot (Woolley 2009). These interviews were designed to get respondents to open up about their involvement with like-minded fans and the community in general. Additional questions on their feelings on specific series and characters were introduced once enough information about their interests was obtained. An example interview guide can be found in Appendix B.

The observation portion of data collection was less focused than the interview portion, but still yielded interesting data. While at Anime Midwest, general observation was done at several locations both in the hotel and attached convention center. This included the hotel lobby, the skybridge between the hotel and convention center, and areas of the vendor hall where sitting was possible. To anyone watching, I was simply another attendee taking a breather and watching the con happenings. When I attended the anime club meetings, I had to take a more direct approach to my involvement. The much smaller group and intimate location made it impossible to hide my intention to interview several members. I did express interest in the club beyond academic purposes, however; I am part of the fandom and did not hide that fact. When I was not directly interviewing people, I sat in the hallway where most of the informal activities took place. This allowed easy observation of the members. As far as I could tell, very few people paid me any mind and my presence did not seem to affect standard behavior.

Gaining volunteers was a matter of appealing to the fandom eagerness to talk about their interests. Given that it was difficult to truly randomize subject selection, I relied on a sample of convenience for the interview portion of data collection. Compensation was offered in the form

of free packages of Pocky, a kind of flavor-coated cookie snack stick that is popular with anime fans. The average college student is not known for having a great deal of money, and much of it gets spent on more important academic needs, so the prospect of free food should be a good motivation for participation. This was indeed the case, for both the convention and club locations. A few of the subjects were somewhat hesitant until I explained that they would be rewarded with free snacks.

Problems and Issues Predicted

The primary limitation of this method is that it focuses very heavily on subjectivity to create data, both on my part and the subjects'. I did not feel that this was overly damning, as social performances are already based upon subjective feelings. I believed that using these personal accounts as data was fully appropriate as they create narratives that put the fandom interactions on display. Goffman's (1959) theory of the personal stage is all about crafting a personal narrative to present to the world. A subject's account of other performances is effectively telling a story about a story that gives context to interactions. Orbuch (1997) further explains that personal accounts bring context and understanding to instances of social interactions that cannot be achieved by a purely objective report. Personal feelings are what fuel social cohesion, and thus I believe that they are the foundation of this project's aims.

Another limitation is that it was mostly dependent on how open people are to speak about these feelings. I did not anticipate that this would be too great of a problem. Conventions and clubs are often the places where fans like this have a chance to communicate openly with like-minded people.

With any kind of human-based study of this nature, there is always the concern of protecting the privacy of all subjects. While all subjects have been given pseudonyms, it is not foolproof. The sheer number of people attending the convention would make it incredibly difficult to pin down any specific person, but the anime club doesn't have such a feature. As leadership roles are spoken of in the interviews, it would probably not be terribly difficult to identify some subjects. Gatson and Zweerink (2004) do not feel that this is a damning issue: "it is questionable how anonymous ethnographic sites have ever been." (p. 16). In their own study of a popular internet community, both the location and members make very little effort to hide identifying markers, and doing the exact opposite is often encouraged. In my case, Anime Midwest takes place in an effectively public location, and purchase of a badge requires consent to possibly being recorded while attending. The NIU anime club promotes itself openly, welcomes new members all the time, and takes place in an open academic building where anyone could be present. Additionally, all interviewed subjects were fully informed that anything said would be used in the study, and had to consent before the interview began. Given all this, I did not foresee this issue to be a problem.

Problems and Issues Encountered

As expected, most of the subjects were quite eager to speak openly once the ice had been broken with the initial questions or mentions of their favored series. There was a range of enthusiasm, but no one outright refused to discuss a raised issue. My fears were unfounded in this case. The greater problem that I encountered was approaching strangers despite being very comfortable with the atmosphere in normal contexts. I had hoped that my long attendance of

conventions and being part of the fandom for nearly two decades would override the latent intimidating factor of approaching a stranger for data-gathering purposes. It was difficult at times, but I overcame it to get what I needed.

Another unexpected issue was an assumed unhindered access to the data collection site: the convention hotel. Often it is possible to ‘shadow’ a convention simply by sticking to the public locations within the hotel or convention center and never trying to enter a panel or event. This is the case with the convention that I have attended for many years; badge checks are *only* at panel and event rooms. This was not the case with the collection site. At one point I was asked to produce a con badge. Being unable to do so, I was personally escorted out of the hotel by security and was told to not reenter until I had one. Instead of testing my luck, I decided to buy a badge. Later I noticed many more checkpoints and signs informing people that this was the policy. Given that it is possible to be at a hotel without being a con attendee, this caught me off guard.

CHAPTER 3

PARTICULAR PERFORMANCES

Subjects

A total of fifteen subjects were interviewed during the course of data collection (See Table 1). An additional participant observation period was also performed at the anime club. Subjects varied in gender, anime and fandom experience, and opinion. Experience varied the most, while age was the least varied. Every subject was in their early- to mid-20s. In my experience and limited surveys (Plante 2014), this age range is consistent with the average adult anime fan, and thus it functioned as a representative sample of the fandom population.

Findings

My original mindset starting this project was that shared hatreds of dislikes can be and often are a strong element of social cohesion in groups such as anime fandom. Based on my experiences I was thought that the various ways that people express and perform their roles with shared negativity would manifest in a stronger manner than simple shared likes. I felt that shared dislikes effectively count as a shared *interest* and would still be something that could bring people together. However, after conducting the interviews with the subjects and observations, something else was more apparent. I will discuss several subjects that I found to be notable in their experiences with passion, enthusiasm, and social bonding and will break down specifics in

Table 1

List of Subjects

Pseudonym	Gender	Location	Experience Level
Ana	M	Convention	Moderate
Byon	M	Convention	Advanced
Chim	M	Convention	Moderate
Domo	F	Convention	Advanced
Erin	M	Convention	Beginner
Fuuka	M	Club	Moderate
Godo	M	Club	Moderate
Hana	F	Club	Advanced
Jiro	M	Club	Moderate
Kana	M	Club	Beginner
Luka	F	Club	Moderate
Moko	F	Club	Advanced
Nana	F	Club	Beginner
Oda	M	Club	Moderate
Pini	F	Club	Beginner

a scheme I call the *Three Enthusiasms*. For clarity, ‘Z’ in any interview excerpt is myself speaking.

Three Enthusiasms

Enthusiasm was the key point of almost every interview and observation, in one way or another. I believe that enthusiasm’s effect on social cohesion in this fandom falls into roughly three categories: the positive, the negative, and the excessive. All three play their part in how people in fandom make choices on who to associate with, stay with, and avoid entirely. As with any classification, these categories are not mutually exclusive and there can be gray areas between them.

Positive Enthusiasm

Positive enthusiasm is mostly self-explanatory. It is the performed enthusiasm of upbeat, friendly, welcoming, and ultimately ‘good’ expressions. It was by far the most popular among the interviewees. Several of the subjects expressed joy at merely observing others engaging in positive enthusiasm; a key few took this as motivation for attaining leadership positions in the anime club. They saw this passion and wanted to build a chunk of their social life around it. This enthusiastic behavior is what established the welcoming atmosphere that subject Erin saw as a gateway to a new social group:

Z: Have you or would you attend a panel based on that series?

Erin: I’m open to it. I don’t know if that’s something I want to do *quite* yet. I’d want to visit a few, see what they’re like. But I’m definitely open to it.

Z: Since you're new to this whole thing, how would you describe the atmosphere in terms of positive or negative? From just talking to people around and stuff.

Erin: I think it's very positive. I mean, everyone around here is very nice. You know, nice, courteous. It's very crowded so it's easy to get agitated, but everyone's been very respectful so far.

Z: Do you think this kind of positivity is what brings people together in this sort of thing?

Erin: I can see it. I mean everyone has a common interest. It makes it that much easier.

The atmosphere of the convention created a stage where Erin felt welcome and was willing to put himself out there as a potential fan. He was already in costume and realized what that meant:

Z: Do you consider yourself part of the fandom, in the general sense?

Erin: In the most general sense. I mean I've watched a few, so you know, I do like them. Personally, I don't see myself as quite a fan as some of the other people around here, but well, I am costuming myself...

Z: So you're kinda putting an image out there.

Erin: Yeah, exactly.

Admittedly, going to his first con in *cosplay* was his friend's idea, but information about the social atmosphere made him feel welcome enough to go along with it, and he was not disappointed.

Subject Godo made several statements about positive experiences driving his own passion, but when asked about the general atmosphere, he said this:

Z: In general, how positive or negative do you feel the anime fandom is in your experience?

Godo: I think it's positive, at least as I've seen. It's exciting for people that enjoy their interests. I'm not into *cosplay*, but I know some people are just fanatics with it and they love to see other people in *cosplay* and to show off their *cosplay*, and they freak out and all that and it's really cool. And I've seen all these videos online with all the *cosplay* stuff, so it seems really joyous. I know with some people there's always going to be one ship over another ship, so people are going to fight over that, but I've never seen it be bad or brutal. So, typically positive.

While not an active participant in the cosplay scene, the positive passion is obvious even to an outsider. He admits that sometimes things can get heated, but when kept to a relatively friendly level, it doesn't creep into the area of negative enthusiasm.

In another case, the positive enthusiasm exhibited by anime fandom gave subject Moko a home away from home on the internet nearly a decade ago:

Moko: It was a brand new forum, and I was 14, and I was just goofing around. Freshman in high school. And I made a lot of online friends. That was kinda my... It wasn't the first time I had made online friends, because I've been a purveyor (sic) of the internet for years before that, but when I actually made real kind of friends online, where I'm still in contact with them today. I have them on Facebook. But I was on the forum for I would say at least four years, like continuously. Visiting it every week. And talking with people, talking about anime, learning about new anime, learning about people's lives. So I think, yes, joining that *Naruto* fandom, it kinda made me embrace the anime fandom more. Cause at that point I did have friends in middle school that I knew, but it was like four of us. A circle of friends. I didn't know my scope beyond that, so joining the fandom kind of helped me create more friends, like more people out there who liked the same fandoms I do.

Moko made lasting connections and came to know fellow fans as real people with real lives. The mutual positive enthusiasm over the series *Naruto* gave everyone in this forum a baseline playing field in which to learn to know each other. Moko later explains her feelings on the positive feelings of the fandom in general:

Moko: That this is awesome, this is something we appreciate so we can be friends, because it's easier for us than just going up to people. You know, someone like me, I feel like I define myself as a nerd, and kind of a nerd who likes... I'm influenced by anime and Japanese culture and stuff. I'm that kind of nerd, so I find it easier to fit in with those kind of people, and that's what I prefer. And if I had had friends, honestly, they should be nerds too. I'm not saying I can't have a friend who's not a nerd. But the positive thing about it is that's what brings people together. I'd say comradery and friendship.

For her, the positive enthusiasm is truly what makes the fandom what it is. The shared positivity is what really binds the group together and allows the greater social cohesion to flourish.

In one final case, subject Hana is one of the leaders of the anime club and the shared positive passion fuels this position:

Z: Would you consider yourself part of the general anime fandom?

Hana: As the leader of the club, I am going to say yes, but I'm also not as heavily involved in the actual watching as I am in the more social aspect. If that makes sense.

Z: Makes perfect sense.

Z: What really draws you to this kind of social setting?

Hana: The fact that people have something they're so passionate about, that no matter how many times they have the conversation they get super excited they're willing to chat for hours about it. And it leads to people having similar interests. Like, we really like board games here, so when we're not watching the shows, we're all getting together and playing games. We're interacting, we're building our friendships.

For her, the shared passion is what really drives the cohesiveness of the club and greater fandom. Board games act as an additional stage of bond-forming, as there is a significant interest overlap for the club members. Taylor (2015) points out this ability for cohesive groups to jump to another interest with a shared mindset. One thing leads to another and friendships are formed via shared positive enthusiasm.

A more general point of outward positive enthusiasm came out during the observation period in which I watched the anime club elect their officers for the following semester. The candidate for president ran unopposed, but still had a presentation to give. From my observation:

She made fun of herself and her interests, but kept on point. What seemed to really resonate with the group was her outward positivity. Several members laughed and cheered when she showed a 'shameful' picture of herself in the bathtub, covering herself with anime DVD boxes. She used both positive and negative traits to describe herself and her role, but had a distinct upbeat-ness about it.

She ran unopposed, but I feel that her performance was exactly what the audience wanted to see and an opponent would've been hard-pressed to match up without crossing the line into *excessive* enthusiasm.

The vice-presidential position was also up for grabs, and was actually contested. It acted as an even greater showing on how much positive enthusiasm can play a part in endearing the audience. Both candidates had been around for several months, but the second had decided to throw his hat into the ring literally minutes before the meeting. The first candidate's speech was almost entirely about himself and his own interests. His stated motive was because the position seemed easy. This didn't resonate very well with the club. While it was nominally positive, it could barely be called enthusiastic. From my observation:

In the pre-voting discussion, it was broadly believed that while the potential VP had been around since October, he rarely had any involvement with the group. He often sat in the corner and played on his 3DS. He lacked passion for the position and his Q&A session seemed very calculated, and somehow lazy at the same time. A couple of club members looked at each other with a 'can you believe this?' look on their faces during the presentation. His PowerPoint presentation was brought up and it was mentioned by several members that he didn't seem like he enjoyed any of it except where he discussed his interests. Someone on the left side of the room said, "It's like he did an English project and replaced the person with himself."

The general sentiment was that his presentation could hardly be said to have any enthusiasm at all, let alone positivity. The other candidate completely ad-libbed his pitch. It was sloppy and lacked any structure, but it was full of positive enthusiasm and kick. He seemed to give a damn about the position beyond keeping a seat warm. As expected by that point, the club responded very well to his positive enthusiasm. It was positive without being too strong, and that is what energized the audience.

Overall, this positive enthusiasm is the glue that created and maintained the social cohesion that so many of the subjects experienced. The desire to engage and revel in the fandom is fueled by this passion. Positive enthusiasm is a performance where the audience is your friend, and you work to keep it that way.

Negative Enthusiasm

Negativity's role in social bonds came up several times in each interview. It being a way for people to form bonds was acknowledged, but often in a 'otherizing' sense. Subjects Luka, Jiro, and Moko all admitted to arguing with others about *shipping* specific characters together. Often these arguments could get rather heated, but they often were resolved before any actual feelings were hurt. Luka and Jiro both mentioned that even though the arguments got passionate, they (usually) never got personal or mean-spirited. When any of the subjects spoke of social bonds formed by excessive negativity, it was always in a dismissive fashion. Those who used shared hatreds or dislikes as the *primary* form of cohesion were considered problems in the fandom. They were the people that were best avoided. When these people became hard to ignore, they bring the fandom as a whole down and render it toxic.

Subject Domo had extensive experience in several fandoms and had her share of negative experiences. When speaking of the fandom for the web comic *Homestuck*:

Z: Do you have friends, either in person or online, that you regularly communicate with in this fandom?

Domo: Yes.

Z: How do these discussions usually go? Even-keel or disagreement?

Domo: It's on even keel and calm most of the time. But there have been troubles in the past, especially in this fandom, where... It's a very unstable fandom, where half of us are

just in it for the goofy, fun-loving adventures, and the rest of us are just kinda out of it and... downright cruel about it.

[...]

Domo: As a whole, I'd say a lot of us are pretty well... in a lot of agreement. That's why we go to conventions. So we can meet other people with similar likes and dislikes. And some of us tend not to let these dislikes get in the way. Disagreements and dislikes are kind of like a bump in the road; you go over it and then it's done. You leave it in the past. But you get the elitists, as a lot of people call them, who think that things have to be a certain way or else they're just total trash, and the rest of us think that's not right or fair to the rest of us.

Z: Right. So would you say that they're kinda using negativity as a way to bring themselves together?

Domo: Yes. The negative people tend to bring themselves together and just pile into a corner of hate.

For her, this negative enthusiasm is a black mark on fandom. People who express this sort of enthusiasm bring down the entire experience for everyone. In addition, Domo feels that this *is* a method of social cohesion for those people, however hate-filled they may be. Subject Fuuka had a slightly lighter note on negativity and fandom:

Z: Given how we just talked about this and the general anime fandom, what do you think brings people together in the general anime fandom, and what roles positivity/negativity play in the fandom?

Fuuka: I feel as though a shared dislike or like for... a character, a pairing, whatever. I think that can drive a lot of fandom. And... could you remind me the question?

[Brief reminder of question]

Fuuka: Okay, so there's this show, *Sword Art Online*. You should only hate the show, and I'm very passionate about that. But there are a lot of people who will tell you otherwise. Those people are very wrong. (mutual laughter) And I actually have friends who do enjoy the show. And like, I enjoyed it, but after watching it a second time, it wasn't nearly as good. A lot of the flaws showed. Some people still love it a lot, so those people and myself, won't necessarily agree on everything and there can be a lot of hostility there. I think to an extent, hostility can drive a fandom by itself.

In his experience, *SAO* is a rather popular and divisive series and this may be a driver of fandom cohesion itself. I have not seen the series beyond a few clips, but I know well enough of the fanbase that those who hate it, *love* to hate on it. Hating the series itself is a kind of performance

to the right audience. This may not have the same level of toxicity mentioned by Domo, but it is certainly a driver of social bonding.

Many subjects had a broad dislike of this ‘wrong’ kind of enthusiasm. This became apparent in one of my most unexpected discoveries. Near the end of each interview, I asked about attendance on what I called a ‘hate’ panel at a con. These usually involved a satirical mockery of series broadly considered to be comedically terrible, or a sort of game where you try to give the hosts series that would be very difficult to tear down in a believable manner. I have attended many of these panels in the past and mostly enjoyed them. Surprisingly, most of the subjects didn’t care much for the idea. A couple said that it had the potential to be funny, but with conditions. Often it was only if they had assurance that it would never get mean-spirited:

Z: Would you ever attend what I call a ‘hate’ panel? It usually has a humorous tone that focuses on shared disliking and stuff.

Godo: Maybe. I know there’s certain characters that shows have for people to innocently mock or something. Like a token character. And it’s typically a parody, so it’s purposely done. So maybe if it’s geared towards those characters. Or if it’s a comedic, but still in a good way. Like they’re not completely bashing the show, like OMG it’s so bad with all this stuff. But teasing or joking, I think that might be fun. But if it’s like brutally tearing into it...so maybe. If it’s comical and upbeat, and has good intent as opposed to demoralizing.

Z: Like everyone’s in on the joke.

Godo: Yes, exactly.

Godo likes the *idea* of a satirical panel that hits on series, but it would really have to keep positive. This mindset of potentially well-meaning ‘negative’ enthusiasm came up during observing the NIU anime club and their attempt to vote on next semester’s series to watch. From my observation report:

There was a layer of self-deprecation when describing one of the shows that won out and how absurd it was. *Akiba's Trip* was selected, a show where the protagonist kills demons by stripping the clothes of the people they took control of. Was described as a *trash* show. Not as an actual terrible show, but the kind of audience it tended to gain. Much like cheap fast-food is often described as being good in a 'trashy' way, this kind of crude enjoyment of such a series makes you trash, in a humorous way.

This series is not known for being particularly tasteful or having anything resembling meaningful messages. It is simply crude and tasteless for reasons of humor, and is thusly a trashy show. The discussion of this show had the same atmosphere that Godo and would *like* to see in a hate panel, but was not optimistic that it would pan out. Subject Ana had another take on such a panel:

Z: Do you think- Would you, if you saw one that seemed interesting?

Ana: It really depends, in all honesty. Because I don't think it's necessarily correct to satirically make fun of something? Now, if this was being critical of the subject, you know, pointing out its flaws, pointing out its pros, I think I could do that. But just being witty about something and joking about it doesn't seem like it'd be too over(sic) interesting.

Without a sense of constructiveness to the mockery or criticism, taking shots at a series was just not something that Ana would find very interesting. Hitting a punching bag that can't fight back did not resonate with him. Hana, who is part of the anime club leadership and has supervised such a panel herself at the university anime convention, ran into the very problem that many of the subjects were worried about:

Hana: That one, it really depends. I'd really have to read the description and if they've had a panel before, or talked to people that've been to it. Because there are right ways and wrong ways to do that. If it can go in a comedy way, like making sure it's an ok situation, that's fine. That could be really funny. But I actually was in charge of one where they started tearing the show down and people got really hurt by it, because they weren't doing it a sort of comedy way. Just like, your opinions are wrong. It got mean.

This kind of negativity was being used as a weapon against those who disagreed with the hosts.

The guise of humor was simply a shield to hide behind to take shots at other people's opinions.

In other words, it got personal.

Others were entirely against the idea; they simply didn't think there was much fun to be had in making fun of something or someone like that, even in jest:

Z: Would/have you attended a 'hate' panel? Humorous mockery of some series.

Kana: I don't think I'd be supportive of that. I mean, yeah, everyone has their opinions. I don't think there's a show that everyone would hate. I wouldn't agree with someone tearing a show apart, because if someone seriously enjoys a show, who am I to judge? People can like what they like.

Z: It *was* a popular panel, people tried to stump the hosts.

Kana: I can understand that, but it's still just... I mean I might be a bit more supportive of that. Like they're literally trying to find everything wrong with a show even if it's not a bad show. I can understand trying to make the hosts make fools of themselves. But the whole environment sounds not pleasant.

Here, Kana shows an outright disinterest in a panel based upon shared negative enthusiasm. Even knowing it is somewhat of an audience-driven game to stump the hosts into hitting a series they can't realistically mock, it's just not something he'd want to experience. Subject Moko expanded upon these kinds of feelings:

Moko: In my opinion, no. I wouldn't. It was one thing talking about the hypothetical *Erased* panel, saying why it sucks, and they're trying to convince you why. I would go to that, just cause I love the show. But if it's like, a hate panel, no I wouldn't go. Because... Generally as a positive person, I honestly don't care if other people in the fandom have really strong opinions on that. Clearly, if they want to make a panel about it, they want to tear down peoples' anime or what they think of it. So, I don't really have a good answer, but I'd just say, no, I wouldn't go. Cause I don't really see the purpose of doing that. Or hating on it for fun, cause I don't hate on anything for fun. I can have an opinion that I don't like a show, but I wouldn't tell people, Hey your show sucks!

Once again, the idea of wallowing in shared negative passion, even if it was nominally for the purpose of humor, was entirely off-putting. It is a kind of atmosphere that Moko and others simply did not want to be exposed to or participate in. The common thread was an idea that once the number of people increased beyond a small group, the odds of it becoming less light-hearted

jest and more mean-spirited mockery went up. Given my extensive experience with conventions and fan groups, this idea could not be dismissed.

As seen above, negative enthusiasm can and does bring people together. Entire social groups form based around ruining things for others. Actual hate groups can be seen as the extreme of such an idea. In fandom, enthusiasm around shared hate seems to need a target to maintain social cohesion. A benign form of this would be the ‘hate’ panel. It is a safe way to hate on a series as a group and revel in doing so. Everyone (usually) laughs and has a good time. Someone in the audience is probably hurt by what they’re hearing, but willingly attending one of these panels comes with some expectation of this happening. The less benign form of this negative passion is when people, not media, becomes the target. This is the kind of fandom toxicity that several of the subjects spoke of: fans that weaponize their enthusiasm and use it as a bludgeon to strike others with. Differences in opinion are not a thing for such negativity. You are right or you are wrong. And attacking those who are ‘wrong’ is the kind of performance that shows that you are ‘right.’ Negative enthusiasm is a performance that receives jeers and thrown trash, only the performer makes sure to prop up a target first

Excessive Enthusiasm

Despite how deeply engaged several of the subjects were in fandom, there were a few points where enthusiasm *wasn't* seen in such a great light, even if it was expressed in a supposedly positive fashion. This is where the excessive enthusiasm resides. This is where fandom is seen to become unhealthy and detrimental to the fan and those around them. In particular, subjects Kana and Luka mention not wanting to be associated with the fans that

elevate their enthusiasm to obsession, despite partaking in behaviors that could get them branded excessive themselves:

Z: Would you consider yourself part of the fandom for a specific show or genre? You mentioned *Neptunia*.

Kana: Yeah, I'm a big *Neptunia* fanboy. I will not deny that. That's pretty much the main one, though.

[...]

Z: Since we've mentioned *Neptunia*, what drove you towards it?

Kana: Well the game series is made by a company that I really like, Nippon-ichi Software. It's partially made by them. I saw it originally a while ago, I thought about it, haven't really gotten to the games. But then I found out there's an anime of it, so I thought Yeah I'll give it a shot. Watched it, and fell in love with it, so then I went to the games, so I played through them all. Yep yep.

[...]

Z: Would you ever go to a panel focused on your favorite series?

Kana: It depends. There are certain kinds of fans of the series that I don't care to interact or talk with. So there are some who are really cringey that I want to avoid.

Luka's enthusiasm also created an odd juxtaposition:

Z: Would you say you have any favorite series or genres?

Luka: Yes, I would have to say my absolute favorite series is *Ouran High School Host Club* and *Nana*. Those are two of my absolute favorites. I'd re-read or re-watch them anytime.

Z: In these series do you have any favorite characters, or least favorites for that matter?

Luka: My favorite in *Ouran High School* is Mori; I think he's great, and Tamaki. And then in *Nana*, my favorite is Nobu, and he's a guitarist in that one and he's just more down to Earth than any other character.

Z: Do you have any favorite romantic pairings or participate in shipping discussions?

Luka: I... Oh, gosh. Yes, all the time. But it's like different for every anime. So, definitely for *Ouran* it's Haruhi and Tamaki, and then for *Nana*, it's Nana Osaki and Ren... whatever the fuck his last name is. Am I allowed to swear?

[...]

Z: Would you consider yourself in the fandom of your favorite show?

Luka: Uh, no. I try not to participate in fandoms, cause they kinda ruin stuff for me. Like, Tumblr and stuff. I'm like, sometimes this is funny, but sometimes it gets too intense, and I don't like that.

Both subjects express distaste at a certain sector of fans that express excessive passion and enthusiasm. Luka goes as far as to state that even diving into these circles can ruin her enjoyment of a series entirely. It is notable that despite being part of the anime club leadership *and* very enthusiastically indulging herself in *shipping* characters together, she denies participating in fandom due to its potential negative associations. Likewise, Kana is a self-admitted *fanboy* of his favored series, having experienced practically everything the franchise has to offer, and yet still doesn't consider himself part of the excessively passionate group.

The pejorative *weeaboo* was used several times when talking about these kinds of people. As other forms of obsession, these fans were seen as taking their love for the medium too far. Characters and series become objects of personal desire, often creating a sense of ownership. Terms such as *waiifu* are thrown around, and characters act as stand-ins for relationships. Subject Byon observed this happening even in the context of a card game:

Z: From your convention and fandom experience, what roles do you think positivity and negativity play in this fandom, in your opinion? How do you feel it brings people together?

Byon: Well, in one sense, I think the best example would be discussing *waiifus*. More or less, people always this terminology like “Your *waiifu* sucks.” Or whatever that sort of thing. It’s one of the big things I tend to see around. Especially with card games, too. One like *Luck n’ Logic*. People tend to like, stick to a female character, or even a male character if you’re the opposite sex. And then declare that character as your wife or husband, as a 2D person. But that sort of thing kinda drives people to get together in terms of people all have the similar wife who in which (sic) they’re all trying to get at ‘this person is mine.’ Or they try to bash on another person, which ends up into heated debacles(sic) and so forth. But the overall idea is that you get people together.. it just gets people together in that sense. Whether it’s a negative or positive connotation, people gather like that.

He keeps a neutral stance on the occurrence, but this excessive enthusiasm can spring up in places where one would assume it'd be difficult. In this case, the characters are limited to static images and maybe a brief description on the card. The characters are merely servicing the functions of the game. Even without a real story or development to relate to, the excessive passion can bloom.

Subject Moko goes into her experiences with the excessive within the overall context of cohesive enthusiasm:

Moko: I guess the label would be *weeb* or *weaboo*. That's a thing. I didn't get that at all when I was younger. I was just like, 'Wow I like anime!' I would never consider myself a *weeaboo* because I... wasn't. But now that I'm an adult I can totally see that, and I'm like oh my gosh, this is kinda weird. I would never call someone weird for liking anime, but yeah people can take it way too far. So in my opinion I can see the well has been poisoned, now I'm older. So that's all I can say about that, really. Now that've grown older the fandom does kind of have two halves to it. One half being like, anime is great! Anime is awesome! We're in a club! We love this stuff! The other half being like, anime is life! Anime is for weeps! I could still be friends with people like that, but honestly I feel like they're living in their own little world. I dunno. It'd hard to say that living on the outside of that. Cause I'm definitely not on the inside of that. I don't know what the *extreme* fans would say about that because they might think they're normal just like everyone else. It really feels like there's two halves to the fandom: the normal people and the extreme people. We all know it exists, but we're still all fans. And that's really important, the most important thing really. But yeah, can't deny they exist.

Even with a very optimistic and welcoming message of inclusivity, Moko cannot deny that there are parts of the fandom that are *out there* in their own world. She specifically calls out how it becomes more than an enjoyable medium for social bonding; it becomes a lifestyle. Also of note, while she happily considers them part of the overall fandom, Moko absolutely does not consider herself part of that subgroup.

During my observation at Anime Midwest, I saw outward performances of excessive enthusiasm in action. From my observation:

A rather tall and lanky man carrying a body pillow of his presumably favorite female character was walking around the common area of the first floor of the hotel, making his way to the hotel-catered food line. He struggled to carry the food and pay the cashier while not losing grip on the body pillow. Someone else asked if he need help. He responded, “Nope! I got enough here for my *waifu* and me.” The cashier made a nervous laugh. The would-be helper backed off and turned around. I could see his face pretty clearly and it looked like some sort of embarrassment by association.

While the helper performed common courtesy to someone in need, after the pillow-holder made a brief performance, the helper’s demeanor quickly changed once out of view. The pillow-holder wasn’t hurting anyone with that performance, but it was clearly off-putting.

This kind of enthusiasm can be either positive or negative, making it seem more like a meta category than the other two. However, I believe the way that it is both performed and received creates a unique situation. When a fan’s enthusiasm becomes excessive, the line between the backstage and stage become blurred. The private behaviors and indulgences stop being hidden behind the curtain and the fan performs as their ‘true self.’ It is not that they do not care what the audience thinks, but that they embrace the off-putting atmosphere that permeates the performance. Unlike with many hate groups, making the message more acceptable for the general audience is not a concern (Perry 2000). It can be both positive and negative, as other obsessive fans may see someone who *truly* understands them. Or it can lead to nasty, mean-spirited arguments on whose *waifu* is owned by who. This kind of performance is made to attract only others with excessive enthusiasm, leading others to avoid association with this ‘bad’ kind of fan.

Discussion

While there absolutely was an element of shared dislikes being a cohesive factor, particularly according to subjects Domo and Fuuka, I could draw a much stronger trend with the elements of passion and *enthusiasm*. Twelve out of the fifteen interviewed either mentioned enthusiasm directly or strongly alluded to its effect on their preferences in group associations. Subject Fuuka spoke directly of how the passion, enthusiasm, and collective energy of the fans is what drives him to seek greater participation in fan groups of his favorite shows. His favorite show, *Gurren Lagann*, has an atmosphere that lends itself heavily to fan enthusiasm, effectively weaponizing the very idea. Subject Luka is part of the leadership of the anime club and spoke frankly of group enthusiasm motivating herself to seek out such a leadership position. Seeing people show such enthusiasm kept him in the game and made her *want* to be more than just a participant in the group. Seeing such an outpouring of passionate ‘performances’ made her happy to be a part of a bigger ‘stage’ (Goffman 1959).

When speaking to subject Moko, an interesting facet of using media as a social cohesion mechanism came to light: age of the media itself. She had an interest in ‘older’ anime that was around ten or more years-old. While she absolutely was part of the in-group when it came to her social connections, she stated that:

So, I feel like I’m kinda left out. Cause if you don’t keep up with the anime fandom and stuff, there’s gonna be shows out there that people are gonna be like, ‘Oh this is a great one.’ ‘I’ve never seen it.’ Because I haven’t been keeping up with new stuff. That’s why I watch old stuff. So, I feel like I’m a part of the anime fandom in the way that I still appreciate and cherish all those great shows out there, but I feel like I’m a bit behind or maybe... I’ve just fallen behind with the know-how of being a part of the fandom. But I can still say I appreciate it.

Moko still has strong cohesion with the rest of the social group, but being ‘behind’ the times sometimes can strain the performance. Her fandom was never questioned, as she says later that people rarely have any problems with her watching habits, but instead that her knowledge-base is somewhat outdated and detached (Kozinets 2001). In other words, she is speaking the same language as her social peers, but using a somewhat outdated dialect. This did not seem to hurt the positive enthusiasm of her performance.

Subject Kana had a unique situation among the people I spoke to. Unlike most of the subjects, he did not consider himself a particularly enthusiastic anime fan. He liked the social circle and did seek out the anime club for friends, but maintained a somewhat ‘shallow’ relationship with the media. He had one exception. After being introduced to it via the game series, he fell in love with the media franchise *Hyperdimension Neptunia*. It is a series based around cute girls who represent different video game consoles. It is a light-hearted series that takes advantage of its subject matter to humorous ends. Kana found that he absolutely loved the game series and related anime series. He has played all the games he could get his hands on. However, he deliberately avoids other fans of the series and stated that he would not attend a panel based upon the series unless it was industry-led and focused more on the production element. Kana said that the average fan of the series was someone he didn’t want to be associated with and felt that they were too obsessive and creepy. This implied that he was certainly *not* part of this group. The reputation was enough to avoid presenting himself as a *Neptunia* fan to other fans of the series. This was an audience that he did not want to perform to and be accepted by.

One of the interview subjects was a bit of a newcomer to the anime fandom, which led to a quasi-outsider perspective. The convention was the first that subject Erin had ever attended. He mentioned his friend introduced him to anime and encourages him to attend. Although this was a new experience, he was actually in costume for the event. He admitted it was putting out a bit of a misleading message that he was more experienced than he actually was in the fandom. Despite its growing prevalence in convention attendees, it's still more common for experienced fans. Erin expressed hesitation with attending panels and other fandom involvement. This is not due to a lack of *want*, but a feeling that he was not experienced enough to dive right in, that he didn't know enough to really be a part of the group. He commented that observation was his plan for the time being and that would attend such things when he felt ready. Aside from his particular experience, Erin expressed excitement at all the positivity he'd seen all day and he was happy to see others getting together with shared interests. It was clear that the positive enthusiasm was driving him to stick around and become invested in the group.

The gathered data painted a different picture than I assumed from my own experiences. This may be due to my own biases and areas of fandom that I have been involved in. Fandom exposure on the Internet might have also played a role, as negativity tends to 'float to the top' in a mostly anonymous environment. Regardless of the reason, the role of shared hatreds and negativity in forming social bonds was different, but not entirely disconnected from my earlier fandom experiences. Negativity was discussed in many of the interviews; several subjects noted its ability bring some people together. However, it being an equal or greater role than shared likes and positivity did not pan out. Positivity struck a greater chord with almost all the subjects,

many finding people that revel in negativity best avoided. The great unifier across the subjects was enthusiasm, both in performance and self-identification.

Passion of self-identification played a great part in how the subjects related to their social experiences. More of an extension of the performance than truly independent, their internal performance informs how they identify and look for the same in others. Many subjects simply felt more at ease or more likely to get along with others that displayed a certain level of enthusiasm in their fandom identity. As I discussed above, this had its limits when enthusiasm crossed over into obsession or very passionate negativity, but positive enthusiasm set the stage for the greatest social cohesion. All in all, the shared likes/dislikes were merely the medium in which this enthusiasm was experienced by those in the social group. In all cases, they set the stage for a variety of performances that endeared, repulsed, or stunned their audiences. For anime fandom, the enthusiastic performance is truly what forms, maintains, and shapes the social bonds that are valued so much by the fans.

Conclusion

I believe that this study and the data gained from it contribute well to the existing literature about fandoms. Previous studies often focused on analogizing media fandoms to more 'real' social groups such as religions and social movements, giving the fandom character by association to other movements (Jindra 1994). While very useful in understanding fandom from outside, it can often miss the interpersonal details that make the fandom function within its own bounds. As someone who is already a member of the groups, I could employ my preexisting

knowledge of trends, genres, and lingo to study the North American anime fandom from the inside. Meaning was derived from fans' experiences with *each other*, instead of similarities to other groups. I feel that researching from this perspective opens up avenues of research by other researchers who can study within their own fandoms to see how they truly tick.

I feel the categorization of the three enthusiasms lays the groundwork for further research into how enthusiastic performances form these unique bonds. In particular, the third group, the excessive enthusiasts, deserves greater investigation. These performances put people in a category where they are undeniably part of the greater anime fandom, but are often used as an example of what *not* to be. I would like to see further research into what drives people to end up in such a way that their backstage and center stage blur together into a very divisive performance. Two avenues that I believe could yield results in this area are the effect of excessive consumption culture on fandom, and social ostracization within fandoms possibly driving this kind of performance. Either of these could help fill in the *why* to compliment the *how* that I focused on. It is my hope that this project could lay the groundwork for others to research this understudied perspective of fandom analysis.

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APPENDIX A

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Anime – An abbreviation of *animation*. Used almost universally to refer to animation of Japanese origin.

Con – Abbreviation of *convention*. Fan conventions are often based far less on industry than other conventions.

Fandom – General term for the collective social groups that forms around any given series/genre/interest.

Manga – Japanese comics.

Mecha – Genre of anime/manga that uses giant robots as a primary plot focus. More of a meta-level label; specific series can fall into practically any other genre.

Pairing – Fandom term for romantic pairings in series. Often signified with a /, x, or portmanteau of the characters' names.

Tumblr – Social media website that has become home to many fandoms due to its ease of sharing and focus on visual media.

Trash – Can used to refer to a product or person that is or likes 'trashy' things, guilty pleasures and such. Often used in a self-deprecating manner.

Shipping – The act of romantically pairing a character with another. Is commonly associated with being deeply or emotionally invested in the pairing.

Weeaboo – Slang term for Japanophile, a fan who is obsessive in their fandom to the point of distancing themselves from all other forms of media. Often used as an insult.

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDE

The following questions were used as a guide for directing the interview process. The subject was informed of the terms of the interview before proceeding. Any names and locations were anonymized for privacy protection. For the live interviews, permission to record the entire interview was gained before starting. Subjects were informed that they could stop at any time to end the interview.

The general format of the interview was fairly open-ended but directed by the researcher, as it is difficult to predict exactly how any given interview will go and I believed that too rigid a structure could hinder subject openness. Subjects were allowed to ask questions that facilitated discussion, but attempts were made to keep the interview on-topic. The interviews generated further emergent questions that couldn't all be listed here due to the unpredictability of the interview format. This list served as a bare minimum guideline to acquire data. The order of the questions was flexible and often was moved around to fit the needs of the interview.

- Is this your first convention?
 - No: How long have you attended this/other conventions?
 - Yes: What brought you to this convention today/this weekend?
- What is your favorite series? Why?
- Do you have a favorite character? Least favorite?
- Do you have any favorite romantic pairing? Least favorite?
 - How popular are these pairings? How do you feel about that?
- Are you here at <convention name> here with friends or alone?
- Do your friends share your feelings on these shows/pairings?
 - How do discussions of these shows/pairings usually go?

- Do you consider yourself part of a general anime fandom?
 - Yes: What draws you to the fandom?
 - No: Why not? Explain.
- Do you consider yourself part of a fandom for your favorite show?
 - Yes: What draws you to the fandom? How would you describe the general 'atmosphere' of this fandom?
 - No: Why not? Explain.
- Have you attended/plan to attend any panel focused on your favorite series/fandom?
(Will be altered for specific convention)
 - Yes, have: What was the main subject? How was the general tone?
 - Yes, planned: How do you think it'll go?
 - No: Why not? Explain.
- How positive/negative, in general, do you feel the anime fandom atmosphere is? Explain.
- How positive/negative, in general, do you feel you feel your series fandom atmosphere is? Explain.
- Given this, what do you feel brings people together in these fandoms? What role does positivity/negativity play in these fandoms, in your opinion?
- Have you ever attended a 'hate' panel? That is, a panel that focuses on some sort of mockery or decrying of a series/movie/character/etc.?
 - Yes: How positive/negative was the experience/audience?
 - No: Why not? Explain.