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The Imaginary World in the Fan–Music Idol Relationship. Selected Contexts of Contemporary Values of Pop Culture

Scholarly literature devotes little attention to the phenomenon of fandom. It is not rarely that descriptions of fan culture are focused on deviation or psychopathology. Fandom understood as a permanent and engaged community of fans should not be associated with notions of youth subculture. In my opinion, the phenomenon is not clearly bad, either.

Works pioneering in the area of fandom description include Henry Jenkins's *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, and Camille Bacon Smith's *Enterprising Woman: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth*, both published in 1952. The texts played a significant role in the way in which *f a n s t u d i e s* – an interdisciplinary discipline combining elements of sociology, anthropology and media studies – are defined (Kobus 2013). The authors of the works sketched the most important fields of exploration of fan reception and discussed ways of perception of fan art, which actively responds to certain pop-culture senses and meanings (Kobus 2013). What is still missing, however, is extensive descriptions of music fan communities and the conceptualization of significant concepts such as the fan hierarchy, hardcore fans and others. The said pejorative tone of the existing fandom descriptions may cause negative simplifications and the perception of all fans as persons who are unbalanced or dangerous. Not every fan strongly engaged in their idol's life is a psycho-fan. Such an identification mainly results from the mass media (TV and Internet) coverage, highlighting single cases of attacks and harassment inflicted on public figures by their fans-stalkers. I agree with Bogusław Dziadzia that the media – along with other socialisation agendas – affect not only who we are, but also our values and the world in which we perceive the world (Karczmarzyk 2013).

To be objective, we need to remember that the negative behaviours targeted at idols are definitely single specific cases that are often connected with personality disorders or other dysfunctions.

Many psychologists believe that an unbalanced psyche is the basic prerequisite for fame, and additionally many specialists see a correlation between per-

sonality disorders and ambitious attempts at becoming successful, which is simultaneously related to the possibility of subordinating the public, anxiety, and self-destructive behaviours (Bandelow 2014). Destructive behaviour may therefore be accompanied by ambition-related factors. The same goes for the people who are on stage. Talent is often a factor of little importance, which can be just an addition to the hidden motivation behind the taking of the appropriate actions by the singer.

My research interest results from my willingness to become thoroughly familiar with the structure of the development of the fan-idol relationship and to describe it in depth. In Western Europe and Northern America, the issue of the phenomenon that singers are for their fans has been largely recognised and examined, but it is yet to be described in Poland. I would like to fill in the gap, be it even modestly, existing in the field of Polish pedagogy in the area of the description and definition of the phenomena of fandom and being a fan of a pop-music idol.

The people in question engage emotionally in a permanent relationship with their idol, and are able to cross geographical, mental, emotional and other borders. They become attached to the artist selflessly, unpretentiously, and totally. They consistently travel just to see their idol during a five-minute concert or to buy yet again the same record with yet another signature of the artist.

The relationship with idols reminds one of the relationship "I need you and you need me". It is based on permanent bonds. Fans want to highlight their involvement and subordination to their idol in an extreme way. The world of the fan's private emotions intermingles with the world of artificial relations created for the purposes of product promotion and sales.

The above-described relation between the fan and the music idol is an illustration of metaphorical imaginary worlds. They can be both beings and situations, as well as relations which for some reason will be unrealistic, and sometimes far from frank. In fans' perception, these imaginary worlds may also take the form of delusions.

I agree that we spend most of our lives fantasizing – in both thoughts and dreams (Karczmarzyk 2013). For many people, the very possibility to express their own opinion publicly is like the realisation of their dreams. Fans function at the borderline of fantasy, disregarding the fact that the music industry and marketing professionals create the illusory world (in which the singer becomes a commercial product) to generate profit. When fans begin to implement values from the imaginary world (in this context, it becomes a parallel world for them, where fantasy concerning the idol is mixed with the reality), this involves the risk of, for example, copying the idol's behaviour and implementing his/her values into real life, although these are often contrary to the one's their fans live by (Karczmarzyk 2013).

Fandom – terminology explained

The word “fandom” was coined by fantasy fans. It was often borrowed to describe groups of lovers of particular singers or actors and today has infiltrated literature. I shall use it in relation to the community of fans of pop-music singers.

Paradoxically, in the case of hardcore fans, i.e. the ones having the closest relationship with their idol, music plays a secondary role. It is the person who becomes the element strengthening the bond – and, along with him/her, a subconscious, often imaginary promise of happiness understood in a variety of ways. This is what makes fans determined to enter into a loyalty contract (Bauman 2002). Music idols are, to an extent, unreal figures. Their stage image, character and appearance must always be consistent. Idols-celebrities are often created by professionals from the music industry. Sometimes pop-culture suggestively exposes an idol and gives him/her the shape of a role model worthy of imitation. “The cult of celebrity creates archetypes and icons with which alienated souls can identify”, thus compensating themselves for the lack of close relationships, purpose, motivation or security (Jenson 1992).

Through consolidation with pop music adopted by pop culture, a significant celebrity-idol element becomes its determinant. Pop music by assumption reaches a wide audience – and one of a specific type to boot. Pop is a commonly accepted genre, trend, and style of music. It is marked by its tunefulness, light rhythm, repeatability of motifs, undifferentiated instrumentalisation, pleasant sound and performance (Gloer, Skrzydlewski 2002).

The canon was created at the beginning of the 1950s in New York record companies, where composers and authors of lyrics produced popular songs to order. We may refer to compositions ranging from jazz to metal rock as “pop songs”. Sometimes the genre is pejoratively associated with the kitsch (Gloer, Skrzydlewski 2002). Pop – as every genre of music – attracts specific groups of recipients. However, in the close fan/idol relationship, it is not the style or type of music that determines one’s belonging to the group.

According to Antonina Kłoskowska, pop-culture fits the mass culture. It belongs to the third system of culture, next to folk culture and institutionalised culture. It is very popular because it easily reaches the mass audience (Barker 2005).

Mass culture includes many norms and models of behaviour with a very broad scope of application. It is a by-product of the industrial revolution and urbanisation. Pop-culture created a specific type of audience – the so-called mass audience – for which it is criticised by many theoreticians. It is primarily criticized for being inferior and non-authentic, since its reception apparently does not require a major intellectual effort, and thus does not enrich its recipients (Barker 2005).

Literature concerning fans as a pop-cultural and music phenomenon is relatively scarce. Only some reflections do emerge on the occasion of discussing fame or celebrity cult. By assumption, fans are understood as a certain resultant reaction to the star system (Jenson 1992).



Photo 1. A wall with images of a pop idol in an obsessive fan's private flat.
Source: M. Weilandt's collection

The modern system of celebrityism promoted by the mass media brought into existence individual fans and fandom (understood as a group of people) very strongly emotionally engaged in the close and emotional relationship with a pop-culture idol. The relationship in some cases may resemble a cult of an individual. Some works devoted to fandom combine the fan's attitude with a pathological attitude.

John L. Caughey classifies the most important attitudes of fans, who shape their life under the influence of fantasies concerning the imagined close relationship with a significant idol as follows:

- an obsessive type (an extreme example balancing between affection and fanaticism; may become a stalker);
- a pathological type (for example fans being a part of the hysterically emotional crowd, and teenagers fascinated with their idols);
- a type enslaved by music (persons exaggeratingly identifying themselves with a style or genre of music, creating for example music subcultures).

In my opinion, the above classification is not full and needs to be extended (Caughey 1978).

Fan-fiction

Literature presenting the reasons why people become fans most often mentions "the influence of the media, a narcissistic society, hypnotic rock music, and crowd contagion" (Jenson 1992: 13). However, the mass media play a significant role in the process. When analysing the context of their impact on young persons' life situation, some authors formulate a belief that at present people live in the age of an addiction to the mass media (Caughey 1978).

Persons functioning in the media (on both commercial and public TV channels) have become idols for many people since the very beginning of their appearance in the public world.



Photo 2. A tattoo with the surname of a pop idol on a pathological fan.
Source: M. Weilandt's collection

Media studies research exploring the engaged and active reception of the media content in pop-culture fan environments shows several tendencies which emerged owing to the existence and the global reach of the internet (Kobus 2013).

Today, the internet has become a common platform for the distribution of messages between the sender (idol) and the recipient (fan). The role of the internet in the establishment of contact has become a key one. Communication developed in this way may build the sense of actual participation in the life of significant persons. At the same time, the internet may compensate for problems with the establishment and maintenance of interpersonal relationships in real life, which are common among fans. Professionals interested solely in material profits consciously and intentionally use the naivety and emotions accompanying the co-participation of fandom in virtual life. The internet contact with the music idol tends to be a façade, as in many cases correspondence with fans is tackled by people cooperating with the vocalist rather than the singers themselves.

At present, the most popular tools used for internet communication include emails (i.e. virtual letters), and messages sent via social media. They have successfully superseded traditional letters and correspondence. At present, Facebook is the platform of communication which idols fans choose most often.¹

The imaginary possibility of participation in the life of one's idol draws like a magnet – perhaps because it is not known from private experience. Most often, it

¹ An internet social media service providing content on diverse topics, most often in the form of videos and photographs.



Photo 3. Intermingling of worlds: a fan/idol meeting. Source: M. Weilandt's collection

is not a real being, either. Here, a question appears – whether the imaginary world may in some situations substitute for the real world to a young person?

Reality tends to be less interesting than the imaginary world – positive and friendly, but often unreal. In an unreal world, the sense of community is also strongly related to the fan's cultural needs (Karczmarzyk 2013). In the 1990s, when the internet rapidly developed, fandoms emigrated to the web. This has resulted in the creation of modern internet phenomena, i.e. figures who for many become a phantasm of people of success – fulfilled and worthy of imitation – such as Justin Bieber.

Imaginary worlds

Everyone has a different theory of happiness. Fandom understood as a group of people with joint interests makes its members happy. Such a form of social reintegration has a strong compensatory dimension. Being a fan becomes a category, translates into a function one holds, is one of the coping strategies.

Fandom is usually composed of a specific group of a more or less consistent number of people. They cooperate together, each for their own individual reasons, normally for a long time. They have common goals behind their actions, such as values within the group including devotion, selfless affection, and others, mutually affecting each other and consciously constructed.

The psychological glossary, classifying membership groups in terms of their nature, points out that the membership is voluntary. Members of fan groups are observers looking for references being the bases for their assessment of the situation. Such environments are therefore strong opinion-makers, and individuals are very much eager to be approved (Szewczuk 1985).

In the fan/idol relationship, moments at the borderline between facts and subjective fantasies or situations in which this borderline is overstepped may be critical and may lead to the blending of the difference between the reality and an idol-related fantasy.

Being a fan then becomes only a substitute for the bond being an inadequate imitation of the desired closeness (Jenson 1992). Such authors as Donald Horton and Richard Wohl believe that such a situation is similar to a conversation, and tries to resemble a face-to-face impact. Since fans may feel a dissatisfaction resulting from the limited relationship, they seek additional forms of contact with their idol (outside of the official meeting places such as a concert). Others strive to establish a direct contact in order to win the prestige or influence they need from the psychological point of view but which they are not able to reach for themselves (Jenson 1992).

If a bond supersedes autonomous social participation, and the relationship with the idol causes a rejection of the objective reality, other social relationships are under threat of distortion or ruin. This, however, is an extreme form of being a fan – one that may take on a destructive or pathological form. Researchers indicate that such borderline forms are typical in particular for socially-rejected individuals, people who are inept, older, handicapped, shy, or rejected (Jenson 1992).

The idealised image of the idol in the case of groups threatened with social exclusion may result in an attempt at a compensation of the absence of authentic bonds. In this case, the celebrity will always function as a meaningful exemplary model. The authors of some works suggest that the media persona is a realization of the fans' dreams of autonomy and a close relationship. Many fans prefer to believe that their idol's official meetings with them result from his/her authentic heart's desire, and not from the economic motives of the music industry. In this case, the imaginary world will take the form of leading a substitute life via one's idealized idol's life. In some cases, being a fan may compensate for one's sense of absence of autonomy or community, fragmentary identity, as well as power and lack of appreciation (Jenson 1992).

Such behaviours always involve a risk or danger. The spheres of reality and fiction should be clearly separated from each other. It is only then that fans can be rational persons realistically assessing their situation, and not pose a potential hazard to the community.

The main factors that may develop into a fan attitude include psychological inadequacy, vulnerability to the media impact, as well as crowd psychology. From the psychological point of view, fans are, along with deviants and fanatics, people who suffer from inadequacy (Jenson 1992), who compensate for their emotional shortages with deep and permanent fantasies. Such persons experience problems related to their insecurity, often lead a relatively monotonous and routine-based life and construct scant social bonds. The mass media represented by pop-culture consciously use this type of inadequacy. It is them who produce all the models of idealised, better worlds, which for many become a way of organizing their average existence and providing it with colour. The attitude adopted by fans simultaneous-

ly determines their worldview and their sense of life. Fandom is a certain collection of joint features, typically including faithfulness, attachment and the cultivation of one's affection. This can also be sense of an aspect of the place we take in the society or culture. Finally, this is a style of life giving people the sense of their existence. After all, you do not travel thousands of kilometres for someone who is not important. You do not buy gifts for them. You do not subordinate your life to their official calendar. The fan attitude is correlated with the need of belonging and devotion. It begins one's new life which from then on has a sense to it: to be as close as possible to the idol – the sacred zone. When the borderline between the fantasy of an ideal world and the fans' previous life is liquid, the emerging compensation determines the life "as if".

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Summary

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Human beings, from birth, become artists of their own life, facing multiple tasks – starting with managing one’s own existence. In our times of liquid modernity (Bauman 2009), we all need to hurry and make different choices. In the process, luck is always a factor. The ideal of happiness, according to Kant, is not a product of reason, but rather the imagination. In our times, strongly dependent on the media (Caughey 1978), celebrities and idols function as role models, becoming significant others with mostly a positive reception in the eyes of their fans – functioning more like imagined figures. Fans willingly sustain artificial relations, created through imaginaries, becoming parts of fictional structures. In this article I will try to shed light on some of the compensation mechanisms present in the fandom groups of popular music.

Keywords

celebrity, fan community, meaningful icons

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