

# **Identification in Popular Music: A Netnographic Exploration of Online Fan Communities**

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## **Abstract**

Although fan identification has received a lot of attention in sport, there is little research on fan identity in reference to popular music. This study employed a netnographic methodology to observe online fan activities. These activities were categorised as behaviour characteristic of a casual, loyal, die hard or dysfunctional fan using the four fan levels proposed by Beaven and Laws (2007) to represent distinct levels of fan engagement in regard to concert attendees. Analysis of different fan level behaviours evident in discussion on *Metallica's* online message board was contrasted with this rock fan typology. All four levels of fans were identified, dissimilar to previous studies that observed an absence of casual fans. It is suggested that the emergence of this fan level is due to an increase in internet usage, and may provide opportunity for marketers to gain an understanding of a large sub group of consumers at different levels of identification.

**Key words:** netnography · fan identification · online fan community · popular music · concerts

# Identification in Popular Music: A Netnographic Exploration of Online Fan Communities

## Introduction

Popular music can generate considerable economic activity to a vast array of commercial sectors, and has been described as providing strong brand identities, intense relationships with fans, the potential for making large amounts of money and a target for exploiting long term band-fan relationships (O'Reilly, 2004). The continuing popularity of live music has been found to be a significant contributor to the popular music scene, where concert attendance has been considered the most important sector of the music business for many artists (Waddell, 2009). Even in the face of the global economic crisis, the global concert industry managed a record \$US4.4 billion in box office revenues in 2009, with over 73 million people attending concerts worldwide (an increase of 11.7% and 12.6% respectively, from the previous year) (Waddell, 2009).

As the concert industry grows, so too do the number of internet users around the world. The number of people 'going online' has more than doubled in the last five years, from 817 million users in December, 2004 to 1802 million users in December 2009 (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2010). With an increasing number of people "connecting with others, working and making purchases, as well as simply passing time" via the internet (Xun and Reynolds, 2010, p.17), the music industry too "continues to move swiftly towards virtual market space" (Beaven and Laws, 2007, p.140). These 'virtual spaces' have created widespread online fan communities such as interaction through online message boards, that allow users with varied levels of identification to communicate with each other and maintain the link between 'performer and fan' (Kibby, 2000).

Identification has been defined as "an orientation of the self in regard to other objects, including a person or group, that results in feelings or sentiments of close attachment" (Trail et al., 2000, pp. 165-166). Highly identified fans have been acknowledged to attend more events, pay more for tickets, buy sponsors products and purchase more licensed merchandise (Fink et al, 2009), whilst less identified fans are seen as the cause of attendance fluctuations (Fink et al, 2002).

As communication technologies' continue to change so does the 'fan', not only in terms of consumption, but how they engage in fan activities (Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington, 2007). Understanding how fans differ in their level of involvement can provide useful insight to marketers so they may be better positioned to segment and target fans with different levels of identification.

The aim of this study is to explore the different levels of fan identification evident among online concert goers of the popular rock band, *Metallica*. This paper will first investigate the concepts of online fan communities and fan identification in popular music and key research questions are developed. The method for data collection and analysis will then be explained, followed by results and discussion.

## Literature Review

### Fan Identification

Fan identification is a concept that has been primarily used to describe different levels of fan engagement in sport (Trail et al, 2000; Hunt et al, 1999; Sutton et al, 1997). Fan identification describes the emotional involvement that a sports fan can hold with a sports team or player, resulting in feelings of close attachment (Trail et al, 2000). This attachment provides a means by which people begin to define themselves (Sutton et al, 1997).

A number of authors have presented models for differing levels of identification. Sutton, McDonald and Milne (1997) suggested three discernible levels of fan identification; low identification (Social Fans), medium identification (Focused Fans) and high identification (Vested Fans). These levels were derived on the belief that not all fans have the "same level of fervor, devotion, and

commitment to their favourite team” (p. 17). *Social Fans* partake in a passive relationship with the sport, are low on emotion and are attracted by the entertainment and social value of the sport. *Focused Fans* form an association with a sport or team based on “fad, social factors, team performance, or player personality” (p.17), however, the relationship or identification may be short term and can be easily affected by poor performance or changes in the team. *Vested Fans* are the most loyal and hold the longest relationship with the sport or team. They are very emotionally involved, and possess unwavering loyalty even in instances of poor performance (Sutton et al., 1997).

In response to the absence of research about music fans, Beaven and Laws (2007) undertook a mapping exercise drawing from sport and popular culture literature, namely Hunt et al (1999) and Thorne and Bruner (2006) to produce a terminology of different fan levels appropriate to rock fans. The “Rock Fan Typology” (Beaven and Laws, 2007, p. 125) proposed four different fan levels: casual, loyal, die hard and dysfunctional. Table 1 shows how these levels are characterised.

**Table 1:** Levels of Rock Fan Typology (Beaven and Laws, 2007, pp.126-127)

<b>Casual Fan</b>	A fan for a limited time (coinciding with a chart placing)  May own a small number of recordings  May be a regular attendee of a broad range of concerts but may only make a casual decision to attend a specific concert.	<b>Die Hard Fan</b>	Band is very important to self – identification  Will make changes to lifestyle - will travel and attend more than one gig per tour  Will wear t-shirts from previous tour or dress up  Will own all or most recordings, collect merchandise and will be very knowledgeable about band history.
<b>Loyal Fan</b>	Uses the band to maintain self-concept and is loyal even if chart placing is low.  Will attend a focused range of concerts within the band's sub genre but prioritise attending band's local concert  May identify themselves by wearing a band t-shirt and has many recordings and some merchandise.	<b>Dysfunctional Fan</b>	Band is primary means of self-identification and is main method of identification to others,  Interferes with other aspects of life (following tours at the expense of work/family life),  May seek contact with the band, including stalking behaviour  Will maintain a relationship with others in the community, although may seek to be recognised as an expert by them or be competitive or antagonistic to the community.

Beaven and Laws (2007) proposed that the levels of engagement in the fan community, and the management processes required in sport are closely congruent with music. The notion that sports fans are similar to fans of other interests (e.g. music) is supported by a recent study that investigates the similarities and differences between sports fans and fans of other interests in regards to identification with not only the fan ‘interest’, but also other fans (Reysen and Branscombe, 2010).

The purpose of Beaven and Laws (2007) research was to determine the “extent fans’ consumer behaviour in a virtual environment mirrors that of the physical market” (p. 125) in regards to online ticket sales. Using the ‘Rock Fan Typology’, Beaven and Laws (2007) were only able to identify loyal, diehard and dysfunctional fans in their analysis of the band *Depeche Mode’s* internet message board (IMB) throughout the band’s tour.

The definitions provided for each of these fan typologies provide information as to the type of consumption behaviour each fan level may participate in (for example, concert attendance, recordings, t-shirts and other merchandise), as well as their individual social behaviours. With such a high increase in internet users around the world, the question emerges about whether casual fans are also frequenting these sites and engaging in online communities. If so, are there opportunities for marketers to better position themselves for targeting this fan level?

### Online Fan Communities

The concept of “fan cultures” and “fandom” has been thoroughly considered by Hills (2002). Fans construct their own communities and Hills indicates the necessity for researchers to consider the difference between these fan communities in both their traditional and online cultures (Hills, 2002).

Online discussion forums and message boards of popular music artists/bands provide a virtual space for these fan communities to express their “fandom”, somewhere they can communicate their fanatical interests and social connections irrespective of geographical location (Kozinets, 1999).

The purpose of this paper is to gain a greater understanding of fan identity within popular music culture by investigating the public message board of the rock band *Metallica* – who in February 2010 were number one at the box office for U.S concert sales, with an average box office gross of \$US1.37 million per city in a week (Chicago Tribune, 2010). Mid year in 2009, *Metallica* had also grossed over \$US20 million between January 1 and June 30, selling 330,655 tickets in a six month period, after touring only nine cities (Pollstar, 2009).

The primary research questions of this investigation are:

- What levels of fan identification are evident among concert goers of the *Metallica* online fan community?
- Do these differ in terms of definition or abundance in reference to Beaven and Laws (2007) proposed levels of rock fan typology?

### **Methodology**

An ethnographic method, termed “netnography”, was employed for this research (Kozinets, 2002). Netnography is a technique that has been specifically developed for studying online communities in a natural and unobtrusive nature as apposed to traditional qualitative techniques such as focus groups and interviews (Kozinets, 2002). Netnography as a marketing research tool can provide researchers with an in-depth understanding of online consumer groups, including behaviour and consumption patterns (Kozinets, 2002 and Misra, Mukherjee et al, 2008).

The choice of using *Metallica*'s message board for this study was based on criteria adhered to in the literature (Kozinets, 2002 and Misra, Mukherjee et al, 2008). According to Kozinets (2002, p.63), a preferred online community is one that has:

- A more focused and research question-relevant segment, topic, or group;
- Higher ‘traffic’ of postings;
- Larger numbers of discrete message posters;
- More detailed or descriptively rich data; and
- More between-member interactions of the type required by the research question.

*Metallica*'s message board has five forums: Anything Metallica, Tour, March Madness Song Tournament, Death Magnetic and Polling Time. The content of the “Tour” forum was deemed ‘research question relevant’ to concert goers (entailing discussion of “shows, set lists and anything that relates to Metallica touring”). The message board is publically accessible (no need to join or pay money) and has a large fan base. As of March 2, 2010, the number of topics in the “Tour” forum was 3,131, with 64,915 replies and at the time of viewing there were a total of 154 active users online. The researcher did not actively participate in the discussion as to not influence interactions (Kozak and Decrop, 2009). Consent was not required as access was not restricted (e.g. by passwords and membership) and thus the site is deemed ‘public communication’ (Elgesem, 2002; Langer and Beckman, 2005; Beaven and Laws, 2007 and Kozak and Decrop, 2009).

An exploratory sample of 1524 postings (with 72,124 views) from the *Metallica* message board was analysed over a one month period (February 1, 2010 to February 28, 2010). All threads and their related posts were retrieved and downloaded. As a first pass, threads were either coded as primarily social or informational. As the social posts would be of interest in this research area, they were further classified as either on-topic or off-topic (Kozinets, 2002). On-topic threads and posts (113)

were then textually analysed and categorised into one of the four rock fan typologies using Beaven and Laws' (2007) criteria.

## Results and Discussion

Beaven and Laws (2007) classification of fan identification in rock music has been used to classify discussion topics. The data are reported in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Discussion topics categorised into Beaven and Laws rock fan typology (2007).

<b>Casual Fan</b>	Missed tickets/haven't seen Metallica before (2) New fan/ first Metallica concert (2) Don't care where they get seats (1) There for fun (1) Like live music (2) Seek advice/Info from other fans (5) Only see band if outdoor concert (8)	<b>Die Hard Fan</b>	Practise tries to get tickets (2) Meet up before show with other fans (6) Know band/history (12) Attend multiple shows (2) Comment on changing quality of shows (2) Think they are Metallica's biggest fan (4)
<b>Loyal Fan</b>	Become a fan member to get good tickets (1) Upload videos from concerts (1) Give tour advice to Metallica (25) Brag about getting tickets (3) Personally address the band/band member (19) Identify with genre (1)	<b>Dysfunctional Fan</b>	Early Line up (2) Drive/Fly long distances to follow tour (3) Willing to pick up stranger / Willing to go with stranger (2) Can't sleep (11 weeks before concert) (1) Changed travel plans (1) Stalking behaviour/seek contact with band (1) Competitive/antagonistic behaviour towards other fans (4)

**Note:** Numbers represent number of posts on topic

### Casual Fan

A total of 21 posts out of the 113 on-topic posts (19%) were identified as discussion pertaining to a casual fan. A casual fan is identified as being a fan for a limited time, such as coinciding with a chart placing (Beaven and Laws, 2007). At the time of analysis, *Metallica* were on tour for their "Death Magnetic" album. The majority of discussion apparent at this fan level was associated with the desire to obtain tickets, see *Metallica* for the first time and to seek information or advice from other fans. This desire was seen as "casual" decision to attend (Beaven and Laws, 2007) as participants were not bothered with seating allocation and expressed the desire to attend for fun – drinking and 'rocking out'. Casual Fans also sought to seek other forms of live music entertainment on the night and surrounding days; an indication of attendance to a broad range of concerts (Beaven and Laws, 2007). Moreover, some participants only expressed an interest in seeing the band at outdoor festivals, indicating attendance for experience and not necessarily a necessity to see *Metallica*.

### Loyal Fan

Loyal fans contributed to the majority of discussion (n=50; 44%). These fans attended other rock concerts in the sub-genre (Beaven and Laws, 2007) like Alice in Chains, Slipknot and Machine head. Loyal fans will become fan club members to obtain good tickets (and also brag about getting them). The preponderance of discussion among loyal fans was dedicated to conversing with the band. Participants personally addressed the band and specific band members, providing tour advice, advising where they should travel and with whom they should tour. Discussion was also devoted to thanking the band for their performances, giving individual band members personal praises and shaming them on broken promises.

### Die Hard Fan

Discussion from participants classified as diehard fans accounted for 25% (n=28) of total on-topic posts. These fans were knowledgeable about the band and the band's history and were able to comment on the changing quality of recordings and shows. They demanded recognition of this knowledge by acclaiming themselves as *Metallica's* biggest fans and sought contact with other fans - wanting to meet up with strangers with the same level of identification. Slight adjustments to

lifestyle (Beaven and Laws, 2007) were evident with discussion pertaining to travel to, and attendance of multiple shows, as well as peculiar activities such as allocating time to perform 'practice' ticket purchases.

### **Dysfunctional Fan**

Dysfunctional fans were the least represented in the discussion forum (n=14; 12%). Discussion attributed to dysfunctional fans demonstrated major interferences with other aspects of life (Beaven and Laws, 2007). One fan indicated that they lined up 19 days before a concert date just so they could be the first there. A number of dysfunctional fans revealed flying and driving vast distances to attend concerts (one car trip calculated to be over 1,000kms, others even travelled to different countries). These fans changed travel plans on concert announcements, were willing to pick up strangers (met on the discussion board) to accompany them on concert road trips and indicated not being able to sleep due to excitement, 11 weeks before a show. They sought to make physical contact with the band, investigating itineraries and which motel the band would be staying at. Competitive and antagonistic behaviour was also evident among these fans who sought to be experts (Beaven and Laws, 2007). This was indicated through discussion with others who asked questions/commented or made factual "*Metallica*" mistakes.

### **Conclusion and Directions for Future Research**

A characteristic of this study that distinguishes it from other research in this area, is that it exemplifies the behaviours of concert goers at the different levels of identification proposed by Beaven and Laws (2007); theory which is believed to be scant in reference to popular music fans. Analyses of posts on the *Metallica* discussion forum represent discourse of fan behaviours consistent with the levels of rock fan typology proposed by Beaven and Laws (2007). However, since Beaven and Laws (2007) netnographic study of the Depeche Mode 2005-2006 World Tour, internet usage has significantly increased. This increase has seemingly shifted the nature of fans who occupy online communities. Whilst Beaven and Laws (2007) identified only "serious fans" (loyal, die hard, dysfunctional, p. 125), this study has revealed a substantial number of casual fans interacting in the online community. Jenkins (1988) suggests that a person becomes a fan by sharing thoughts and feelings and joining a community of other fans who share common interests (p. 305). It therefore seems reasonable that the 'causal' fans in this study are in fact fans, not just spectators or contributors to the discussion.

Online fan communities are contained in websites that are "created to fulfil commercial, informational and social goals" (Baker, 2009, p. 20) and provide opportunities for marketers to gain an understanding of a large sub group of consumers. It has been suggested that highly identified fans (loyal, die hard and dysfunctional) already exhibit greater loyalty, more price tolerance and less performance sensitivity (Gwinner and Swanson, 2003). Whilst casual fans may attend concerts for social and experiential reasons, understanding the reasons for concert attendance provide opportunities for music managers and marketers to not only better segment and target specific fan markets, but also develop new entertainment markets based on the characteristics (e.g. demographic, psychographic) of these fans. Understanding fans at different levels of involvement would also allow development of marketing strategies that could increase the level of a fan's involvement and in turn increase awareness and patronage (Gwinner and Swanson, 2003). The results of this exploratory study indicate that increasing casual fans' involvement may be achieved by considering the behaviours identified by casual fans, and creating events that appeal to the casual consumer, such as outdoor concerts and festivals.

Some limitations of the study include: the examination of online fan identity using only one band (i.e. *Metallica*), the use of an exploratory sample of online posts, the applicability of the results to offline identity and the reliability in the classification of discussion into the four fan levels. Future

studies should adopt a quantitative approach in examining fan behaviour of popular music concert attendees, both in an online and offline context.

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