From Deadheads on bulletin boards to Taylor Swift 'stans': A short history of how fandoms shaped the internet

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Fans and the internet have a symbiotic relationship. The digital era increased the productivity and visibility of fan culture, which in turn has largely influenced the ways that we all act online.

Fan communities existed long before the internet, but the proliferation of online platforms changed the ways in which they connect and participate.

Here is a brief history of how fan cultures shaped—and were shaped by—the internet.

Early adopters

As early as the 1970s, fans were participating in digital spaces. Some of the first email mailing lists and digital bulletin boards were utilized by Grateful Dead fans, or Deadheads, who came together to create an online archive of lyrics.

In the 1990s, science-fiction fans established online repositories, using Usenet groups for fannish discussion and fan-fiction distribution.

As the adoption of the internet became more widespread, so did fan culture. You could simply search for your favorite TV show or band and find a like-minded community online. This brought on an era of forums and blogs, where fans were quick to jump on sites like LiveJournal to write and build communities.

As social media platforms launched in the 2000s, fans co-opted them for their fan practices. MySpace fans helped launch many music careers; One Direction fans put Tumblr on the map.

When Twitter took off, so too did "Stan Twitter." As a verb, to stan is to exhibit fandom to an excessive degree. The public nature of Twitter (now X) allowed fans to come together in large groups to start trends and campaign. This collective power has been both praised for digital activism efforts, and criticized for harassment.

The public and the private

Fans move between private and public spaces online, negotiating different identities.

On platforms like Tumblr and LiveJournal, fans often choose a pseudonym, whereas Facebook enforces a real-name policy.

Different platforms offer different privacy settings, which also shapes fan behaviors. Private spaces allow for personal conversations, while fans embrace public channels for sharing fan works and campaigning, for example, for voting or fundraising.

Each platform has different social norms and functionality. Fans adapt and develop their fan practices accordingly.

In doing so, they have shaped the social internet as we know it today.

Fan migrations

The launch of a new platform introduces new ways to participate. Tumblr became the place for ""fuckyeah" fansites, sharing fan works and communicating via GIFs. Fans jumped on TikTok to create video edits, sounds and mashups.

Fans may also choose to leave a platform because it no longer satisfies their needs or the platform goes through significant changes, as when Tumblr announced a ban on adult content, or when Elon Musk bought Twitter.

While the launch of Meta's Threads provided a possible replacement for stan participation, some fans were hesitant to migrate across. Users must

log in to Threads via their Instagram account, a platform many use to stay connected with friends and family.

On Twitter/X, fans expressed they were weary of the new platform, because they did not want their fan activities to be connected to their "real life."

In cases where existing platforms haven't met the community's needs, fans have created their own. [Archive Of Our Own (AO3)](link) is a repository for fans to share works inspired by the objects of their fandom, [created in response to](link) design and policy changes made on other fan-fiction sites.

Transformations

Fans are known for their creative productivity, transforming and remixing their favorite cultural objects in fan-art, fan-fiction, videos, zines and music remixes.

Technological advancements made creative production easier to master, and the public and networked nature of platforms has allowed fan works to be [circulated to a much wider audience](link). Audio from fan-edits often become trending TikTok sounds.

How fans shape brands

The mainstreaming of fandom across digital platforms has also led to changes in brand behavior.

Some brands have started to act like fans online, learning from fans' behaviors to form an affiliation with these engaged audiences.

On TikTok, brands are participating in fan-based trends, tapping into

community-specific knowledge and jokes.

The Empire State Building has leaned into #swifttok, regularly creating content that demonstrates their love of Taylor. One of their most successful videos is a fan-edit professing their love for the Eiffel Tower, set to a sped-up version of Wildest Dreams.

Brands are also adopting fan language and tone in their captions and comments. Take a look at the comments on one of Taylor Swift's recent TikToks and you'll find brands like DuoLingo, Spotify, The Natural History Museum and Peter's Pasta using words like "blondie," "mother" and "ICON."

On Twitter/X, cookie brand Chips Ahoy! regularly posts about trending fan-culture moments, demonstrating insider knowledge.

On Threads, the official Star Wars account is stanning favorite characters, adopting a fannish persona. And on TikTok, Penguin Books Australia is "shipping" Draco and Hermione to promote Tom Felton's new book.

In my ongoing Ph.D. research, I've found fans are working as social media managers for brands, leveraging their expertise to connect with fan audiences.

Given the widespread adoption of fan culture and practices across platforms, it makes sense that a fan's digital literacy can be beneficial to brands.

As one Harry Styles fan that I interviewed explained:

"I think if you're a brand who wants to be tapped into culture, you need to hire people who are engaging in it. If you're wanting to jump on

trends […] talking to people in their own language, in that social first native language, you need to be hiring people who were already speaking in that way."

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