

Freaks and geeks: Exploring the emotional landscapes of online fandoms

While fandoms and subcultures are by no means new phenomena, social media and online culture have accelerated their reach and impact. This raises the stakes for both participants and content producers who have to engage in a treacherous tango with their demanding fans. They are no longer small fry and a lot can be won or lost...

A fandom can grow around any area of human interest or activity. While traditionally we associate fandoms with admiration of a celebrity or an artwork (music, tv, films) in recent decades tech brands such as Apple and Tesla have created two of the largest online fandoms of all time.

All fandoms are different, each with its unique set of

internal rules, codes, visuals and linguistics. This can make them feel deeply inaccessible to outsiders. Perhaps though, **there are some universal truths that link the fandom experience and these can help us to effectively reach them?**

In this report we used the **Discover.ai** platform to analyse the discourse of **50+ online fandoms** from different domains of contemporary culture.

Our objective was to understand what lies beneath the seemingly infinite number of unique subcultures that comprise fandom more broadly.

Anger, ambivalence and amour: mapping fandoms

This report presents an AI-enabled analysis of the varied emotional responses of fans across a diverse set of fandoms, as expressed on social media, reddit, fan forums and so on. We identified 17 distinct spaces and mapped them onto two axes:

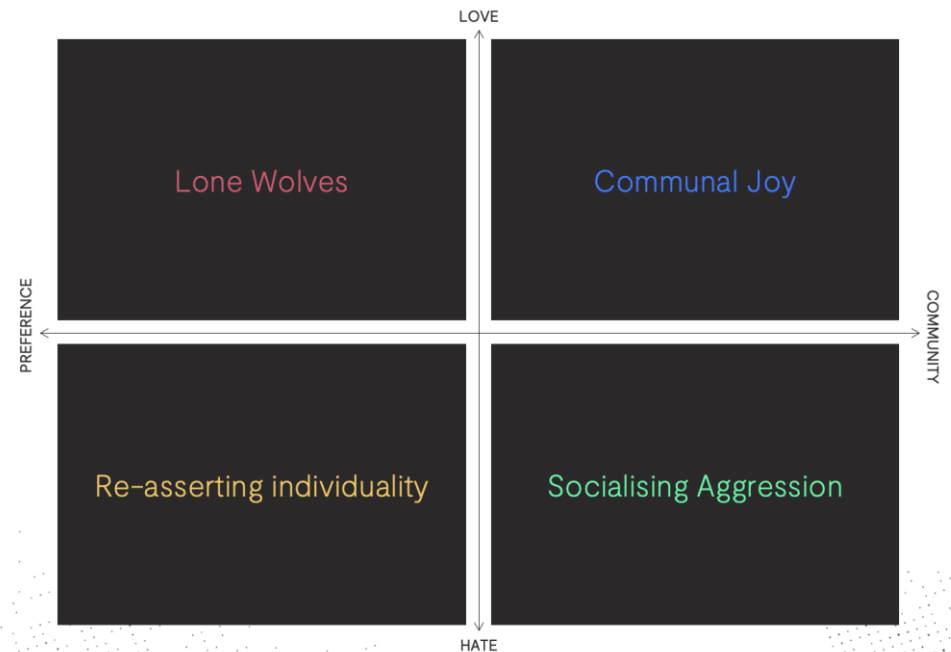
On the one we created a spectrum between love and hatred; from words of encouragement and support to comments that ooze negativity, anger and hatred. The majority of the data we collected expressed negative emotions; this is not so surprising for anyone who's spent some time online. It constitutes something 'enjoyable' and empowering, as much as that may be distorted and we might wish that it wasn't so.

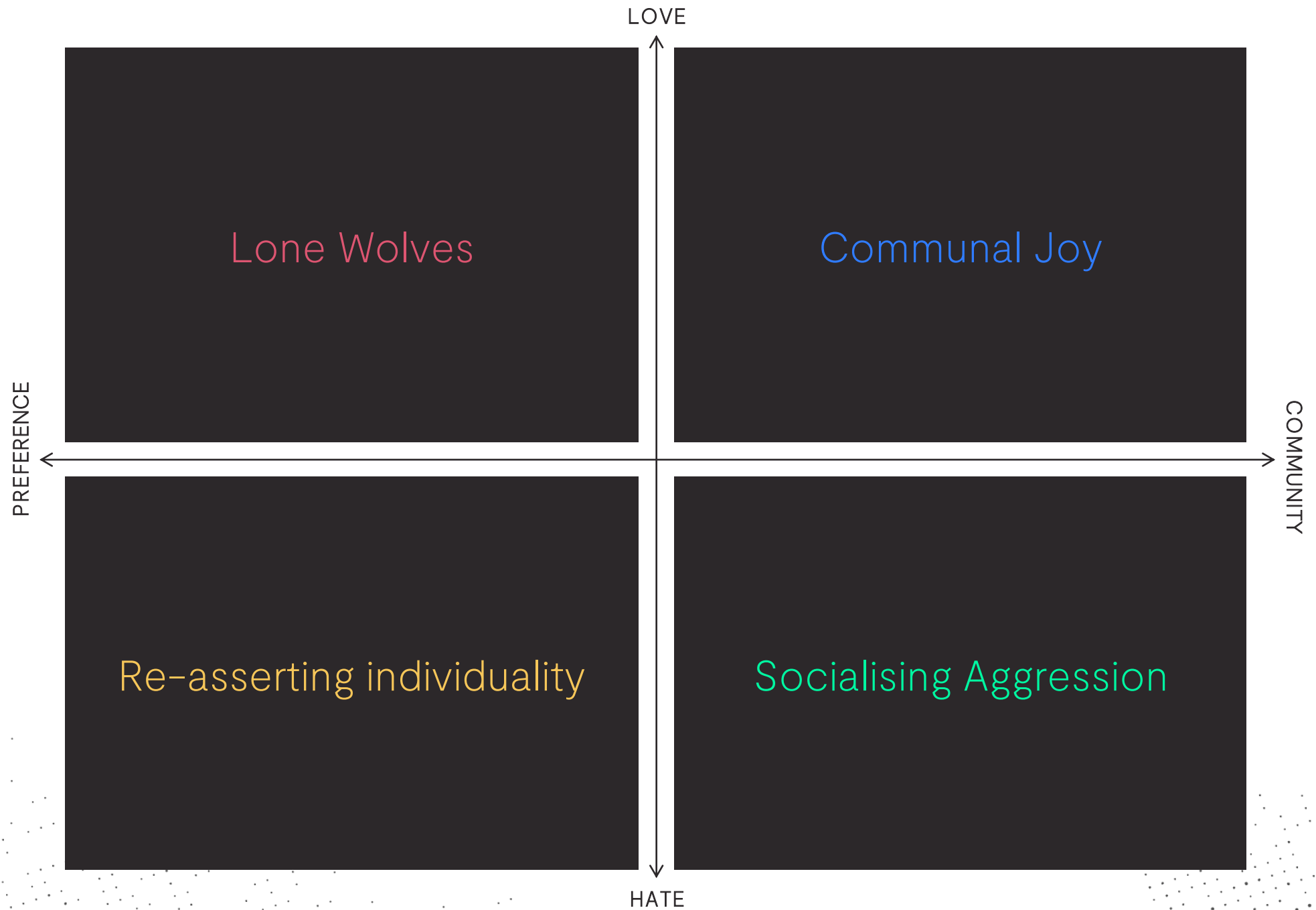
On the second axis, we identified a tension between on the one hand organised communities and on the other what we might call 'lone wolves', individuals who are passionate about their interest, but who do not see themselves as belonging to a group.

But what movement is there between these two fan modalities?

What does it take for a lone wolf to join the pack?

What we found in the analysis is that it's never as straight-forward as 'liking' or 'disliking', being a 'fan' or being 'hater' – there is always pleasure in hating, and ambivalence in love...





Lone Wolves

Before the fandoms there were the fans. In this space we see the different ways of being a fan without actively participating in any relevant (online or offline) communities or without really socialising based on your proximity to a specific subculture



Lone Wolves



My show, me time

Sometimes you just want to watch or enjoy something without thinking too much about it. Particularly relevant during the pandemic – the need for mindless entertainment; something to pass your time

Key takeout: Don't discount 'mindless' entertainment – people need to be actively de-stimulated

“ Just like when you like a tv show or a movie and a ton of people don't let you enjoy it by criticising it even when it's barely brought up or even when it doesn't make sense talking about it at all in the context...



For the first time, a hero like *me*

Identifying with characters and building a sense of selfhood by finding yourself in what you see on screen. Particularly relevant in discussions around diversity – having someone that looks like you helps you better understand your place in the world

Key takeout: There's huge opportunities for diverse positive role models for diverse global audiences

“ It means so much for the girls to be fans... and relatable celebrities play a huge role in the construction of their personal identities

Lone Wolves



Guilty pleasures as cultural capital

Finding your 'guilty pleasures' and committing to them without ever apologising. We live through the total normalisation of guilty pleasures – particularly since the pandemic started. On social media, sharing info around guilty pleasures becomes a precious part of our online personas

Key takeout: Publicly admitting guilty pleasures as a paradoxical way to showcase cultural capital: embarrassing relatability as clout

“

No judgement, and no “guilty pleasure” excuses. Be proud of the trash you consume.”

“Guilty pleasure?! You should be proud of your good taste @XXX 😊”



Para-social intimacy

Daydreaming imaginary relationships with celebrities and fictional characters; enhanced by social media, Instagram stories, TikTok and streaming services, a sense of intimacy and closeness facilitated by voyeuristic social platforms. Increasingly, a sexualised space thanks to private Snapchat profiles and OnlyFans facilitating para-social boyfriend / girlfriend experiences.

Key takeout: Investigating the potential (and testing the limits) of social media intimacy; the example of celebrities sharing their mobile numbers and answering DMs by fans

“

Peoples parasocial relationships with people on the internet get to their heads so much they start thinking their fav streamer is a therapist”

“Real talk: some of the McElroys’ fans have the worst parasocial relationships that I’ve ever seen in a fandom”

Communal Joy

Participating in a fandom in order to meet and socialise with like-minded people. Online fandoms create spaces of belonging and communal joy; welcoming groups of positivity and subcultures helping their members forge strong bonds and gain a sense of identity



Communal Joy



We support each other

The idea of fandom as a supporting community – finding a group of people that understand and even love you unconditionally. Fandom as a family, providing support and guidance.

Provocation: Creating communities that encourage a sense of belonging – online ‘families’ and supportive ‘tribes’, with a repository & future of shared experiences

“biggest flex, I belong to one of the most creative and best fandom!! let's stay together as a family”

“One of the most fulfilling aspects of belonging to a community is the discovery that even while we are physically distanced, we remain bound by the memories of our shared experiences”



No haters here

Communities that police their internal levels of ‘toxicity’ by fighting against all types of negativity and by rejecting ‘gate-keeping’ attitudes. This space emerged in reaction to online geekdoms that set strict rules of elitist expertise at the centre of their community-building processes.

Provocation: Community moderation that purposefully isolates and criticises aggression and negativity

“r/MoonKnight is an amazing community, full of kind and welcoming people who are very passionate about the character and are willing to help any new fans

I love that there’s a subculture centered around kindness, sweetness, nature, and cherishing the little things

Socialising Aggression

The dark side of fandoms. Fan communities socialising their frustrations, disagreements, or pure anger. As online 'attention economies' thrive on negative emotions, a new generation of hateful online communities emerge



Socialising Aggression



Brigading hooligans

Liking something is not enough, you have to hate something different to what you like and harass its fans in order to feel validated. This attitude is particularly common among YouTubers. Some fandoms only exist because of a shared hatred of something, not because of a shared appreciation.

Key takeout: Online bullies and fandoms organising attacks against other communities are considered the lowest form of internet life

“ One thing that criticizes their community and then they make a video or post about it telling their demented fans to raid the hater

Personally I think entire communities brigading people involved with making something is the absolute worst aspect of fandom,



Toxic accelerators

Online spaces where fans go to express their negativity and amplify each others' disappointment, anger and hatred. Fandoms that have been accumulating negativity for years, turning into literal hate groups.

Key takeout: Fandoms can turn rogue – they become spaces that people look to express their disappointment with life. The reasons for their negative emotions and anti-social behaviour go way beyond fandom-related issues

“ I know a lot of them don't have social media anymore because of the toxic environment Star Wars has become

“It's all blatant escapism which is why all its fans are deeply depressed and hateful people who need therapy. These anime studios just know their audience is all.”

Socialising Aggression



Pop culture wars

Highlighting internal antagonisms within existing subcultures – with an emphasis on racism and sexism. The relative mainstreamisation of nerd-culture brought scrutiny around questions of inclusivity and discrimination. At the same time the ‘woke’ turn of pop-culture has caused strong reactions within certain ‘old-school’ fandoms.

Key takeout: very few fandoms escape the polarised climate of our times. From TV and film to hobbies and pets – there is a day when online fandoms have to choose their political alliances

“ A lot of the "nerd" subculture is rooted in being predominantly white and male, and there is an undercurrent of racism/misogyny/toxic masculinity

VS

But then Star Wars became popular and all of a sudden feminists wanted Star Wars to be all about women



Trad-nerds VS Woke-nerds

A visual representation of the big schism in nerd culture between the old gatekeepers and the newcomers

The casual observer might not see a big difference in the two images (right and left) – BUT either pictures could launch millions of furious hate-posts



Re-asserting individuality

Dismissive (or even inflammatory)
opinions as a way to feel special –
'I hate this therefore I'm different to
the people who un-critically
embrace it'



Re-asserting individuality



Cringing on subcultures

People who really value feeling unique and not being part of a 'herd' or a specific subculture. In this mindset, being a fan is by definition 'cringe' – wearing a t-shirt of a particular fandom, for example, is considered an embarrassing admittance of 'sameness'

Key takeout: The bigger a fandom / subculture, the more it's associated with notions of herd mentality and sameness

“
bro..”

“dude Star Wars fans are WEIRD

“K-pop fans are pure cringe...”

“covid made it really hot to hate on a subculture”



My taste is better than yours

Devaluing things other people like to feel superior – ‘my aesthetics are better than yours’. This is often expressed in elitist terms (e.g. focusing on questions around quality, depth, substance)

Key takeout: For these audiences there's always a need to understand the hidden or more profound aspects of the source material; read about it, listen to a relevant podcast, reflect and discuss etc..

“

Star Wars is mindless fantasy action against a sci-fi backdrop while *Star Trek* explores themes and solves problems with technobabble

This comic is just fan fiction in the worst way

Re-asserting individuality



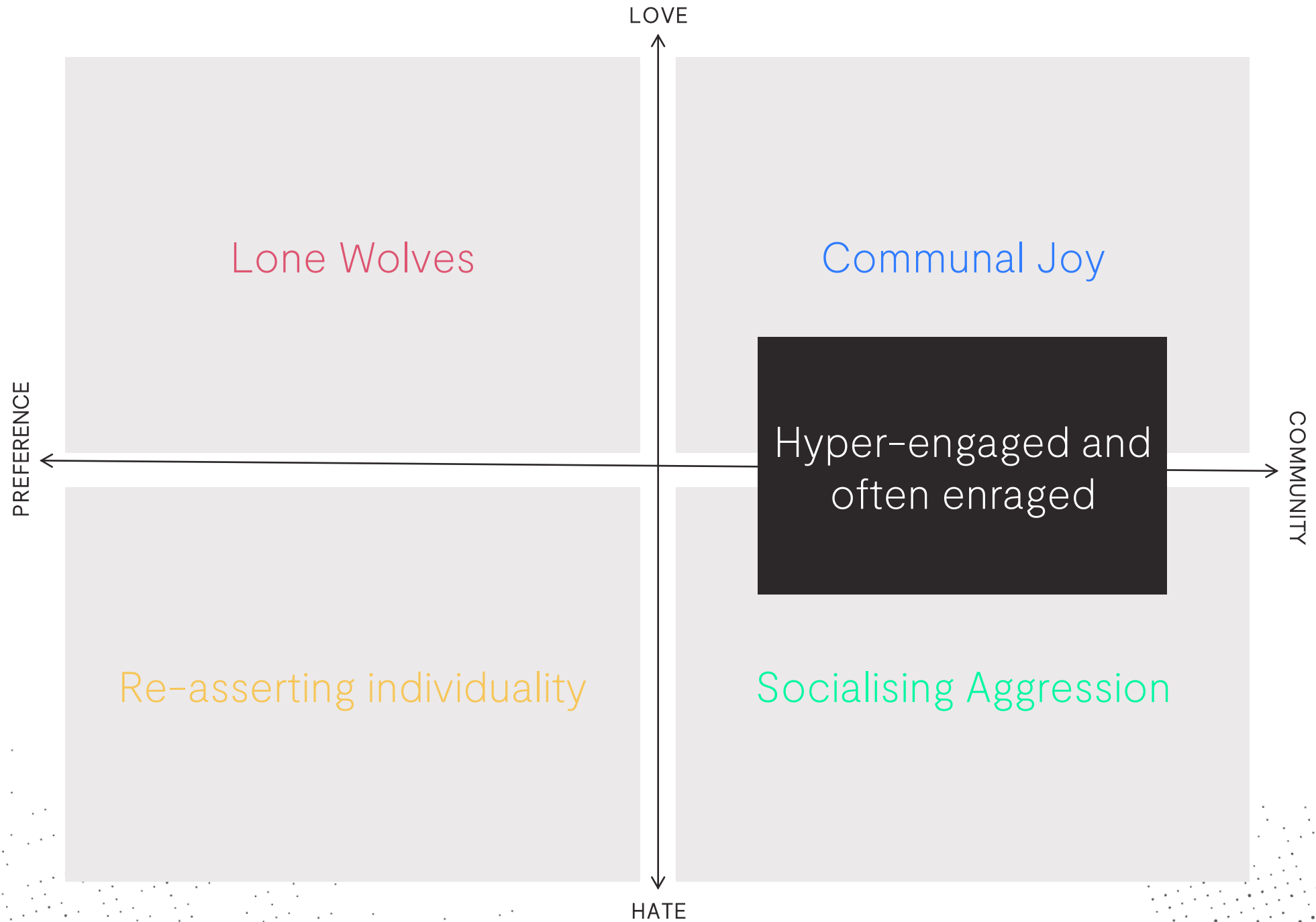
The sweet taste of trolling

Using internet anonymity in order to be an annoying and contrarian *troll*. Taking pleasure out of irritating fans and always trying to create controversy. The joy of conflict without any of the social repercussions one would experience in real life .

Key takeout: The ancient internet wisdom suggests you should never feed a troll – in their solitary contrarian existence there is not so much an opinion or a position; their parasitic discourse is essentially the sound of the internet observing itself

“ You did make a post to troll I'm sure, but do you really enjoy being a contrarian for the sake of it”

“No one forces those trolls to watch the show either and let alone troll the sub here”



Hyper-engaged and often enraged

By trying to sort content on the positive vs negative axis we arrived to a new problem: certain fandoms and fan discussions seemed to perfectly occupy both emotional spaces at the same time. Moving from extreme adoration to passionate hatred and from harsh criticism to ecstatic celebration...



Hyper-engaged and often enraged



Re-writing canons

Using your imagination to overcome the limitations of the source material. Fandoms going beyond what is given to them in a process that actively reframes fictional universes. If you hate parts of the original it's not a big deal since you can always re-write it

Key takeout: Fandoms can enhance and expand fictional universes – and this could be a creative way to express their frustration with the source material



Nostalgic contradictions

Idealising parts of a fictional universe (often linked to a childhood memory) and hating everything else that came later on from the same IP. In a way, nothing can live up to the original material and everything else will always be considered a 'cash grab', a watered down version, or a straight up insult.

Key takeout: The paradox here is that the fandoms actually crave for new material only for it to be disappointing as it doesn't match their fantasy of what the original stands for

“ honestly one of the most evil things is when a character is popularly headcanoned as gay by fans and then creators give them a heterosexual love interest just to put a stop to it because they hate gay people..

My guilty pleasure is reading unhealthy amounts of fan fiction about miserable characters getting therapy and learning to be happy again

“ And it is not that you can't do nostalgia, but the lesson Disney learned is Star Wars fans only want nostalgia

Hyper-engaged and often enraged



Bitter Betrayals

Betrayed fans: they used to be the biggest supporters and now they are vicious haters as they feel fooled and personally offended. Similarly to what happens in romantic love, after a period of uncritical idealisation a reality check can be painful. When someone or something doesn't live up to your expectations you hate them for betraying your hopes.

Key takeout: Hardcore fans should not be taken for granted – they can easily turn into the most vicious haters

“ I know it had good aspects but it betrayed everything i loved about Zelda games and left it all behind

I was angry, I felt betrayed, I felt like my favourite series had been skul*** into eternity



Cancel rituals

Fandoms cancelling their members when they don't comply to the unspoken rules of the group. Accountability processes that punish / ex-communicate whoever doesn't fit the high standards of a certain community. When it comes to pop culture, fandoms can turn against their very creators when their artistic choices or even personal lives do not adhere to the the principles the community considers fundamental

Key takeout: Taking online accusations and defamatory campaigns seriously – engaging in collective processes of accountability

“ In modern times, when social media has become a nest of venting out our emotions and suppressed feelings, people find it a comfortable platform for calling out someone's false actions...

So often when personalities f**k up, the fans for whatever reason get entrenched either defending a louse or demonizing an idiot

Hyper-engaged and often enraged



We made you, and now we'll destroy you

The expectation that fans are not just consuming the cultural product of their preference but they are an important stakeholder in the production process as well. They might hold petitions, or social media campaigns to get their desirable narrative or casting outcome, and overall they will behave with extreme entitlement and little patience.

Key takeout: Is there a way to engage an audience without creating what is effectively a 'dictatorship of the fans'? And what do you do when the fan-dictated decisions end up producing disappointing results?

“ If WB wants to listen to fans demand then I would ask them to remake the last couple of seasons of Game of Throne, am pretty sure that everyone will be on board with that”

“I will say, calling for writers to be fired and for controversial creative decisions to be retconned is exactly how the Star Wars fandom got Rise of Skywalker”



What does this mean for content producers and media companies?

- For better or worse, fandom is about belonging
- While you must not feed the trolls you must listen to your fans
- ...whilst remembering you can't please all of the fans all of the time
- Fandom's experience and enjoy a rollercoaster of passionate experiences
- If you don't make it – they will!



Final thought

Fandoms are not to be taken lightly – they can wield enormous influence and power. They have a ‘fan integrity’ at the heart of them that is not for sale but can be engaged... thoughtfully and with the same intentions that they bring to their fandom. So always start with the passion, not the ‘strategy’...

If you are looking for some cultural inspiration for your brand strategy, innovation or communications, we’d love to hear from you