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Groupies, Fangirls and Shippers: The Endurance of a Gender Stereotype

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Abstract

The purpose of this special issue is to offer new perspectives on fan cultures which respond to changes and controversies that have happened since the last *American Behavioral Scientist* special issue on fandom was published, in 2005. But the aim of my contribution is to argue that, sadly, derisive-gendered discourses like 'fangirls', 'groupies' and 'shippers' are still alive and well. Returning to the kind of research conducted in the 1980s – when women's experiences of feminized popular cultures began to be taken seriously – reminds us that their pleasures are no less derided or controversial four decades on. My findings also suggest that the enduring presence of older stereotypes within teen drama fandoms – particularly the 'groupie' – signals the agility of sexism, as the term can now be understood as more of a generational designation rather than a medium-specific one. This article is the product of three years of qualitative empirical research with 'teen girl' fandoms of three popular television shows: *Pretty Little Liars*, *Revenge* and *The Vampire Diaries*. The data it discusses includes Skype audio and video interviews, written interviews conducted via email and Facebook Messenger, along with overt social media observations.

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Introduction

In the introduction to *American Behavioral Scientist*'s previous special issue on fandom, published in 2005, Harrington and Bielby set the scene by explaining that the issue's contributions 'represent[ed] significant advances in fan studies to date' (2005, p. 799), and that they challenged 'established scholarly and common-sense notions of fandom' (2005, p. 800) of the time. As noted in their Editorial, the goal of Williams' and Bennett's special issue is similar: offering a follow-up to the foundational 2005 issue to provide new perspectives on fan cultures, responding to some of the changes and controversies that have happened in the sixteen years since its publication. But what if there are important aspects of fan cultures that have *not* changed between 2005 and the present day?

In this spirit, my contribution to this special issue is to explore the endurance of controversial gender stereotypes about certain fan identities and behaviours. My article explores how three derisive discourses – 'groupies', 'fangirls' and 'shippers' – are frequently used to demarcate controversial fan behaviours, but are actually deeply unoriginal modes of fannish distinction. As Hannell explains, 'fangirl' can be used as a verb, intended to describe (and deride) 'a youthful, (hyper)feminine, and performative act of cultural consumption marked by excessive displays of embodied affect' (2020, p. 1). We then have the 'groupie', a term that emerged in the 1960s to label devoted fans of male musicians who were supposedly more interested in having sex with pop icons than in their music (Cline, 1992; Ehrenreich et al., 1992). As this article will show, this term is now detached from its roots in music and sexuality and applied to fans of other genres, like teen TV. Perhaps most recently, we have the 'shipper' fan, a term short for 'Relationshippers' which refers to fans who are interested in fictional romantic relationships in media texts (Williams, 2011). In what follows, I show how these tropes manifest in three 'teen girl' fan communities (that is, texts predominantly aimed at teenage girls): teen drama television series Pretty Little Liars (2010–2017), Revenge (2011–2015) and The Vampire Diaries (2009–2017).[1]

Extant literature tells us that these three discourses are frequently used to devalue fans, fandoms and behaviours discursively positioned as feminine. They circulate externally to fandoms via dominant cultural stereotypes, but they also circulate *within* fandoms as a way of maintaining boundaries and designating other fans as controversial: a process Stanfill (2013) calls 'intra-fan stereotyping'. But – and crucially for this article – my empirical data show that these gender stereotypes are also deeply connected to age. My adult respondents (those over the age of eighteen) drew on these terms to deride the show's younger and mostly female fans, thereby legitimizing their own fraught subject position as fans of a show for which they are not the target demographic. Hills calls this intersection '"gender plus," that is, gender plus age or orientation' (2012, p. 121), though I would add to Hills' term to account for the assumed whiteness of the fangirl in both public discourse and academia (Pande, 2018), and classed assumptions about teen drama fandoms as a non-'quality' televisual text (Williams, 2015).

Many of my adult respondents grew up with the term 'groupie', and this article partly shows how they bring it back to life by applying it to contemporary fandoms. One of the aims of this piece is therefore to put the groupie into conversation with more contemporary incarnations of terminological dismissal of female fans, and to show how intra-fannish dynamics represent the endurance and flexibility of inequalities such as sexism (see Gill, 2011). Flexible forms of sexism are, as Gill (2011) argues, perhaps even more troubling than their more traditional forms precisely because they are perpetuated within fandoms through intra-fan dynamics. This makes them much harder to identify and perhaps normalizes them: a deeply problematic trend (Hill et al., 2016). This article begins by describing the methods used in my three-year long empirical research with teen girl fandoms. The remaining sections then show how phrases like 'groupie', 'fangirl' and 'shipper' are central to my respondents' pleasures, *particularly* the adults.

Methods

The aim of my research (conducted between 2014 and 2017) was to explore how fans of contemporary teen drama television series use social media to engage in fandoms (Gerrard, 2017; 2020; forthcoming). It intended to update literature published during feminist scholars' 'turn to pleasure' in the 1980s (Hollows, 2000) to understand if popular, girlish pleasures were any less problematic four decades on. Because teen drama series sit low down on a cultural hierarchy of taste (Davis & Dickinson, 2004), I knew that my twenty-two research participants likely experienced derision from certain people in their lives and therefore used social media to engage in 'secret' acts of fandom. My three main qualitative research methods – (1) fourteen in-depth, semi-structured Skype interviews, (2) eight structured typed interviews, and (3) seventeen social media observations – were therefore adapted to ensure my participants, who already used pseudonyms across various social media platforms, were re-pseudonymized. This research received approval from the University of Leeds' Research Ethics Committee.

The methods I used to conduct this research were largely dictated by the ethics of social media research, and I took several measures to preserve my participants' pseudonymity (Gerrard, 2020). For example, I do not quote directly from my participants' social media accounts as this would risk re-identifying them, and I sought participants' consent for me to observe their social media fan account(s) for a three-month period immediately following the date of our initial interview. I also recorded the observations through hand-written field notes instead of a digital methods tool to avoid capturing the data of those who had not consented to be researched (Gerrard, 2020).

Further, I did not ask participants to give me their 'real' identity markers, such as their age or gender, and instead allowed them to emerge through our conversations, if indeed they emerged at all. During my fieldwork, I created a table listing participants' demographic details, but there were several blank fields because I did not want to assume any identity markers. Importantly, participants revealed their racial identity to

me far less than, say, their age, gender or sexual orientation. When participants did discuss their race, they tended to be of colour. I want to note here that the relative absence of race in my study should not be taken as a sign that racial identity was unimportant for my participants. On the contrary, the absence of race might be taken as a sign of *whiteness*; namely: its unremarkability (Dyer, 1997); the depiction of fandom as 'a sort of failed nonheteronormative whiteness' (Stanfill, 2011, n.p.) in mainstream media representations; the dominance of 'white middle-class girls' in 'many of the most dominant cultural tropes about fan girls' (Hannell, 2020, p. 3), and the overwhelming whiteness of the media texts I analysed, partly in terms of casting choices (Berridge, 2013). To quote Pande, whiteness seemed to be 'the (unsaid) default' (2018, p. 8) for most of my research participants.

Age became another standout feature of my research data and analysis. Of my twenty-two participants, only two were under the age of eighteen (but no younger than sixteen), and only one participant did not disclose their age at all. The dominance of adults in my dataset might have resulted from my sampling method – snowball sampling – but it was a striking finding nonetheless, and one that features heavily in this article. I now turn to a discussion of my empirical research data, which uncovers the reproduction of three gendered discourses within fandoms: the groupie, the fangirl and the shipper.

The Groupie

In the early 1990s, feminist scholars like Cline (1992) and Ehrenreich et al. (1992) critiqued discursive constructions of the *groupie*: a heteronormative term used to devalue female music fans who seemed to be more interested in pursuing sexual relations with male musicians than their musical talents. Scholarly work on the groupie has mostly fallen out of fashion (for an exception, see Hill, 2016), yet it continues to exist as a loaded sexist discourse. My article partly explores the generational use of the term 'groupie', showing how – and why – it has been brought it back to life and applied to contemporary teen drama fandoms. Many of the adult fans in my research used the term to disparage younger fans' behaviour, which resonates with Ehrenreich et al.'s point that groupies' collective actions were seen as an 'epidemic', for which 'there appeared to be no cure except for age' (1992, p. 87). Several fan studies scholars have explored the intersection between age and gender bias in pop culture fandoms: for example, the 'Brony' fandom (adult male fans of the kids' *My Little Pony* franchise) (Jones, 2015) and the '*Twilight* Moms' (adult female fans of the teen romance franchise) (Scodari, 2014). Research on age/aging and fandom teaches us that adult fans have long been pathologized for engaging with media texts not intended for their demographic (Harrington & Bielby, 2010), and this is because behaviours that are deemed 'appropriate' or otherwise change throughout the life course (Harrington & Bielby, 2010).

For example, one of my adult fans, Jessica, used the term 'groupie' during our interview to distinguish herself from younger female *Pretty Little Liars* fans. Jessica

identifies as a heterosexual, married woman in her thirties who works as a teacher, real estate agent and 'Mompreneur'. She has also earned a Masters in Business Administration (MBA) degree. Jessica only engages in *Pretty Little Liars* fandom on Facebook Pages, and values Pages hosting 'educated' discussions about the show, and that attract 'other mothers' and people of her age.[2] In the quote below, she distinguishes these Pages from what she calls the 'teenybopper' ones:

> INTERVIEWER: What happens in those groups that you don't like?
>
> JESSICA: Just the postings and everything. Like, I'm obsessed with Lucy Hale type of thing. And I'm obsessed... You know, they're just like... You know, the typical groupies type of thing. I don't see much substance in it. They're not giving us much information. [...] They're more like groupies, like they're just obsessed with the people, with the actors, more than the storyline and the books.

Jessica explains that 'high-school [aged], fifteen- and sixteen-year-old girls' dominate Pages like this. Her words echo Click (2009) and Busse's (2013) observations that fangirls – and therefore their predecessors, groupies – are portrayed in popular media as 'obsessing' over celebrities, such as the *Pretty Little Liars* actress Lucy Hale. Jessica ostracizes young female fans who engage in certain acts; ones that she feels are obsessive and lacking in substance, legitimizing the seemingly substantive and informative fan spaces that she inhabits.

This is a prime example of a generational use of the term 'groupie', and of the intersection between age and gender bias in my dataset. That is, the reason gender norms like 'groupie' continue to be perpetuated through intra-fan dynamics – and the reason why fans like Jessica would devalue other fans belonging to their own gender – is in large part because of their relationship to age. In direct response to the theme of this special issue, the reason why the 'groupie' continues to exist as a *controversial* cultural figure is precisely because she is used as a method of distancing (or delineation) from certain behaviours that, over the life course, become viewed as unacceptable for people of certain ages.

During our interview, Jessica also reproduced anxieties about collective expressions of female sexuality. As Stanfill notes, fans are often portrayed as being 'confused about the distinctions between fantasy and reality, which leads to connotations of insanity and lack of behavioural and affective boundaries' (2013, p. 124). These behaviours are gendered, as it is groupies who are scorned for 'abandon[ing] control' of their sexual desires, and for 'scream[ing]' and 'faint[ing]' (Ehrenreich et al., 1992, p. 85) at the sight of their (typically male) objects of affection. Jessica rearticulates these discourses in the quote below:

> You know, people idolize the– The– I don't even know what the One Direction people look like. But I'm thinking, you know, people idolize them just like they're obsessed with our guys. You know, Caleb and all those people. Toby, which, you know... *Laughs*. I'm

indifferent because I'm an adult. But people really love them! [...] So many people are so emotionally invested in these characters. [...] Some people get so upset about it. [...] I'm an adult, and I'm married. And I watch it, and I'm like, oh, that's cute. But I don't fantasize my life in there. And I can think of myself maybe ten, fifteen years ago watching it and falling in love with these characters. [...] It's a different perspective. If I was watching this at seventeen years old, it would be completely different from the way I feel today.

Here, Jessica separates her fan behaviours from younger groupies'. She distances herself from younger fans by maintaining that she 'doesn't even know' what the members of the popular boyband One Direction look like, and reproduces the same language that was used to disparage groupies. For example, she uses intense affective terms such as 'idolize', 'obsessed', 'upset', 'fantasize' and 'falling in love', rendering younger fans' afflictions as deviant. Jessica feels she is 'indifferent' to such extreme emotions because she is an adult, which resonates with Ehrenreich et al.'s argument that the only treatment for groupies' affliction was 'age' (1992, p. 87). Here, we can clearly see the devaluation of girlish fandoms based on a unique intersection of gender *and* age. As a woman in her thirties, Jessica believes that she has been cured of the groupie 'epidemic' (Ehrenreich et al., 1992, p. 87), which constructs her fan behaviour as unthreatening.

Jessica's words firstly illustrate the endurance of the groupie as a term that is used to 'deride women as a group' (Lewis, 1992, p. 3), but, interestingly, not always in relation to their sexual desires. They secondly demonstrate the problematic manifestation of sexism within teen drama fandoms, given that it is perpetuated through intra-fan dynamics. These dynamics represent a form of *flexible sexism* (Gill, 2011), as fans like Jessica devalue younger fans' groupie-like behaviour to normalize their own fandom. This is partly why Gill discourages readers from thinking about sexism as a 'single, unchanging "thing" (e.g., a set of relatively stable stereotypes)' (2011, p. 62). To be clear, I am not suggesting that fans like Jessica are being deliberately discriminatory here, but argue instead that she and other adult fans perhaps strategically mobilize cultural discourses in response to derision. The presence of the 'groupie' stereotype within teen drama fandoms signals the agility of sexism (Gill, 2011), as the term can now be understood as more of a generational designation rather than a medium-specific one (in that it is tied to emotional or sexual excess rather than tied so explicitly to music). I now analyse the contemporary manifestation of the groupie: the 'fangirl'.

The Fangirl

'Fangirl' is a discourse that is commonly used to devalue young and feminine fans, fandoms and behaviours (among others, Busse, 2013; Cann, 2015; Click, 2009; Ewans, 2019; Hannell, 2020; Hills, 2012; Pande, 2018; Stanfill, 2013). She is one of the most dominant mediated images of fandom in contemporary culture, yet she does not symbolize an increased acceptance of fandom. Rather, as Click notes, fangirls are 'ridiculed' (2009, *n*.p.) in the popular press for their enactments of 'uncontrolled,

socially unacceptable desire' (Stanfill, 2013:118). Their affection is typically directed at male popular cultural icons, which makes the term heteronormative (van der Graaf, 2014), and the fan*girl* is also evidently imagined to be youthful. Their behaviours are belittled by the news media and labelled with 'Victorian era gendered words like "fever," "madness," "hysteria," and "obsession"' (Click, 2009, n.p.). As Busse (2013) argues, the fangirl is the Other against which fans of more acceptable (masculine) cultures are measured. Yet, such derisions do not only circulate in the popular press. To borrow from Stanfill (2013), they are also perpetuated through intra-fan dynamics. In what follows, I show how adult fans of teen drama television series repurpose the fangirl stereotype to help them facilitate their own objectionable *pleasures*, thereby benefitting from sexism's flexibility.

In addition to running social media fan accounts for the show, *Pretty Little Liars* fan Amanda also co-organizes conventions for other television series. Amanda is a married, forty-something, heterosexual woman who lives in North America. She holds a Master's in Business Administration (MBA) degree and works part-time as an events manager. Much to my surprise, Amanda told me that she enacts the identity of her teenage child on her *Pretty Little Liars* Facebook fan Page: something she does because she was bullied for being an adult fan of a teen show when she participated in the show's official Facebook Page using her Facebook Profile, which disclosed her 'real' identity. During our interview, Amanda commented on the behaviour of some of the convention's volunteers:

> I mean, I'm not– I'm not a fangirl. And I-- That's why I'm one of the supervisors for the conventions that come through here because I'm not– All of the– Most of the volunteers are fans of the show, and if they get around celebrities, they go all fangirl. Um... But I'm professional.

Here, Amanda juxtaposes her own 'professional' and therefore rational, mature and acceptable behaviour against the convention volunteers', many of whom 'go all fangirl' around celebrities. I then asked Amanda to define the term 'fangirl', to which she replied:

> Well, fangirling is, to me, is just the, oh my god! Oh my god! You know, people that can't control themselves *laughs*.

This statement, punctuated with laughter, is an explicit derision of hyperfeminine (Cann, 2015) fangirl behaviours. For Amanda, fangirls are 'hysterical' (van der Graaf, 2014, p. 38) – 'oh my god!' – and 'out-of-control' (Busse, 2013, p. 74) – 'people who can't control themselves'. This less acceptable and '[un]professional' behaviour un-does the fan identity that Amanda has carefully crafted through her Facebook fan Page and through her work as an events manager.

Although Amanda enacts the identity of her teenage child, she deliberately distances herself from the fangirl stereotype:

> I think I have a little bit more of a selective fan base than other Pages. I think mine tend to be a little bit older and more mature, for the most part. I've got a lot of people between the ages of twenty and thirty, women. And they're very loyal people. They're on there every single week, waiting for every single post that I make. [...] I think that the people who actually understand the show are more on my Page. Because it's more of a-- It's a little bit of a higher level of intelligence type of Page.

Amanda explains that her Page attracts *Pretty Little Liars* fans who have a 'higher level of intelligence' than others, and who 'actually understand the show'. By using terms such as 'older' and 'mature' to describe herself and her Page participants, Amanda constructs her enactments of fandom as more rational and acceptable than simply 'fangirling' over the show and its celebrity actors. This behaviour threatens to undermine Amanda's carefully crafted fan identity, which she feels compelled to normalize because she recognizes that it is unconventional. Amanda's pleasures are only permissible if they are measured against Others who engage in riskier behaviour, such as the fangirls, though I maintain that fans like Amanda are not being deliberately sexist but are invoking gender stereotypes to defend and legitimize their own subject positions.

Also important to note here is that, especially for my white, cisgender, female participants, their derision within teen drama fandoms might be one of the only times in their lives they have felt marginalized. As Pande explains, there is a 'consistent trend that positions the fangirl as a marginal identity' (2018, p. 27), but this argument 'maintain[s] that the very act of identifying as a fan somehow makes white cisgender women participants in these spaces less privileged on an institutional level' (2018, p. 28). A related question to be explored in future publications is to ask how these stereotypes might be passed down generationally: are older tropes like 'groupies' sticking around because older female fans are upholding and perpetuating them in response to agism? Questions like this will help us to understand why older *and* newer sexist discourses seem to be so rife in girlish fandoms; an argument I now further through my analysis of the shipper fan.

The Shipper

The third gendered discourse that I examine in this article is the 'shipper' fan. As Williams explains, this term is short for '"Relationshippers" (Scodari & Felder, 2003, p. 240) and refers to fans' support for fictional romantic relationships in texts such as television shows, films, or novels' (2011, p. 271). Shipping is also gendered, as it has 'often been perceived as a culturally feminised fan practice due to its associations with romance, love, and emotionality' (Williams, 2011, p. 271). As with fangirling, shipping is a term that has recently entered mainstream discourse (Williams, 2011), yet its popularization should not be mistaken as a sign of the increased acceptance of fan cultures (Scott, 2019). Indeed, my research shows that adult fans of teen TV talk about a divide between different 'kinds' of fans, and that the shipper fan is frequently Othered.

When teenage fans use the word 'ship', it is used earnestly. Yet when older fans use it, they do so to deride younger fans.

For example, three of my teenage participants – Carrie, Kat and Vicky, who all self-identify as female fans of *The Vampire Diaries* – discussed their preferred 'ships' in a literal and non-derisive way:

> I am a huge Delena shipper. (Carrie, female, teenager, *The Vampire Diaries* fan)

> Stefan and Caroline hooked up and that was just so forced and so... Ew. I don't like that ship. (Kat, female, teenager, *The Vampire Diaries* fan)

> Let's admit it, even Stelena shippers can say by now that Damon is Elena's one true love. (Vicky, female, teenager, *The Vampire Diaries* fan)

Carrie, Kat and Vicky typed their interview replies, which meant our discussions were less detailed and should therefore be read differently to those of my Skype audio and/or video participants. Notably, their longest replies were in response to questions about their favourite and least favourite aspects of the show's narrative. Here, they all wrote about their favourite 'ships', using this term in a far more literal way than my adult respondents. They wrote about fannish activities like 'role-play' (Kat) and the many 'friends' they have made in the fandom (Vicky), largely framing *The Vampire Diaries* fandom in a positive light. Carrie was the only participant to comment on other fans' behaviours, and she focused on the often-fierce 'competition' between fan pages to get more 'likes' (whereas Vicky said that gaining 'likes' 'increases' her enjoyment of the fandom, 'and it motivates me to work hard').

Conversely, adult fans Amanda, Taylor, Kate and Emily explain that shipping is an activity that younger fans engage in, which is precisely what makes it unacceptable. For Amanda, there is a 'fan of the show, and then a shipper fan', reflecting Hadas' argument that shippers are guilty of focussing on relationships 'to the exclusion of all else' (2013, p. 336). Amanda explains that young and female fans of the show 'get pleasure out of' shipping, yet she does not 'get the same satisfaction' from it:

> That's not why I'm watching the show. I'm watching the show to figure stuff out, and I'm not watching to watch them mack on each other all the time. But that's a teenage thing that people wanna see, and they have to incorporate it in there to make the younger viewers happy too.

Amanda later told me that the fans of her Page are 'generally fans of the show and fans of intelligent theory, and not shipper fans'. She condemned shipper fans for their dependency on the show's romantic pairings and not with other, more 'intelligent' aspects of its narrative. For Amanda, the purpose of the characters' relationships is to 'make the younger viewers happy'.

Taylor – who identifies as a thirty-something, heterosexual, stay-at-home-mom with a Master's degree – also explained that *Pretty Little Liars* fans are not 'the shipper kind

of fans', but *The Vampire Diaries* fans are. This is because, in her view, the latter show's narrative is more focussed on 'romance' whereas the former prioritizes 'female friendships'. Both Amanda and Taylor imply that there are hierarchies of acceptability within fandoms, which they themselves perpetuated during the interview by devaluing shipper fans. Harrington & Bielby (2010) note similar findings in their research, explaining that, as people age, certain activities become 'inappropriate', like taking pleasure in teen screen relationships as an adult. A near identical criticism has been levelled at the *Twilight* Moms, who, as Jones notes, face criticism on the axes of *both* gender and generation for their supposedly 'creepy' behavior (2015, p. 122).

Indeed, one of my adult participants, Kate, views shipping as a controversial force within fan Pages. Kate identifies as a Brazilian, twenty-something, heterosexual, female *Revenge* fan. With the help of another fan, she runs a website and Facebook fan Page for the show. Kate explains that her fan Page is generally 'peaceful' and that the participants are:

> Most[ly] interested in the storyline. Most of the time, actually, they're interested in the storyline. But sometimes they say something about the characters and the development of the characters. But it's mostly about the storyline. [...] Some fans argue about shipping, which is about the show's couples. They like to talk about the couples they like and the couples they don't really like.

Like Amanda and Taylor, Kate suggests that there are two kinds of *Revenge* fans: those who are interested in the show's narrative, and those who are interested in characters' relationships. For Kate, the latter fans – the shippers – disrupt the 'peaceful [ness]' of her fan Pages, which she consciously works to maintain. She also creates a boundary between her fan identity and the shippers' by saying '*they* argue about shipping', yet she does not. As Hadas notes, the shipper is a '(female) fan whose interest in the show is dependent on and limited to a single romantic pairing portrayed therein' (2013, p. 336–337), yet fans like Kate are more interested in the storyline. This sets up an us versus them rhetoric between fans within the same fandom (Zubernis & Larsen, 2013), and in this case, the 'them' is the emotionally and intellectually under-developed shipper fan.

Fellow *Revenge* fan, Emily – a North American woman in her early-twenties who works in communications and has an undergraduate degree – distinguishes the *Revenge* fandom from *The Vampire Diaries* and Reign (2013-2017) fandoms.[3] During our interview, Emily raised concerns about the role social media plays in fandoms, particularly when shipper fans abuse it:

> With the ships and with the actors and whatnot, they're not afraid to um.... Send hate or bash or– It gets very defensive and a bit of a battleground. And I know with *The Vampire Diaries* it's, you know, it's the big ship, it's Delena! It's Delena! And it's all– It drives the fandom. And while it's really great to see, it's also a bit of a downside sometimes, and every fandom has that. Every fandom has a ship war that's going to– To separate fans or

bring them together or whatnot, and– sigh. Yeah. I think it can get very overwhelming for a lot of fans and– And for fan page owners, I mean a lot of them a very young themselves, and they just jump into it like oh this is going to be great! They're not– They're naïve and they're not expecting it. And when it comes, they don't know how to handle it because of how crazy it can get.

Although Emily celebrates visible enactments of fandom, perhaps because she is aware that the activity is stigmatized, she derides the 'young', 'crazy' and 'naïve' shipper fans. This reinforces all sorts of stereotypes about fans and sets her identity apart from dominant and problematic mediated images of young and female fans. It is very interesting that both Emily and Kate frame shipping as a 'battleground' and a 'war', as both terms denote violence. The term 'ship war' has been recently popularized alongside shippers and fangirls, and is defined as:

> When two groups of shippers fight over whose romantic duo is destined to be. It is especially fractious if the head writer for the show publicly disses one coupling. These fights happen on the forum board for the show and lead to lots of trolling, ship vids, shopped pics and out right hatred. The only positive is they bring much lulz (Urban Dictionary, 2009).

According to both Emily and the above definition, shipping and ship wars are linked to controversial, hate-fuelled online practices like trolling (see Bergstrom, 2011). This negative representation is especially concerning as shipping is linked to female fans, potentially perpetuating sexist stigmas.

Evidently, shippers – along with groupies and fangirls – are *not* embodiments of the increased societal acceptance of fan cultures, despite their cultural popularity (and, in the groupie's case, endurance). Not only have sexist derisions of young and female fans endured, but they might have worsened (Gill, 2011), given that teen drama fans themselves use loaded terms like groupie, fangirl and shipper to ostracize other fans. I once again contend that the fans quoted in this section are not being consciously sexist, but that they invoke gendered stereotypes to normalize their own fandom, and distance themselves from a pathologized fannish identity. I now offer some concluding thoughts to this article.

Conclusion

I close with an anecdote about a rare moment of rupture from the stereotypes discussed at length in this article.

When a mainstream news outlet publishes a picture of a teenage girl singing her heart out at a pop concert, you would be forgiven for expecting her to be called a *fangirl*, ridiculed for her attachment to a pop culture icon (for example, see the image used in Rosenblatt, 2017). But the 2017 terrorist attack at Ariana Grande's Manchester Arena concert – which left 22 dead and over 800 injured (BBC News, 2018) – prompted a

temporary discursive shift, where stereotypes of teen girl fandoms were suspended. Headlines like 'Manchester's heartbreak: "I never grasped what big pop gigs were for until I saw one through my daughter's eyes"' (Petridis, 2017) and 'The horror of an attack targeting young women' (Gilbert, 2017) offered teenage girls brief respite from the ridicule to which they have become accustom. In the aftermath of the Manchester attack – and for the first time in my memory – popular *girlish* pleasures were celebrated and not scorned. I end with this anecdote to note quite how exceptional a societal respite from the fangirl stereotype is. If the purpose of this special issue is to offer new perspectives on fan cultures which respond to changes that have happened in the sixteen years since the last *American Behavioral Scientist* special issue on fandom was published, then the aim of my article has been to argue that, sadly, derisive-gendered discourses like 'fangirls', 'groupies' and 'shippers' are still alive and well.

Brunsdon made an almost identical argument over two decades ago, noting that she had 'always been conscious of the way in which what women and girls like is somehow *worse* than the equivalent masculine pleasures' (1997, p. 2, emphasis in original). Returning to the kind of research conducted in the 1980s (for example, Ang, 1985; Modleski, 1990; Radway, 1984) – when women's experiences of feminized popular cultures began to be taken seriously – reminds us that their pleasures are no less derided four decades on. Indeed, the enduring presence of the older 'groupie' stereotype within teen drama fandoms signals the agility of sexism (Gill, 2011), as the term can now be understood as more of a generational designation rather than a medium specific one (in that it is tied to emotional or sexual excess rather than tied so explicitly to music). It seems we are only offered *suspensions* of these stereotypes, via tragedies like the Manchester Arena attack in 2017.

As teen drama series have a low cultural status, their adult fans often try to normalize their pleasures. But this can unfortunately mean reproducing the same intersecting ageist and sexist discourses that are levelled against them. Derision works in an interesting way in teen drama fandoms. First, it can be used to help adult fans normalize their devalued pleasures, as they frame other fans' behaviors as controversial (e.g. 'fangirling') to make their own pleasures seem more acceptable. But second, fans mobilize derision to generate a form of *pleasure*, as some of my adult respondents enjoy adopting roles that elevate their cultural status (for example, being an 'educator' of other fans). Both findings are deeply troubling for teen drama fandom as they suggest that derision is inescapable, given that it is mobilized in direct response to other forms of criticism. The reproduction of derision might also be thought of as *intrinsic* to fans' pleasures and may well constitute a pleasure in and of itself. Though this is not necessarily a deliberate act, perhaps it is only by rearticulating stereotypes and ostracizing other fans that their pleasures can become permissible.

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Notes

1. Pretty Little Liars (2010–2017) told the story of four female teenage friends – Aria, Emily, Hanna, and Spencer – who began receiving a series of mysterious text messages from 'A' after the death of their friend, Alison. The series was set in the suburban, middle-class, fictional town of Rosewood, PA, and progresses with the girls trying to discover the identity of 'A'. Revenge (2011–2015) told the story of a twenty-something woman, Emily, who returned to her hometown to exact revenge against the people who wrongfully accused and convicted her father of a terrorist act. The show was set in the wealthy North American neighbourhood of The Hamptons, Long Island. The Vampire Diaries (2009–2017) told the story of a teenage girl, Elena, who was caught in a love triangle with two vampire brothers: Damon and Stefan. The two vampires tried to integrate into a school in Virginia with other non-vampire and non-supernatural humans, and the series revolved around the dramatic merging of different teenage worlds and identities.
2. When I capitalize 'Pages' I am referring to Facebook's Pages function as a distinct communicative space from Profiles.
3. *Reign* is a historical teen drama series that follows the romantic life of Mary, Queen of Scots

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