

# GENDER DIFFERENCES IN TEENAGE-FANDOM: A TEENIE-FAN SURVEY ON MUSICAL INTERACTION IN FAN CULTURAL CONTEXTS

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## ABSTRACT

**Background.** This paper presents a reanalysis of data from a previous study on teenage music fandom. When thinking about teenage fans most people picture young female teenagers acting fanatically or hysterically whenever their favourite star is in sight. Moreover, those fans' musical interaction is often considered as passive. These stereotypes of teenage fandom are challenged by our MultiMediaComputer-survey that takes a different theoretical approach to the phenomenon: Fandom is regarded as a contribution to young people's self-socialization and identity construction, and as an active process in the social context of the fan group. The results of our initial analysis of the data supported this theoretical model of teenage fandom. As teenage fandom is often stereotyped as a "girl thing", the reanalysis of the data focuses on the relevance of gender in the fan cultural context.

**Aims.** The secondary analysis focuses on gender-specific aspects of fandom. Two hypotheses are tested: (1) Girls ascribe different meanings to their fandom and their favourite music than boys. (2) Musical interaction in fan cultural contexts is gender-specific.

**Method.** 217 11- to 15-year-olds participated in the study. They answered mainly closed, but also open format questions on their musical taste, their engagement in musical fan cultures, their use of popular musical objects, and on their musical interaction in the peer context. The questions were presented to them as an audiovisual questionnaire on the computer.

**Results and Conclusions.** Separate cluster analyses for the male resp. female fans in the sample lead to parallel cluster patterns concerning the different meanings ascribed to fandom: Both, the female and the male clusters, do not represent different types but different intensities of fandom. Despite this parallel pattern of the male and female clusters, there are some gender specific differences between the male and the female versions of the three fan intensities. All in all, the results of the reanalysis suggest that female and male fans are not as different as they are often considered to be.

## 1. TEENAGE FANDOM: BACKGROUND, THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

This paper presents a reanalysis of data from a previous study on teenage music fandom (Rhein 2000, 2002). Due to the presentation of teenage fandom by the media, when thinking about teenage fans most people picture young female teenagers acting fanatically or hysterically whenever their favourite star is in sight. Teenage fandom seems to be considered as a mainly female phenomenon which revolves around the person of the star rather than around the music. It is assumed that the teenage

fans' musical interaction is passive and that it is mainly teenagers with weak identities who are involved in teenage fandom. These assumptions go together with the gender stereotyping of fandom since passivity and weak identities are often considered as female characteristics. The stereotypes of teenage fandom shown above (see also: Jenson 1992) are challenged by our survey that takes a different theoretical approach to the phenomenon: Fandom is regarded as a contribution to young people's self-socialization and identity construction (Müller et al. 2002). Therefore it is seen as an active process in the social context of the fan group. To be a fan is understood as being a member of a youth culture that is defined by a shared musical taste and by a specific approach to popular music and is therefore distinct from other groups and persons such as non-fans or adults. The initial analysis of the data focused on this aspect of fandom. Therefore, it investigated the differences between fans and non-fans in their use of popular music. Among others, the following hypotheses were tested:

- Fans can be differentiated based on the significance and meaning they ascribe to their fandom in their lives and based on the intensity with which they practice their fandom.
- Fans use the range of popular music more intensively than non-fans for the appropriation and presentation of expert knowledge and fan-specific competencies.
- Fans practice more diverse and complex musical activities than non-fans.
- Among fans, being a fan, or the preference for certain kinds of popular music, is more strongly regarded as creating a feeling of community than among non-fans.
- Fans regard their musical involvement more strongly than non-fans as a means to construct and present cultural identity.

The results of the analysis supported these hypotheses. It could be shown that fans are active users of popular musical objects, they engage intensively and creatively in a greater variety and complexity of musical activities than non-fans. The social context of their musical involvement – including the appropriation and presentation of expert knowledge concerning their favorite music – is more important to them than to the non-fans in the sample. The results also indicate that teenage fandom is not at all an indicator of weak identities – it can be shown that teenage fans actually use their musical involvement to a greater extent for the construction and presentation of cultural identity than non-fans.

Since teenage fandom is gender stereotyped we decided to complement the theoretical approach of the initial analysis by a gender perspective: It is assumed that gender is a category that is continuously constructed, challenged and reconstructed in interactive processes of representation and self-representation (Bechdolf 1997). Within this discourse social positions and (gender) identities are negotiated. This process is very often described as “doing gender”. Media play an important role within the gender discourse: They present different images of femininity or masculinity, of gender differences and gender hierarchies. These images can either challenge or work as material for the construction of the recipients’ own gender images and for his or her own positioning in the field of gender discourse. The crucial question here is to what extent and in what respect the gender stereotyped image of fandom is reconstructed within fandom, i.e. by the fans. The following two hypotheses are tested by the reanalysis of the data and will be focussed on in this paper: (1) Girls ascribe different meanings to their fandom and their favourite music than boys. (2) Musical interaction in fan cultural contexts is gender-specific.

## 2. THE FAN SURVEY

### 2.1. Audiovisual Questionnaires on the Computer

A survey of 217 11-15 year-olds at various schools and youth centers in and around the city of Stuttgart, Germany, was carried out in March 1999 using an audiovisual questionnaire. The study was processed by means of the authoring system for multimedia surveys FrAuMuMe (Müller 2002) where interviewees are not questioned by a human interviewer but by the computer. In the course of an audiovisual questionnaire musical pieces and images were presented to the interviewees [[screenshot1.jpg](#); [screenshot2.jpg](#)]. The questionnaire contained mainly closed, but also open format questions on different dimensions of fandom. The questions referred

- to the musical taste of the interviewees (tested e.g. by the subjective evaluation of actually sounding pieces of popular music),
- to their engagement in musical fan cultures (e.g. the subjective meanings ascribed to fandom),
- to their musical activities (e.g. song-related activities like dancing to their favourite music, translating the lyrics),
- to their use of music as a means of expressing cultural and social identity (e.g. if they want/ don’t want to share their musical taste with different social groups or individuals such as their parents or friends, etc.), and
- to their musical interaction in the peer context (e.g. which musical activities they share with peers).

### 2.2. Fandom

48,8 % of the participants are male, 51,2 % female. All those who indicated that they consider themselves to belong to at least one of the categories “fans of music groups/ music stars” and “fans of music types” were defined as fans. All others are summed up as “non-fans”. Altogether 166 of the questioned youths considered themselves to be fans; this corresponds to 76,5 % of the sample. It is conspicuous that those who do not consider themselves fans are actually eager music listeners and interested in music as well. About 70 % of these non-fans indicate that they listen to music on CDs, records and music cassettes every day. There are significant differences between girls and boys concerning fandom (Chi-Square;  $p=0,001$ ): 85,6 % of the girls in the sample characterized themselves as fans, while 67 % of the boys did so. Thus, the girls made up 57,2 % of the fans in the sample, the boys 42,8 %. On the one hand, this corresponds to the assumption that girls are more likely to be fans than boys, on the other hand the surprisingly high proportion of boys questions the assumption that teenage fan culture is a mere “girl thing” - and thus indicates that being a fan is gender stereotyped.

### 2.3. Ascribed Significance to Fandom

To be a fan means to me...	
to have found the music that excites me ( <i>music</i> ).	to be crazy about someone and dream about him or her ( <i>having a crush</i> ).
to know a lot about a certain area of music ( <i>knowledge</i> ).	to admire someone and want to be like him/her ( <i>admiration</i> ).
to have a way to spend my free time that takes my mind off of everyday life ( <i>leisure pursuit</i> ).	to show adults that I consider different things important in my life than what they consider to be important in their own lives ( <i>separation from adults</i> ).
to be able to talk with others about it ( <i>join in conversation</i> ).	to share in the success of a group/ a star ( <i>sharing success</i> ).
to do something together with others ( <i>common activity</i> ).	to live my life totally differently from the way it was before ( <i>living differently</i> ).
be fully into something ( <i>full commitment</i> ).	to feel myself a part of a fan community/ to have found a kind of family ( <i>fan community</i> ).

**Table 1:** List of Items: Aspects of Significance in Fandom

To differentiate between the fans in the sample, we presented them with twelve different aspects of significance in fandom (see table 1), to which they could express one of five degrees of agreement: “1” standing for “is absolutely true”, “5” for “is not at all true”. The highest level of agreement among the interviewed fans (N=166) was received not by the star-related aspects of “admiration” (M=2,79) or “having a crush” (M=2,75), but rather by the music-related aspects such as “music” (M=1,66) and “knowledge” (M=2,30). The frequently expressed supposition that music plays only a marginal role in the fandom of teenage fans thus seems wrong.

## 2.4. Fan Clusters

A cluster analysis carried out on the twelve aspects of significance listed above produced three fan clusters. These are differentiated not in the kind of significance the fans ascribe to their fandom, as was expected, but rather in the degree of agreement with the items. The clusters thus do not describe different types, but different intensities of fandom.

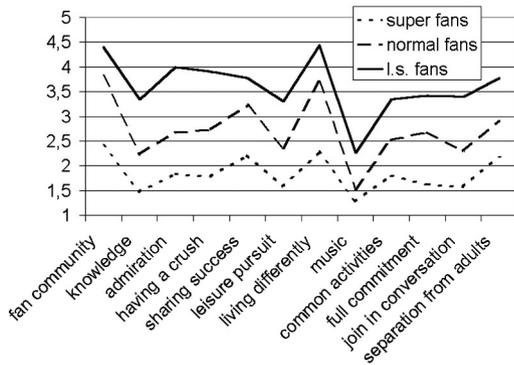


Figure 1: Fan Clusters

It is conspicuous that fans with the lowest level of fan intensity only agree with a single item – and this only on a relatively low level: “To be a fan means to me to have found the music that excites me.” Those in this cluster were designated “l.s.”-fans, standing for “little significance”, since their fandom seems to have hardly any significance in their lives. The cluster that describes the middle intensity of fandom receives the designation “normal fans”. The group with the highest intensity of fandom is called “super fans”. For them all aspects that were raised in the questions were of significance. In reference to the fans in the sample, the super fans make up 19,5 %, normal fans 41,5 % and l.s. fans 39,0 %.

## 3. GENDER ASPECTS IN FANDOM

### 3.1. The Gender-specific Structure of Fandom

Whereas it is to a certain degree gender-specific whether someone considers himself or herself a fan (see chapter 2.2.), no significant gender effect can be found concerning the affiliation to each of the three fan clusters. This indicates that there are no gender differences concerning the intensity of fandom among the fans in the sample. To investigate whether there are structural differences between male and female teenage fandom concerning the significance and meanings ascribed to fandom, it seems necessary to carry out two separate cluster analyses – one for the male fans, one for the female fans.

The results are striking in different respects. Each of the cluster analyses produces three fan clusters similar to those shown in figure 1, where clusters differ with respect to the intensity of fandom. The general structure of male and female fandom

concerning the ascribed significance in fandom thus appears to be similar. Figure 2 and 3 report the following cluster sizes: 26 male super fans, 25 male normal fans, 19 male l.s. fans and 32 female super fans, 31 female normal fans and 31 female l.s. fans. These findings raise the question whether differentiation of female and male fandom provides additional information. Cross tables in combination with Chi Square Tests show that the affiliations to the fan clusters produced by the two gender-separated cluster analyses are far from corresponding to the affiliations defined by the cluster analysis carried out over all fans. 13 of the 32 female super fans e.g. did not belong to the super fan cluster of the first cluster analysis but to the normal fan cluster.

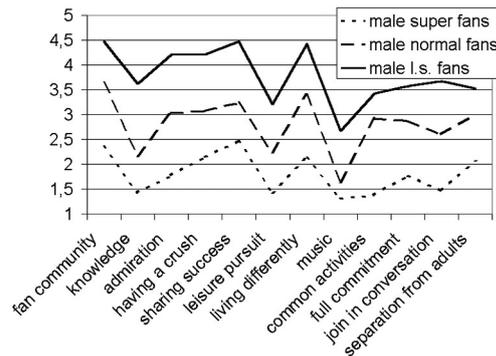


Figure 2: Male Fan Clusters

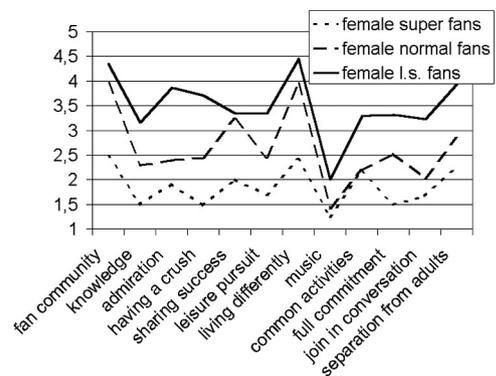


Figure 3: Female Fan Clusters

### 3.2. The Gender-specific Differences in the Ascribed Significance to Fandom

To investigate the differences between the gender-specific versions of the fan intensities, variance analyses between male and female super fans, male and female normal fans and male and female l.s. fans are carried out. Male super fans regard “common activities” as a more relevant feature of their fandom ( $M=1,38$ ;  $p=0,001$ ) than female super fans ( $M=2,16$ ). Female super fans show a higher level of agreement to the aspect of “having a crush” ( $M=1,47$ ;  $p=0,015$ ) than male super fans ( $M=2,15$ ). On the level of normal fandom, gender-specific differences can be

found concerning the two star-related aspects “admiration” and “having a crush”, but also the two aspects “common activities” and “join in conversation” that refer rather to the social and integrative aspects of fandom. Female normal fans consider all these aspects as more integral parts of their fandom than male normal fans (see table 2). Female l.s. fans show a significantly higher level of agreement to the aspects “music” (M=2,00; p=0,044) and “sharing success” (M=3,35; p=0,000) than male l.s. fans (M=2,68; M=4,47). These results indicate that each of the three different intensities of fandom is related to gender-specific ascriptions of meaning to fandom.

Aspects of Fandom	Gender	M	SD	P
Admiration	Female	2,39	1,12	0,033
	Male	3,04	1,10	
Having a Crush	Female	2,45	1,12	0,041
	Male	3,08	1,12	
Common Activities	Female	2,19	1,11	0,014
	Male	2,92	1,00	
Join in Conversation	Female	2,03	0,75	0,024
	Male	2,60	1,08	

**Table 2:** Differences between female and male normal fans.

### 3.3. Gender-specific Musical Interaction in Fan Cultural Contexts

Due to the limited scope of this paper, hypothesis 2 is here only tested for the diversity of musical activities practiced by the fans. Musical activities were raised by different item batteries, differentiating between song-related, fan-related and music-related activities. *Song-related activities* refer to the musical pieces preferred by the interviewees (e.g. memorizing the lyrics, inventing own dance steps). *Fan-related activities* are for example writing poems or stories that have something to do with the favourite star, writing letters to music stars, groups or magazines. *Music-related activities* are more general activities such as going out to dance, listening to music, going to concerts. Diversity is understood here as the number of different activities practiced by the interviewees. To compare the diversity of the different activities, these were each relativized to an “activity quotient”. These quotients lie between 1 and 0, whereby 1 stands for the largest possible amount of diversity. Both for the female and the male fans the diversity of activities practiced decreases with the decrease in fandom intensity.

To investigate whether there are gender-specific differences concerning the diversity of these activities, variance analyses between male and female super fans, male and female normal fans and male and female l.s. fans are carried out. There are no significant differences on the level of super fandom and l.s. fandom, but one highly significant gender effect on the level of normal fandom: Female normal fans undertake more different song-related activities (M=0,56) than male normal fans (M=0,28; p=0,000).

## 4. SUMMARY

The results strongly indicate that teenage fandom is far from being a mere female phenomenon. There are differences between female and male fandom both on the level of ascribed significance to fandom and on the level of musical interaction. The most essential finding probably is that these differences are not as striking as one might have expected them to be. This indicates that gender is not an important dimension of distinction in the fan cultural context. Another important result is that male and female teenage fandom have the same general structure even though there are differences: This structure is characterized by the fact that there are not different types of fandom but different intensities. This supports and complements the position of Fiske who suggests that the main difference between fans and the “more normal audiences” is that fans are the more intensive readers (Fiske 1992): Thus it can be said that the main difference between super fans, normal fans and l.s. fans is that the former are the more excessive and more intensive audience. Therefore we suggest that super fandom and non-fandom mark the opposite ends of a continuum.

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