

**Je t'aime... Moi non plus :**  
**Exploring the Diversity and Strength of Fan-Idol Relationships in the Field  
of Music**

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**Abstract**

**The objective of our research is to investigate fandom from a psychological perspective. As a departure from previous research relying on a sociological approach, we focus on the nature and strength of fan-idol relationships. To this end, this study reports the findings from qualitative research carried out in the field of music on how fandom is expressed through fans' interactions with their favourite singer/band, its associated significations and behaviour. We identify four significations: the musician as a brand, as a public personality, as an intimate and as a god. We highlight that fandom is initially an individual phenomenon whereby an individual creates a specific relationship with a musician, and that all fans can be considered valuable consumers independently from the relationship's strength.**

**Keywords:** *fandom, music, psychological perspective, relationships, significations*

**Track Indication:** *Consumer Behaviour*

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## 1. Research Objectives and Theoretical Background

Academic research on fandom in the past has been conducted using two main perspectives, i.e. psychological and sociological. The latter was often preferred in consumer research focusing on various subcultures, such as brand communities (Muniz Jr & O'Guinn, 2001), sports fans (Derbaix & Decrop, 2011; Holt, 1995; Hunt & Bristol, 1999) and science-fiction aficionados (Kozinets, 2001; Le Guern, 2002). Most of these studies on fandom have addressed the issue using an ethnographic approach and offer a significant contribution to our knowledge of fan activities and the internal organization of fan communities (referred to as subcultures or tribes), particularly the nature and meaning of fans' relationships with one another (Cova & Cova, 2002; Cova, Kozinets, and Shankar, 2007).

Our research aims to investigate fandom from a more psychological perspective and focus on the nature and strength of fan-idol relationships rather than fan-to-fan relationships. To this end, this study reports the findings from qualitative research carried out in the field of music on how fandom is expressed through fans' interactions with their favourite singer/band as well as its associated significations and behaviour.

This paper is structured as follows. First, we briefly review the literature on fandom and, more specifically, celebrity fandom and the types of relationships commonly related to it. Next, we present a brief description of the methodology used and report on the results. Finally a typology of fan-idol relationships is proposed and discussed in order to differentiate this study from previous typologies that rely more on specific fans' behaviours (Beaven & Laws, 2007) than on a better understanding of the link between fans and their idols.

### 1.1. *Conceptualisation of fandom*

The literature on fandom has revealed that the concept is often considered difficult to comprehend because of the use of various terms (*fan*, *fanatic*, *fandom*, *fanaticism*) and uncertainties with regards to its dimensions (Smith, Fisher, and Cole, 2007).

Many of the studies on fan communities refer to fanaticism, a term often dominated by negative representations (e.g. fanaticism often leads to excessive, bordering on deranged behaviour), rather than fandom. In this research we prefer to use this much more moderate term and define fandom as the "*degree to which an individual demonstrates continued support for an object based upon cognitive, affective, and evaluative factors of psychological commitment*" (adapted from James, 1997, pg.24). The object can refer to a brand, product, person (e.g. celebrity), television show or other consumption activities (e.g. sports) (Thorne & Gordon, 2006). The level of "psychological commitment" may vary from fan to fan and marketing researchers have used a range of terms to characterise this kind of relationship, from normal, ordinary enthusiasm (Hunt & Bristol, 1999) to more complex and excessive devotion (Chung, Beverland, Farrelly, and Quester, 2008). Between these two "extreme" types of relationships, other terms often used include involvement (Thorne & Gordon, 2006), attachment (Thomson, 2006) and allegiance (Funk & James, 2001) to the object of interest.

### 1.2. *Celebrity fandom : From attachment to worship*

Consumer research has investigated attachment namely to brands (Fournier, 1998; Lacœuilhe, 2000), products (Belk, 1988) and celebrities (Thomson, 2006). The latter focuses on consumers' attachment to "human brands", a term that refers to any well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communication. Attachment is a strong relationship which people usually first experience as children with their parents; later in life, these attachments routinely develop with other targets, such as human brands (Leeds, DeBecker, and Giles, 1995). A person immersed in such an emotionally significant relationship usually perceives the relationship partner as differentiated and irreplaceable (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). This concept

is clearly reminiscent of brand attachment, defined as “*a psychological variable describing a durable and unchanging affective relationship toward the brand that expresses a psychological relationship of proximity with that brand*” (Lacœuilhe, 2000, pg.66). These definitions thus suggest that when experiencing attachment to a celebrity, a strong relationship or tie exists between the individual on the one hand and the celebrity on the other. Secondly, this implies that the celebrity to whom a person experiences attachment triggers one’s emotions.

Psychological research into the area of celebrity emphasises the strong attachment to celebrities labelled as “celebrity worship”. McCutcheon, Lange, and Houran (2002) suggest celebrity worship is due to over-identification based on psychological absorption and addiction: some people go beyond the entertainment/social stage of celebrity attachment to become increasingly absorbed with and addicted to their favourite celebrities. People having this kind of relationship with a celebrity appear to be obsessed with and compulsive about him or her.

These authors also developed the Celebrity Attitude Scale (CAS), from which three dimensions of fandom have emerged. These vary in terms of the interaction between fans and celebrities: entertainment-social (fans are attracted to a celebrity because they find him or her entertaining and a source of social interaction and gossip), intense-personal (there is a strongly personal aspect to the attraction to a celebrity, a person may experience a negative event in the celebrity’s life as keenly as if it were happening to them personally), and borderline-pathological (this is characterised by obsession and fantasies about the celebrity; people may imagine they have a special relationship with the celebrity).

Consequently, we believe it is important to further our understanding of fan-idol relationships and enlighten previous research on fan communities using a psychological approach. Moreover, different levels of relationships are established between the musician and the fan, to which the fans associate specific meanings.

## **2. Method**

The exploratory stage of the research indicated that a qualitative research technique would be the most informative for furthering our knowledge on the nature of fan-idol relationships and their meanings. Furthermore, in-depth interviews were preferred to focus groups as our respondents had to express their feelings and sometimes personal thoughts about the particular relationship they maintain with their idol. 15 semi-directive in-depth interviews were thus carried out with fans of musicians or bands of various musical styles. Respondents came from different regions of France and Belgium and their ages ranged from 20 to 60. A detailed discussion guide was developed containing questions on the manifestations of fan attachment to an idol, the evolution of this passion and their feelings/thoughts about this relationship with the musician. A content analysis was implemented to analyse the data and develop categories of common themes.

## **3. Emerging Findings**

A series of themes emerged from our data. In this section we examine how informants describe their relationships with their idols, emphasising the associated significations and behaviour. Then, in the discussion section, we clarify the links between these significations and the different types of relationship (from attachment to obsession or worship), as described

in the psychological literature. There are a variety of significations a fan can associate with the musician they love. These can be classified into four categories of ascending degrees of strength: the musician as a brand, a celebrity, an intimate or a god.

First, the musicians can be considered a brand: they make products (records, DVDs, sometimes own a ready-to-wear brand, etc.) and provide services (concerts). The fan enjoys these things in a “reasonable” manner as illustrated by the following quotes:

*"Well, Murat has three faces, because he is the musician, the man and the beast of the media circus... The beast of the media circus does not interest me at all; the musician well obviously I'm interested in him otherwise I wouldn't listen to him, and then the man, sure, he's married, he has kids, I'm happy for him really but that's all, I don't care... Either you're a fan because it gives meaning to your life, you want to be a fan like you have a religion ... Or you're a fan because you like the songs, what counts are the songs, it's not everything else... I like the songs, and then I allow myself a T-shirt, because it's fun, it's amusing..."* (Sylvain, 36, Jean-Louis Murat fan).

*"They do their job, their music, but then you're not obliged to appreciate the people behind... (...) I just want to focus on their music"* (Miguel, 32, Radiohead fan).

Fans who see a musician as a brand can possibly be as dependant on the musician as some other fans in one of the three “stronger” signification categories. Contrary to other fans, they refuse to pay too much attention to the musician’s private life, and more generally to anything not directly related to their music, the “work of art”. Fans in this situation often distinguish themselves from what they consider die-hard fans, emphasising differences between them. Miguel, who is also a Led Zeppelin fan, adds “*some people talk about Led Zeppelin as a person, just like if the band was a famous human being... The band members disappear behind the band –it makes no sense.*”

Secondly, the musician can be considered a public personality (they make music the fan adores, the fan may become interested in their private life in order to better understand their work, but it is essentially their public personality which interests the fan):

*"I want to know as much as possible about him... I know that he gets laid with the model for the Yves Rocher cosmetic brand, and also more musical things... He talked, in 2010, about a solo release... I'm still waiting for it. But I'm also interested in his guitar solos and the effects that he uses for his guitar! I'm actually interested in everything"* (Romain, 23, Jack White fan).

*"I think these days if you consider a musician, you have to distinguish between the musician and the man, that is to say that what the man has done maybe could be condemned but what the musician has done, it's... It's a game that he's playing and that is coherent with his gangster image... He tries to shake people up a bit, tries to focus the attention on him, tries to advertise himself... and today Booba is trying to promote himself any way he can... and then is it good, is it not good? That's another question... But now, does it work, does it not work? I can assure you that it does work..."* (Mickaël, 23, fan of the rapper Booba).

Thirdly, the musician can be considered a close friend or family member. The fan feels they are part of the musician's intimate circle (Giles, 2003), often because the musician reveals a lot about their personal life (Schickel, 1985). This phenomenon seems to happen more often with musicians who have achieved great success and wide recognition than independent musicians, in part probably because of high exposure to the media: the more a fan knows about a musician, the more they want to know, and the closer they feel:

*"Me, I lost my father, I lost my fiancé, I lost everything... All the men in my life I loved... When Claude left my world collapsed... Ah yes, it was my life, my world, I was 20, everything collapsed... For me, I had no future, it was over, my life was finished, down the drain... Without Claude, there was no point in living anymore..."* (Martine, 54, about the French singer Claude François' sudden death in 1978).

*"Sometimes I write to him, when there is a particular event... When his son David was born... My son is also called David, just like his son, there are similarities, that's not the only reason though... And my daughter is called Sylvie [the name of Johnny Hallyday's first wife], so there is a bit of a connotation there... But sometimes I send him messages, not writing personally to tell him something but I sent messages when David was born and things like that" (Alain, 60, Johnny Hallyday fan).*

Finally, some fans see the musician as a god (a ritual, a belief, possessing an ethereal and immortal quality). Much has been written about consumers considering a brand or celebrity a god (Heinich, 2012; Kozinets, 2001). This intense relationship consumers have towards their idols elicits passion, involves specific rituals and sacred devotion (Belk & Tumbat, 2005):

*"I had an entire wall dedicated to The Sex Pistols... I had an English flag and I had some newspaper cuttings, ads, I did drawings... But it was very precise... Back then, my father called it the Ardent Chapel... that was exactly the right word..." (Laurent, 46, still fan of The Sex Pistols).*

*"There is something emanating from this person, something very... very iconographical, really, pretty sacred... This kind of mysticism which... which really gave me a lot actually when I was younger..." (Eric, 36, fan of Morrissey and of his band The Smiths).*

Let us add that the qualitative study has also revealed the many facets of fan behaviours, some of which have been revealed by Raviv, Bar-Tal and Ben-Horin (1996), or Beaven and Laws (2007) in their attempt to propose typologies of rock music fans.

The nature of some of these behaviours is more directed toward the fan himself/herself. Some other behaviours are more directed toward others:

- Behaviours directed toward oneself: listening to music/watching videos, information search, buying objects related to the celebrity (posters, books, etc.) and learning lyrics/singing the songs/playing the songs on an instrument.
- Behaviours directed toward others: attending concerts, interacting with other fans, trying to contact the musician and advertising the musician.

Three behaviours fall in between these two categories, depending on the occasion: creating new media (artwork or website for example), participating in contests related to the musician and trying to look like the musician.

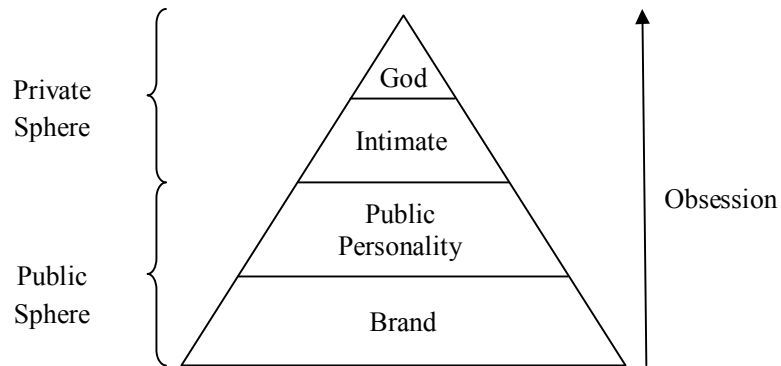
#### **4. Discussion and Implications**

This study has attempted to provide a better understanding of the relationship between a fan and the musician/band they love. Several past studies have emphasized the social aspect of fandom, however we have tried to show that fandom is initially an individual phenomenon whereby an individual creates a specific, one-sided, relationship with a musician based on a psychological relationship.

Four fan-idol significations associated with these relationships were identified and will now be discussed and related back to their particular level of attachment. This is clearly illustrated by the following pyramid (Figure 1). Significations can be placed on a continuum depicting these relationships, from the musician being considered a brand to being considered a god. There is an increasing level of obsession along this continuum: the higher this gets, the more the fan wants to know and share but also the more they expect from the musician. These different levels of obsession refer to studies by McCutcheon, Scott, Aruguete, and Parker (2006):

- the musician as a brand or public personality corresponds to a social relationship;
- the musician as an intimate corresponds to an intense-personal relationship;
- the musician as a god is linked to the borderline-pathological relationship.

Moreover, fans who are in the lower part of the pyramid tend not to go beyond the private sphere of the musician, and to consider the musicians only as what they are supposed to be: individuals who make music. People on the higher levels maintain relationships which go beyond this usual boundary. The relationships they imagine with the musician cannot happen as they will probably never have a real intimate relationship with them –and obviously, the musicians are just human beings. This is a case of parasocial relationship, in which the fan knows a great deal about the musician, while the reverse is not true (Giles, 2003).



**Figure 1. – Fan-Idol Relationships Pyramid**

There is no direct relationship between the musician’s signification for the fan and his/her behaviour. The listening patterns of fans in each of the categories cannot be clearly delineated, for example. However, fans who consider the musician as an intimate or a god tend to be more compulsive in their behaviour, and to collect more items related to their idol. Nevertheless, fans in the upper part of the pyramid may lack hindsight and concentrate more on extrinsic aspects of the celebrity (collecting licensed products such as mugs or creating paintings or drawings).

In contrast, the most active fans in the lower part of the pyramid may focus more on intrinsic aspects, such as the music itself and the lyrics. These fans may possibly create more valuable content, such as websites dedicated to the musician or to covering/adapting/writing their music. It would be interesting to investigate these relationships more systematically with a quantitative study.

All kinds of fans can be regarded as valuable consumers for a variety of reasons: they are heavy users, can act as opinion leaders and also go to great personal and financial lengths to support the object of their fascination (Chung, Beverland, Farrelly, and Quester, 2008). This is why we believe people in the lower part of the pyramid deserve as much attention as those often considered fanatics or dysfunctional fans.

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