

## The Fandom Phenomenon

In the '50s, it was Elvis that had teenage girls losing their minds. In the '60s it was the Beatles. Whether you were a proud Blockhead in the '90s or caught a bad case of the Bieber fever in 2009, you were probably called weird a time or two by a classmate who took note of your merch. That classmate may have been rocking their favorite sports team jersey on as they made the comment, followed by getting their buddies riled up over the tragic play-off from the night before.

For decades in the entertainment industry, sports and music are the two things that pop culture always keeps coming back to. From flipping through magazines, watching the latest interviews, buying the merch, and hanging up the posters, fans continue to show their support for their favorite figures in profuse ways. Despite mirroring similar mannerisms, society views the two groups differently—one side is crazy, while the other just has something they are passionate about.

The term “fan” originated in 1885 as a shortened version of the word “fanatic.” The term was first recorded to refer to “baseball die-hards.” Over time, the term became universally used to include any kind of entertainment. Nearly six decades later, the “crazy fangirl” stereotype was first coined in a book written by A.P. Herbert. In 1943, *Holy Deadlock* described young women who were obsessed with musicians as fangirls. The term rose in popularity in the Beatlemania era. Jumping forward to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, fandom culture has certainly not slowed down. Mega superstar Taylor Swift has fans gathering outside venues to enjoy her concerts from the parking lot due to the extremely high demand for tickets.

Millennial Megan Gehrlich considers herself an OG Swiftie. She takes pride in the fact that, like the pop star, she was also born in 1989. Now a youth minister and high school drama

director, Gehrich reflects on her experience as a Swiftie in high school and observes how that culture has shifted over time.

“The music industry and who you like in the music industry...the amount of people that share their opinions these days on that is so much more than what it was when I was in high school,” Gehrich says. “In high school we just liked music and we let everybody else who liked music like it...nothing was as big as it is now.”

Social media is attributed to the explosive rate at which fandoms grow today. Musicians such as Taylor Swift are able to interact with fans in ways that were not accessible before the Internet. Along with musical artists, fans of athletes, actors, and other public figures can share their support for their idols through TikTok edits or Instagram fan accounts. This was not quite a concept that millennials experienced as teenagers.

“I do love that some of my favorite songs I’ve learned about because someone posted them on social media, or I heard it on TikTok. I love that part,” Gehrich says.

Although many fans use social media as a positive outlet, it also provides a space for criticism, putting young fans in a vulnerable position that is susceptible to haters. Unfortunately, Internet trolls thrive off of throwing shade at successful celebrities and their fans willingly fall onto those knives. Linnea Mayo suggests in “Opinion | Discrepancies between Sports and ‘Fangirl’ Fan Culture” that “The utilization of social media also perpetuates the concept of actively defending your favorites from strangers on the internet, even if you’ve never met those people.” The concern here is not whether that behavior is necessary, but rather how that behavior is received by society. One Reddit user did not hold back in regard to Swiftie Twitter. The user said, “I love twitter but I keep far away from swiftie twitter. it’s a cesspool.” The issue at hand is not the fact that Taylor Swift fans are being attacked online. The concern is how her fans are

perceived in comparison to sports fans. The ongoing issue at hand is a reality that society is continuously faced with—sexism.

Gehrich says, “I think a lot of times music fans, especially Taylor Swift fans, are painted in like a bad light, almost like an obsessive light. Whereas people have the same affinity and love for certain sports teams, but that’s painted always in a positive light...the way in which it is shown to society is 100% different.”

According to “Gender Inequality in Sports Statistics 2023,” 48% of male sports viewers in the United States consider themselves avid fans, while only 19% were female. On the contrary, 46% of females consider themselves casual sports fans, where 39% were male. The data shows that women aren’t uninterested in sports. They’re just not as obsessed as men.

“If we cheer and scream loudly because we love Taylor Swift, we’re being too loud. We are excited about silly things. But the same thing happens when someone kicks a ball across the field, that becomes exhilarating,” Gehrich says.

Most recently, Swift has sparked “controversy” due to her dating life...yet again. NFL fans are bothered by her screentime as the cameras seem to gravitate toward her as she cheers on her partner, and the Kansas City Chief’s tight end, Travis Kelce. For context, during the Chiefs playoff games, Swift was shown less than a dozen times, a whopping 0.46% of screentime.

“I could care less about who Taylor Swift is dating,” Gehrich says. “I like her because of her music. I could care less. People are like, ‘Oh are you excited to see Taylor?’ Like I mean, it’d be nice to see her but she’s not playing the game so...”

It’s fascinating how Swifties mirror a lot of the mannerisms of sports fans. For example, a trend that emerged as part of The Eras Tour is dressing up as various Taylor Swift eras or the making and exchanging of friendship bracelets. Sports fans have a history of wearing old jerseys

of their favorite athletes and even painting their faces and bodies with their team colors. A Swiftie may go to a concert and scream out the lyrics to their favorite songs, while a sports fan will cheer for their team or yell at the refs from the stands. A fangirl may spend their free time watching interviews of their favorite artist and a sports fan may do the same for their favorite athlete. The list could go on, but the similarities are uncanny.

“It’s all about just how different it is to be the man and that’s so evident in things like this...if we get excited, we’re crazy and obsessive. If a man gets excited, he’s passionate,” Gehrich says.

We are all are passionate about something, or in some cases someone. We don’t have the same interests as everyone else; that’s the beauty of it. What excites one person is not the least bit thrilling to another. I hope as a society we can move past the sexist stereotypes and just accept people for what they are, which is passionate. A fangirl myself, I embrace the thrill of awaiting new music from my favorite artists the same way a football fan anticipates the games on Sundays. Unfortunately, some people fail to make this connection, but at the end of the day, Taylor Swift said it best: “Haters gonna hate.”

**Word Count:** 1224

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