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## Why Industry Professionals Should Care About Fandom

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## Why Industry Professionals Should Care About Fandom

### Abstract

A fandom is a community of people who share a common interest and interact with each other on the basis of that common interest. When a fandom comes together on the basis of a creative work, it allows a mutually beneficial relationship to form in which the fandom will eagerly consume existing content, allowing new content to be produced for their consumption. Thus, professionals in industries such as publishing, theater, and television and film should be aware of the integral role fandoms play in the consumption of their content and how to nurture fandoms through the means discussed in this article.

### Keywords

fandom, media, publishing, marketing, creative content

### Disciplines

Advertising and Promotion Management | Film and Media Studies | Marketing

### Comments

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## **Why Industry Professionals Should Care About Fandom**

When the relatively small American publishing company Seven Seas Entertainment decided to begin publishing English translations of Chinese author Mo Xiang Tong Xiu (MXTX)'s three book series, many may have been surprised to see that the first novels of each series charted on the [New York Times Best Sellers List](#) in their first week of release in mid-December of 2021. However, there was already a [significant fandom](#) in the U.S. (and worldwide) dedicated to MXTX's works who had been previously unable to legally purchase them in English, creating a high demand for a product that Seven Seas Entertainment effectively supplied. This is just one example of how understanding fandoms can have beneficial implications across all industries in media spaces.

### **What are “fandoms”?**

A fandom is a community of people who share a common interest and interact with each other on the basis of that common interest. Being in a fandom often evokes feelings of camaraderie, joy, and belonging. Fandoms can form for books, movies, television shows, musical artists, actors, athletes, and others. Participation within fandoms can take the form of [disseminating the latest episode of \*Ted Lasso\* in great detail](#), [debating whether Team Black or Team Green is morally superior to the other in \*House of the Dragon\*](#), [compiling a video of highlights from the \*Shadow and Bone\*](#)

[season 2 press tour](#), and [posting a \*Shadowhunters Chronicles\* fanfiction](#)<sup>1</sup>, just to name a few.

There are many locations available for fandom to reside. [Supernatural has had a massive presence on Tumblr](#) since the site's inception; there are over [600,000 Marvel fanfictions on Archive of Our Own](#); more than one million fans of the anime/manga Attack on Titan gather on a [subreddit](#); and Chinese fans have engaged in [nearly 13 million Weibo discussions](#) about the Chinese danmei<sup>2</sup> *Mo Dao Zu Shi*. While fandom thrives virtually, it can also be seen at in-person events, such as Comic Cons, which draw up to hundreds of thousands of attendees, celebrities, and cosplayers all over the world.<sup>3</sup>

### **Why do fandoms matter?**

Book publishers, video game creators, producers (including television, movies, music, and sports) and related fields must convince people to consume their content rather than something else, making it essential for them to know how to create content that people will find worthy of its own dedicated fandom. After all, fandoms are a group of people who are so passionate about a particular thing that they spend their free time creating fanworks—such as fanfiction, fan art, and video edits. Fanworks are freely produced by fans without financial compensation, yet have the benefit of providing additional content for other fans to consume and keep the original content on their minds.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on fanfiction, see [this article](#) from *Writer's Digest*.

<sup>2</sup> Danmei is the Chinese term for literature centered around romantic relationships between male characters. For more danmei, see [this article published by Ohio State University](#) and [this article published by the Guardian](#).

<sup>3</sup> For more on Comic Cons, see [this video](#); for more on cosplay, see [this library guide](#) created by the University of Montana.

The longest-lasting content empires tend to have the largest fandoms because there is a mutually beneficial relationship between fandom and the production of new content. Fandoms consume so much content that more can be created to fill their demand. For example, it is unlikely that the CW series *Supernatural* would have continued for 15 seasons despite a steady decline in viewership after season 11 if fans had not [made their love for the show known](#) through attending expensive in-person [conventions](#) dedicating to celebrating the show, proving that there is a [Supernatural gif](#) for anything on Tumblr, and writing such prolific fanfiction that the show even named an episode "[Fan Fiction.](#)" Similarly, BBC series *Doctor Who* began in 1963 and continues to air 60 years later—albeit with some breaks in between—a feat again attributable to cultivating a dedicated fanbase. *Doctor Who* fans have organized their own [conventions](#), created and distributed their own [fanzines](#), and loved a side character from the spin-off series *Torchwood* so much that they created a [memorial](#) in Cardiff, Wales when he was killed off.

Having a dedicated fandom also makes marketing creative content much easier. Evidence suggests that people active in fandoms are so obsessed with the object of their fandom that they are generally willing to spend significant amounts of money for merchandise, interactions with actors, and other relevant opportunities. Many even pay money to get fandom-related [tattoos](#). AMC launched a line of merchandise to support its series *Interview with the Vampire*, with one item being a one-of-a-kind nearly \$4,000 [coffin](#) that an eager fan scooped up. Fans of *Supernatural* have spent [thousands](#) of dollars for convention tickets, meet-and-greets with the actors, autographs, photos, and

other merchandise. When official merchandise is unavailable, many fans sell and buy unofficial merchandise for their preferred fandoms on sites like [Etsy](#) and [Redbubble](#).

### **How and why do fandoms form?**

If a particular person or thing does not have a substantial fandom, it could be a simple marketing problem. More likely, however, is that this intellectual property lacks enough distinguishing features to nurture an obsessed fandom. The *Captive Prince* trilogy by C.S. Pacat combines detailed fantasy worldbuilding with [allegorical narratives](#) about sex and power, and it has a sizable fandom for a book series with no adaptations. Meanwhile, Pacat's unrelated *Dark Rise* suffers from [pacing issues](#) that are not redeemed by any special attention-drawing factor; thus, the series so far lacks a sizable fandom, though the series is incomplete as of this publication.

Paying attention to how fans interact with each other often reveals what the “special something” is that drives so many people to the level of obsession that distinguishes fandoms. A few types of factors powerful enough to create fandoms could be ships<sup>4</sup>—or romantic pairings—brimming with chemistry, innovation, compelling characters or a sympathetic persona, vivid worldbuilding, and the evocation of strong emotions.

Many fandoms revolve around a central ship that may or may not have originated in the source material. In *Supernatural*, that was the case with the ship [Destiel](#)—consisting of Dean and Castiel—which eventually drove the writers of the show to allow Castiel to confess his love for Dean in the show's penultimate episode. Providing fans with strong ships gives them something to write [fanfictions](#), make [fanart](#), and create [YouTube](#) and [TikTok](#) edits about. Discouraging fans from engaging in

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<sup>4</sup> For more on ships and shipping, see [this article](#) posted by Fandom.

creative endeavors such as fanfiction can also destroy fandoms, which happened when *Interview with the Vampire* author Anne Rice began [suing](#) fans for writing fanfiction. Fans will often invent ships when they are not explicitly given options they enjoy, which while not so problematic for a fictional case like Destiel, can be problematic with real people. Fans were so [enamored](#) with Larry Stylinson (Louis Tomlinson and Harry Styles) for example, that it began to disrupt the singers' lives when fans harassed the real people about the fictional ship, and some even attribute the breakup of One Direction to this. Content creators should take care to avoid intentionally [queerbaiting](#) fans, which occurs when same-sex couples are presented to fans via sexual tension and subtext rather than making the romantic relationship explicit, with creators often mocking fans for shipping these relationships while simultaneously relying on these fans to continue consuming their content. Queerbaiting has been a [problem in fandom historically](#), with prominent recent examples including [Harry Potter](#), [Teen Wolf](#), and [Supernatural](#).

Many fandoms form for things that are disruptive to what has traditionally been done in movies, television, music, etc. *Hamilton* was an [innovative](#) force in the musical theater world with its unique decision to tell the story of a lesser-known founder of the United States with an all-POC cast and heavy reliance on hip-hop. Readers worldwide have created an [MXTX fandom](#) to celebrate Chinese writer Mo Xiang Tong Xiu's unexpected success writing gay fantasy romance despite [heavy censorship](#) from the Chinese government. The strength of this fandom has resulted in three animated, two live-action, and two comics [adaptations](#). Fall Out Boy has disrupted the music industry multiple times over, [beginning](#) when they decided to have their charismatic bassist write

the emotionally raw lyrics and act as the “frontman” for the band in public while their lead singer took the lyrics and put them to music that bridged the gap between catchy pop melodies and edgy punk rock.

Another element that may draw fans to form particular fandoms is the presence of compelling characters or real people with personas that people want to root for. A prime example is the *Six of Crows* duology, which can be compared to the same writer’s previous *Shadow and Bone* trilogy. Both are set in the same fantasy world, but fans tend to [resonate](#) with the characters of *Six of Crows* more than *Shadow and Bone* due to the former’s more compelling cast of characters with distinctive aesthetics and personalities that give fans more to discuss than *Shadow and Bone*’s Chosen One arc. Similarly, Marvel’s Loki is a fan-favorite character because he [subverts](#) the expected characteristics of an antagonist because viewers are allowed to understand his motivations and sympathize with his constant struggle between accomplishing his own goals and making the “right” choices. A [study](#) revealed that *Game of Thrones* fans tended to prefer characters whose personalities most closely matched their own, implying that audiences resonate with “relatable” characters. An example of a real person that has brought fans together is Johnny Depp, as seen in his 2022 trial against his ex-wife, when fans raptly followed each day’s events, flooded social media with support for him, and traveled to Virginia to greet him with cheers. Some have [connected](#) the fans’ proud, often Captain Jack Sparrow-related support of Depp to nostalgia associating him with the iconic roles he has played.

Fandoms tend to thrive when strong emotions are evoked. This can create small but mighty fandoms, such as for the self-published *All for the Game* trilogy about a



scarred boy—on the run from his brutal father’s involvement with the Japanese Yakuza—who finds makes his own family with an underdog D1 team playing the fictional sport “exy,” which boasts a surprising number of [fanfictions](#) and fan-made [merchandise](#). Similarly, fans of the Netflix series *Sense8*—which told the story of eight people around the world who became psychically linked and were able to experience each other’s lives—were so passionate about it that they convinced Netflix to [greenlight](#) a movie to finish the series’ plot after they had elected not to renew it for another season.

Fictional works that include fantasy worlds so inviting that fans want to continue to live there can be additional building blocks for building fandom. One strong example of this phenomenon is *Harry Potter*, which has even created a physical [Wizarding World](#) that fans from all over the world flock to visit in Orlando, Florida. In addition, fans love the world of *The Lord of the Rings* so much that they can now visit [The Shire](#) in New Zealand. It is also possible for non-fantasy works to create strong associations with their settings and real landmarks, as occurred with the *Doctor Who*-spinoff show, *Torchwood* in Wales, leading fans to create a [memorial](#) to a deceased fictional character in a prominent filming location.

### **What might look like fandom but isn’t?**

Fandom is present when people are engaging passionately, rather than passively, with the source material, so things like viral social media dances and trending audios are not necessarily indicators of fandom. [Passionate engagement](#) might take the form of “transformative” (creating fanfiction, fan art, and fan edits) or “affirmation” activities (collecting merchandise and memorizing trivia). A good case study to

distinguish the two is *Wednesday*. The dance the titular character performed during an episode of the show went [viral](#) on TikTok—albeit, with a different song than the one used in the show. Netflix saw this and immediately [renewed](#) the show, likely expecting that the increased viewership *Wednesday* season 1 saw because of this viral dance would carry over to season 2. But curiosity about a viral trend does not automatically mean that people were engaging *deeply* with the show to the point where they are excited about season 2 the way that fans would be. Relying on social media trends to boost viewership of a show creates pressure for “viral” moments to be scripted into season 2, which is much more difficult to plan than it is for it to happen spontaneously like the dance in season 1.

Fandom requires passion on the part of its fans, so something that people engage with passively is not likely to have a significant fandom. Many reality television shows, for example, could fall into this category. For example, people who choose to watch *Love is Blind* may do so because they enjoy the “[mindless](#)” nature of it. By contrast, some reality programs are able to nurture passionate fandoms. For example, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* has accrued fans who pay to attend [DragCons](#) to meet the show’s contestants. It stands out from other reality shows because it has provided a platform for queer people to achieve success as a result of the art of drag being presented to the world in a sympathetic manner, leading *Vanity Fair* to say that “[there has never been a show like RuPaul’s Drag Race.](#)”

### **How can fandom be gained and lost?**

Fandom can be gained by adding the elements listed above—ships, innovation, compelling characters or personas, the evocation of strong emotions, and enticing

world-building—and effectively marketing those additions so that potential fans are aware of them and become eager to engage with the source material.

There are a few ways that fandom can be lost or damaged. One is when the source material sacrifices the quality of character development arcs in favor of plot conveniences. A [common complaint](#) about recent Marvel projects is that the films and shows are too busy setting up future projects to devote the time they should to developing their characters. Fans of *Game of Thrones* [turned against the show's creators](#) when they rushed season 8 and left viewers furious about Daenerys Targaryen's abrupt fall from sympathetic protagonist to insane villain.

Fans also do not typically like it when they perceive content creators to be manipulating their emotions pointlessly. This can often take the form of needless tragedies, such as the [“bury your gays”](#) trope. Fans of *Supernatural* were [disappointed](#) when mere moments after Castiel confessed his love for Dean, he was literally dragged into a black pit of death and Dean subsequently died an anticlimactic death in the next episode, while his straight brother was able to get married, have kids, and grow old.

### **How do fandoms transcend borders?**

Thanks to the internet and social media, it is now more possible than ever for fandoms to transcend not only national, but even linguistic borders. This is most easily done when source material incorporates universal emotions and issues that people can find relatable across cultures. For instance, within Thai and Chinese boys' love (BL) shows, foreign viewers may not understand every reference, but they do understand and appreciate the love stories at the shows' core. Viewers of *Between Us* may not comprehend the educational system of Thailand which makes up the setting for the

show, but they can overlook that knowledge gap in favor of [focusing on the sizzling relationship](#) between Win and Team. *The Untamed* (the live action adaptation of MXTX's *Mo Dao Zu Shi*) references many Chinese philosophies such as Daoism that unfamiliar viewers may not immediately grasp, but it is easy for fans to [focus on the epic love story](#) of Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian.

## Key Takeaways

- Fandom makes marketing easy
- Fans are willing to spend money on merchandise, conventions, and anything else they can get their hands on
- Differentiate between short-term social media trends and passionate engagement with source material
- Don't take fandom for granted once it exists; continue to create high-quality content

High-quality content will often have an international fandom as a result of word-of-mouth and effective marketing. *Stranger Things* has had a large budget and a [character-driven focus](#). *The Song of Achilles* featured a wholeheartedly gay retelling of a classic myth known to many but [beautifully told](#) from the point of view of the previously unsung hero, Patroclus. *Yuri! On Ice* used detailed animation and a sweet love story to bring to life the world of competitive figure skating through the perspective of a [“painfully relatable”](#) protagonist. The optimistically queer *Red, White, and Royal Blue* gained so much traction through [BookTok](#) (the book community on TikTok) for its [“well-written love story and . . . celebration of identity”](#) that it now has a [movie adaptation](#) coming out on Amazon Prime in August 2023.