Studies of fandom are part of a broader history of research on film spectators and the cinema (see Janet Staiger’s piece on Reception Studies in this volume). At the same time, they represent a break from film studies traditions. “Fandom” is a term strongly linked with “fan studies,” a line of research that emerged in the 1980s and 90s. Fan studies strategically moved away from the term “spectator” and many of the conceptions of spectatorship that were dominating film studies during this period. The research addressed in this chapter—feminist analyses of fandom—represents both a response to film theory prior to the 1980s, and a continuation of the work already being done by feminist film scholars of this period. Despite the complex relationship between spectatorship and fandom, the history of fan studies—and of feminist studies of fandom—is dependent on a legacy of feminist film studies scholarship.

In the 1960s and 70s, apparatus and psychoanalytic theory were popular theoretical frameworks in film studies. These approaches tended to see film spectators as a collection of individual psyches—minds that the film apparatus positions in a particular way. This view of cinema holds that film’s technologies, formal and aesthetic codes, and systems of production/reception hold spectators within specific ideological perspectives and privilege certain views of the world. While informed by this framing of spectatorship, many feminist scholars also found it limiting. Analyzing film through a psychoanalytic lens helped reveal the ways in which classical Hollywood cinema privileges a white, heterosexual, and male gaze (Mulvey 1975). However, there were numerous spectators who were not white, male, or heterosexual. Jackie Stacey argues that: “an implicit textual determinism defines assumptions about spectatorship. … the term spectator implies a unified viewing experience, and its usage carries with it a very passive model of how audiences watch films” (Stacey 2011: 646). Sharing these concerns, many feminist scholars began approaching spectatorship from additional angles (e.g. genre, target markets, television viewing habits) and blending textual analysis with more empirical research methods. Many film scholars also found themselves studying a broader range of media and production environments (e.g. film, television, and print).

Annette Kuhn’s “Women’s Genres” (1984) is a useful starting point for anyone who wants to understand this history. Kuhn outlines two ways of conceptualizing audiences: as spectators and as social audiences. Due to the different ways film and television technologies
organize audiences and shape narratives, Kuhn argues that film and television scholars tend to study spectators differently. Kuhn organizes these approaches on a spectrum, with one end emphasizing text and the ways the text positions the viewer (spectatorship/film studies) and, at the other end, context and the social/industrial circumstances informing reception (social audiences/television studies).

For many feminist media scholars, the 1980s were marked by a move away from the study of spectatorship, or at least spectatorship as it had been understood prior to this period. Many scholars increased their focus on cultural contexts, systems of representation, and the structuring of identities and ideologies across media. There were also broader moves to research various production and reception contexts, incorporate trans-media analyses, and to study audiences using empirical research methods. In the process, one of the audience groups these scholars turned to was fans.

The interest in viewing contexts, the influence of television studies, and the focus on the social is evident in fan studies scholarship. Corresponding with Kuhn’s binaries of spectatorship/film studies and social audience/TV studies, a great deal of the research on fandom has been connected to television texts and audiences rather than film. However, all forms of research come with their own limits and affordances. Wherever their work falls on the spectator/social audience spectrum, it is critical that feminist fan scholars consider how their approach to research will shape their questions, methods, and findings.

### Conceptualizing fans

Being a “fan” implies an emotional connection between an individual and something, but there are many possible “somethings.” For example, a fan may enjoy a particular film, sports team, or a type of food. With fandom, however, the suffix “–dom” is significant. It signals a broader and shared declaration of affection, a group status, and a space in which one fan’s interests are shared with others. Fandoms are often identified with a particular text or media franchise (such as *Harry Potter* or *Breaking Bad*), or a media genre (for example, Japanese anime, Korean TV dramas, or science fiction). When researchers study fandom they often want to know how fans are engaging with media and making sense of popular culture. This means that analyses of fandom tend to center more on fans, fan communities, and fan practices than they do on the texts themselves. Additionally, contemporary fandoms are also highly digital. Fan interests are coded into user profiles on social media sites, and fan-marketing strategies have become a major part of selling any popular media product. Due to this, contemporary fan studies can be, simultaneously, a study of a fandom, of digital cultures and networks, and of an individual’s social media use.

While fandoms commonly organize around media texts and franchises, fan studies research often starts with an Internet forum or a fan convention and may, eventually, circle back around to a television show or film. Alternatively, the research might focus on the materials fans produce (a work of fan fiction, a fan-made music video, a fan in costume, or a work of fan criticism) rather than the media texts they are engaged with. Contemporary studies of fandom cover everything from the Japanese fans of Hong Kong celebrities (Hitchcock Morimoto 2013) to female gamers and their use of social media (Gray 2015).

Today, research on fandom (feminist or otherwise) is much more likely to be tagged with key terms like fan, audience, user, consumer, and participatory culture than it is with the term spectator. It also tends to be associated more with fan studies than it is with film studies. However, fan studies is an interdisciplinary network of scholars with connected research interests. It draws upon a multitude of methods and conceptual approaches from...
other disciplines. Among the many concepts it draws upon, spectatorship and feminist analyses of female spectators continue to play a critical role in fan studies and its history.

**Media Fandom, fan fiction, and slash**

Historically, feminist analyses of fandom have tended to focus on three particular aspects of fandom: Media Fandom as a specific fan community, fans’ creative practices (often within Media Fandom), and slash (male/male and female/female focused creative work and a genre closely associated with Media Fandom).¹ In part, Media Fandom became the focus of scholarly attention because it was, and continues to be, a predominantly female area of fan activity. It also constitutes a production network, as (mostly) female fans use it to connect with each other socially, engage in media criticism, and produce/circulate their own creative works.

Media Fandom emerged in the late-60s as an offshoot of Science Fiction Fandom, which has been in existence since the early twentieth century. While Science Fiction Fandom had been more exclusively focused on literary science fiction, *Star Trek*'s popularity in the late-60s introduced many new people to the genre. Divisions formed between the older networks of literary science fiction fans and the newer media science fiction fans. While Science Fiction Fandom continued to publish fanzines, organize local interest groups, and put together large fan conventions, the growing body of media fans began developing their own traditions. By the late-60s, fan fiction began to appear regularly in *Star Trek* fanzines and many well-known genres of fan writing were developed in the late-60s and 1970s. There were also clear gender differences emerging between these two groups. While there were prominent female fans prior to this period, historically, the Science Fiction Fandom was predominantly male. In the wake of *Star Trek*, fandom demographics changed. Many of the media fans joining Science Fiction Fandom were now female (Bacon-Smith 1999; Coppa 2006; Jamison 2013; Lichtenberg et al. 1975; Verba 2003). While both male and female fans read fanzines, the fan fiction writers were nearly all women (Coppa 2006; Jamison 2013; Lichtenberg et al. 1975).

During this period, early slash fan works (homoerotic stories and fan art) began to circulate. “The premise” that two fictional characters like *Star Trek*'s Kirk and Spock would be in a sexual relationship scandalized some and intrigued others. The Kirk/Spock premise quickly became a focal point for debate, fantasy, and for scholarly interest. While both adult content and slash were highly controversial, many female fans defended these practices and began to organize conventions and fanzines dedicated to these materials. Out of this, Media Fandom emerged as a space for (mostly) female fans, artists, and writers to share their enthusiasm for popular media, creative work, sexual fantasies, and media criticism. These three aspects of fandom—Media Fandom’s high numbers of women, the creative and critical practices predominantly sustained and shared by women, and slash as an erotic and romantic storytelling genre developed by women—drew in many feminist scholars interested in gender, media, and spectatorship. In contemporary fan studies, the focus has broadened beyond Media Fandom, its practices, and slash, but this genesis continues to inform feminist fan scholarship today.

**The beginning of fan studies**

As a field of academic inquiry, fan studies traces its origins to a series of articles, books, and essay collections published in the 1980s and early-90s. In 1985, Joanna Russ published “Pornography by Women for Women, With Love.” The following year, Patricia Frazier

While these early studies of fandom are now an important part of the fan studies canon, at the time, most of them were more directly linked with feminist media criticism. Feminist media scholars were engaged in a broader effort to analyze women’s culture, and advocated for academics to take feminized genres more seriously. Tania Modleski and Janice Radway published their work on romantic literature, film melodrama, and television soap operas during this time (Modleski 2007; Radway 1991). Arguing that these genres reveal deep contradictions about women’s roles in society, feminist media scholars worked to validate women’s culture and reclaim feminized genres like romance and serial television.

Media Fandom and its creative practices were also used to complicate the debate on women and pornography taking place across the feminist movement during this period. With Media Fandom primarily comprised of women, and with fan art/writing often sexually explicit, it was positioned as a female production space, and fan work as a female version of pornography. Explaining that, “the author doesn’t live her life according to feminist theory, but draws her feminist theory from her life,” Joanna Russ focused on her own relationship with pornography (Russ 1985a: 9). An academic, a well-known science fiction author, and a reader and writer of Kirk/Spock fan fiction, Russ theorized her own relationship with slash and argued that female fans “have—ingeniously, tenaciously, and very creatively—sexualized our female situation and training, and made out of the restrictions of the patriarchy our own sexual cues” (Russ 1985b: 86). In this way, Media Fandom and its creative practices were used to complicate feminist conversations on women and pornography and to challenge the idea that pornography is inherently misogynistic.

The excitement and optimism that these scholars feel when discussing slash fan fiction is clear across their writing. “[M]erely the premise” of these stories makes Russ’ “automatic nervous system [do] the nip-ups” (Russ 1985b: 81). Similarly, Constance Penley describes herself as, “for the most part, completely ga-ga over this fandom” (Penley 1994: 319). The work done on fandom in the late-80s and 1990s has been criticized for its enthusiasm and described as exemplifying a problematic “fandom is beautiful” phase of fan studies scholarship (Gray et al. 2007). However, it is important to remember that most of these early scholars were not attempting to establish fan studies as a discipline or mark out its borders. Their research circled back and contributed to central questions for feminist media and film scholars then and now: What enables women’s creative production? How do stories represent women’s desires and life experiences? What can be learned from feminized genres? This work was done as part of a broader academic conversation on women’s genres and the ways that female audiences negotiated between their particular life experiences and the ways that media texts imagined them.

Fandom goes digital

Fandom is a common feature of today’s digitized culture. Contemporary media is typically designed with some degree of audience participation and interaction in mind. In particular,
the remix practices now seen as commonplace in digital culture (fanvids and anime music videos, digital collage, machinima, etc.) have been strongly influenced by fans and their early adoption of digital technologies. Internet-based fandom and fan practices play a role in Henry Jenkins' theories of a contemporary convergence culture (Jenkins 2008), as well as Lawrence Lessig's arguments regarding the role of remix in digital culture and his recommendations for policy reform (Lessig 2008). However, digital fandom is not a new phenomenon. It has a surprisingly lengthy history, much of it shaped by fandom’s quick adoption of digital tools and networks in the 1980s and 90s. For feminist scholars interested in the role of gender within emerging digital practices, Media Fandom continued to be a useful focal point for their analyses.

Soap opera fans were connecting on Usenet forums as early as 1984, making soap fandom one of the earliest to connect online (Baym 1998: 111). Talking about soaps in online forums provided these fans “with interpretive resources to which fans may not have access on their own” (ibid. 127). Nancy Baym argues that soap operas function as a pretext that fans use to connect with other people and discuss a range of topics “including emotion, relationships, and selves” (ibid.). This suggests that part of the appeal of fandoms and fan practices are the opportunities they offer for individuals to engage in particular topics of conversation, as well as discussing and deconstructing popular media.

As access to computers increased, the new technology and communication networks were often celebrated as more open and democratic means of communication. The reality, however, was more complicated. Digital fandom was not without its problems. Studies of computer-based discussion forums found they replicated preexisting social hierarchies and norms (MacDonald 1998: 133). The use of new technologies was limited to individuals with access to computers and the free time to use them. In the 1990s, computer users were a fairly elite and limited group (ibid. 150). Computers facilitated dialog between more people, but in 1998, Andrea MacDonald observed many female fans using private mailing lists to create hierarchies of exclusivity among themselves. MacDonald found that “old social practices merge with new[,] creating a different but not radically new discursive space” (ibid. 133). In practice, new communication technologies were being used to create exclusive discussion forums and email lists just as easily as they were being used to facilitate large forums for public discussion.

There are also important reasons why female fans might want to create their own smaller and more exclusive discussion lists. In 1994, at least 94 percent of Internet users were male (Bury 2005: 1). Female fans encountered a great deal of stigma when they tried to share their interests in the more generalized Usenet groups. For example, in the early-90s, female Quantum Leap fans reported feeling pressured to leave rec.arts.tv (MacDonald 1998). In response, they created one of the first private mailing lists for (mostly) female fans in 1991 (ibid. 146). Feeling harassed and dismissed in the public forums, “many female fans chose to stake out and colonize cyberspaces of their own” where they could engage in media criticism and share creative work on their own terms (Bury 2005: 2). Rather than retreating from the Internet entirely, female fans strategically withdrew, “refusing to accept the fan practices engaged in by male fans and gathering in spaces of their own” (ibid. 17).

These early mailing lists and Usenet forums blurred the line between public and private fan conversations. Pseudonyms were already a part of fandom prior to the Internet but, as the Internet’s role in fandom grew, they became a standard practice. According to Sharon Cumberland, the paradox of cyberspace is that it offers “personal privacy in a public forum” (Cumberland 2011: 669). Female fans used this ambiguity “to explore feelings and ideas that were considered risky or inappropriate for women in the past” (ibid.). Pseudonymity enabled
larger numbers of individuals to join different fan forums and websites. While fandom could carry with it some degree of stigma, now fans could participate without feeling that being “fannish” would be traced back to them in their daily lives. Overall, the gendered aspects of fan networks and practices that so intrigued earlier feminist media scholars continued on in fans’ newer computer-based communication networks. The Internet also broadened fandom’s scope and integrated existing fan practices with the digital technologies and new cultural trends emerging at this time.

**Queering fan desires**

By the late-90s, it was routine for research on fans to assert that Media Fandom was predominantly white, female, and straight. The problem with this assertion is that it carries with it a normative function. It continually reinforces the idea that there are fannish “norms” and, in the process, crowds out the experiences of non-white, non-female, non-straight, and non-cisgendered fans. Given that much of today’s fan activity happens online, this image of the archetypal fan girl is more perceived than statistically verifiable. Rather than researchers questioning these assertions, asking how fandom reinforces them, or where the perception of a dominant type of fan is coming from, the claim has often been left unquestioned.

In contrast, many fans have begun to push back against the assertion that Media Fandom and slash are exclusive to heterosexual women. Polls and anecdotal evidence gathered by fans “suggest that the number of self-identified not-straight women is proportionally greater in [media] fandom than in the population at large” (Busse 2006: 208). While slash had traditionally been analyzed through a feminist frame, Rhiannon Bury argues that slash is less an undoing of masculinity and more a continual questioning of heterosexuality. In this context, slash can be “better understood as a queer practice” (Bury 2005: 31). Fans continually move back and forth between the familiar and unfamiliar, referencing societal norms, playing with their limits, and performing different identities. Within this interplay, Kristina Busse argues that fandom can become a performance of queerness and queer desires (Busse 2006). The performance may be a momentary experiment; however, its potentially transitory and temporary status continues to reaffirm it as a queer performance. For Busse, the destabilization of identity and fluidity of norms underlies many fandoms and fan practices and, again, reinforces its queerness.

**Ongoing concerns and (seemingly) absent parties**

As fandom has become more visible and fan practices more widespread, the broader image of “the fan” has changed from a persona that is socially stigmatized to one that is much more legitimated. Today, fandom is incorporated into media marketing strategies, monetized by Web 2.0 companies, and fan conventions like ComicCon have become major media events. And yet, as Kristina Busse reminds us, “if the mainstream embraces one form of geek, it risks excluding further or even negating the existence of whoever does not fit that new model” (Busse 2015: 111). This has become a growing area of concern for many feminist media scholars. If popular culture currently celebrates fans, it is typically the figure of the fan boy, and not the fan girl, that dominates popular imagination.

While feminist analyses of fans return again and again to Media Fandom, feminized fan practices and networks continue to be stigmatized, with female fans portrayed as hysterical, overly emotional, and unable to control and appropriately channel their desires. Mel Stanfill finds that the fans celebrated in media are typically those who learn to keep fannish
The process of learning to be a “good” fan is one that also reaffirms white, heterosexual, and male privilege. While the overly enthusiastic or improperly desiring fan is able to learn self-control, this process affirms one model of fandom while stigmatizing another (ibid.).

Profit is also used as a means of sorting between valuable and unproductive fan practices. In popular culture today, there is now an entire industry built around professional fans covering popular entertainment, celebrities, and new media releases. These professional fans serve as arbiters of taste and fan behavior. Suzanne Scott calls such an individual a “fantrepreneur,” “one who openly leverages or strategically adopts a fannish identity for his or her own professional advancement” (Scott 2015: 148). Fantrepreneurs demonstrate that fandom can be a legitimate path towards professionalization and profit. However, a fantrepreneur is much more likely to be white and male. Women fantrepreneurs often face increased scrutiny and accusations that their fandom is faked or insufficiently proven (Scott 2015).

Popular media franchises like *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games* draw large audiences and have many female fans. However, when these media and their fans receive attention, they are often positioned as embarrassing invaders into “real” fan spaces (Busse 2015; Hills 2013). To do fandom improperly, embarrassingly, and excessively often aligns with being feminized or non-normative in a variety of ways. On the surface, gender norms shape how fandoms and fan practices are coded—either pathologized or valued as productive. However, there are many additional hierarchies—race, class, sexuality, age, etc.—which intersect with what, on the surface, is most easily visible as gender (Busse 2015).

Feminist analyses of contemporary fandom have broadened beyond Media Fandom and slash, but the emphasis on Media Fandom continues, sometimes problematically so. Although Media Fandom increasingly incorporates popular media from around the world, analyses of fandom continue to center on Western and English-language media. Research tends to center on Western and English-speaking fans who occasionally “dabble” in international media. This ignores the various international contexts for fan practices, the global circulation of contemporary media, and the many borders fandoms cross. Addressing these gaps requires more than the occasional study of non-Western fans. Bertha Chin and Lori Hitchcock Morimoto call for fan scholars to be more attentive to cultural flows and transnational contexts. They argue, “we need a more effective means of accounting for social and cultural differences in fan practices across borders both geographical and cultural” (Chin and Hitchcock Morimoto 2013: 105).

Feminist media scholars have paid a great deal of attention to the role of gender and sexuality within fandom. Much less attention has been paid to the experiences of fans of color and to the issues of race and ethnicity across fandoms. Despite this lack of scholarship, fans themselves are increasingly debating issues of race and ethnicity in fandom and across popular culture. In 2008, when the cast was announced for a film version of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, many fans were outraged. Upset that movie producers were “changing the race of characters of color to white for reasons of marketability” fans organized an elaborate Internet-based protest campaign in response (Lopez 2014: 638). Lori Kido Lopez argues, “fan communities offer a potential space and set of tools for shifting conversations from fictional texts to the realities that they impact and rely upon” (ibid. 646). For feminist scholars interested in the relationship between personal and political, as well as the role of protest within today’s digital culture, Lopez’ observations underscore the need to study how and when fans connect their status as fans to broader social and political concerns.

More than thirty years have passed since Russ, Lamb and Veith, Penley and Jenkins first began to publish on and codify academia’s understanding of Media Fandom. Despite this,
analyses of fandom continue to circle around identity categories like gender and sexuality. Feminist analyses of fandom need to address the issues of class, race, and transnational media flows, and consider how they intersect with and shape fan experiences. In focusing primarily on gender and sexuality, whiteness is permitted to be an unspoken and seemingly neutral component of fandom. The reality, however, is that many members of Media Fandom are not white. Media Fandom’s social networks extend globally, crossing beyond the borders of Western English-speaking countries. More importantly, despite the size and prominence of Media Fandom, it remains one node of fan activity. The ongoing lack of scholarship on transnational fandom, on the experiences of fans in non-English-speaking countries, and on the experiences of fans who are not white, middle class, and cisgendered is painfully apparent. This is a signal to fan scholars that our love of Media Fandom, and perhaps our conception of fandom as a whole, is problematically shaping the possibilities of our discourse.

Related topics
Janet Staiger, “Film reception studies and feminism”  
Ikechukwu Obiaya, “Nollywood, female audience, and the negotiating of pleasure”

Notes
1. Specific fandoms will be capitalized in this essay in order to distinguish between specific fan networks and fandom as a general concept/activity.

References

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