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TRIPLE-ACCREDITED, WORLD-RANKED



**Managing Collective Effervescence:
'Zomsumption' and postemotional fandom**

Abstract

Based on an analysis of the YouTuber-fan community, we theorise the “living dead” nature of collective effervescence under postemotional conditions. We introduce the concept of zomsumption whereby “dead” emotions are carefully synthesised, governed, and presented as “living” throughout the communal consumption of a totem. Here, we explore fans’ efforts to ensure the stability and longevity of their community through the lifelessness of their emotional behaviour. By forfeiting genuine and unfiltered emotions in favour of their rationalisation and governance, fans access the illusory potential for more manageable forms of sociability and totemic worship. This outlook prompts us to reconsider the nature of the relationship between consumption communities and dominant structures of feeling. We suggest that consumption communities should not be presumed liberatory retreats from such structures as, contrarily, some may function as microcosms for reflecting and even incubating the wider postemotional order.

Keywords: postemotionalism, YouTube, fandom, community, zombie, collective effervescence

Introduction

Where does fandom fit within the neoliberal projects of moderation and self-control? In today's "narcissistic" (Cluley and Dunne, 2012), "responsibilised" (Giesler and Veresiu, 2014) and "reflexive" (Beckett and Nayak, 2008) market-based society, a premium is placed upon fitting in, protecting one's image, and calibrating how one behaves. Under such conditions, identity work, aesthetic reflexivity and impression management for individuals and groups come to the fore whereby even emotions, "the last bastion of 'authenticity' in an 'inauthentic' age", are subject to scrutiny and surveillance (Williams, 1998: 754). Here, sociologist Stjepan Meštrović refers to the development of a postemotional society characterised by a deliberately rehearsed and rationalised social life "in which synthetic, quasi-emotions become the basis for widespread manipulation by self, others and the culture industry as a whole" (Meštrović, 1997: xi). Therein, emotional behaviour exists as a site for governance and those who refuse to control their emotions – or refuse to let them be controlled – risk censures to *chill out*, *chillax* or *take a chill pill*. The resultant principles of sobriety, composure and self-monitoring, we argue, sit uncomfortably with the "emotional excess" traditionally associated with fan cultures or celebrity worshippers (Duffett, 2015: 2).

Consumer fanaticism, defined as affective commitment to an extraordinary pursuit of some marketplace object (i.e. whether a celebrity, a commodity, activity, or experience), has been equated with high levels of emotional investment and expression

(Chung et al., 2017). When fans collectively unite to consume their focus of worship, a shared state of emotional intoxication unlike anything that can be achieved in an individual's everyday life is reached. This, Durkheim ([1912] 1965) identified as "collective effervescence" and the "spectacle of collective life". However, it is not known how such collective *life* is capable of flourishing in spite of, or perhaps because of, the *deadening* impact of contemporary postemotional conditions. It is possible that we might be seeing only the simulation of life or, at least, a different kind of life that is subject to its own expressions and nuances. Here, we echo Baudrillardian assertions that late capitalist, market-liberal societies are characterised as "a meticulously regulated universe" wherein social life becomes "a gigantic collective asceticism" (Baudrillard, [1976] 1993: 177-178) leaving behind room for only emotions that are as manufactured, static and insincere as "the smile of a corpse in a funeral home" (Baudrillard, [1990] 1993: 45).

Relatedly, we contend that aspects of the "living dead zombie", a figure in which both life and death are simultaneously present, can help to conceptualise postemotional fans' amenability to collective life but also self-control, order and docility. In this paper, we introduce the concept of "zomsumption" to refer to consumer fanaticism under postemotional conditions in which emotions are governed and thereby "deadened", but continue to be presented as "living" in order to maintain and encourage a particular vision of communal consumption. We use the term "dead" in a critical post-

Marxist sense, to infer that emotions “are no longer an organic part of [one’s] personality” *i.e.* they do not possess a life of their own, having become instead reified as “things which [one] can “own” or “dispose of” like the various objects of the external world” (Lukács, 1971: 100). They simply become *capital*.

Through conceptualising postemotional fandom using notions of the living dead we ask the following interrelated questions: First, if fans’ emotions have indeed become deadened, then what is the nature of their collective effervescent behaviour? And second, how are these effervescent states reconciled with the abstemiousness and self-control implicit under postemotional conditions? To answer these questions, we draw upon the YouTuber-fan community and how its emotional experiences are governed both online and offline.

YouTubers and their fans provide us with a unique context to advance our enquiry for a number of reasons. First, unlike fan communities that cohere around celebrities who have been established by the culture industry and ‘pushed’ using mass-media to aggregate audiences (e.g. Hewer and Hamilton, 2012), the YouTuber-fan community centres on the consensual and ongoing elevation of ordinary individuals to “micro-celebrity” status by the advocacy and support of loyal pockets of viewers/fans (Cocker and Cronin, 2017). This co-constructive, participatory approach to celebrification generates feelings of intimacy, involvement and ownership amongst fans

which could potentially impact their displays of, and responses to, collective effervescence. Second, unlike fan communities that form offline and use online spaces simply as a platform to discuss the object of their fandom (e.g. Muñiz and Schau, 2005), the YouTuber-fan community centres on the online arena as the primary site of emotional exchange between both themselves and celebrities (Mardon et al, 2018). Specifically, YouTube's integration of public comments with its videosharing function allows for fans to scrutinise and respond to celebrities' emotions but also for fans' own emotions to be subject to scrutiny by one another.

Our work follows calls to better consider how emotion interacts with and impacts upon marketplace-culture intersection (Illouz, 2007, 2009). By adopting a critical postemotional perspective, we contradict theorisations of consumer excitement which suggest consumers when socialised amongst like-minded others are prone to highly affective communal activities that transgress everyday rules (Goulding et al, 2009; O'Sullivan, 2016). Rather than assuming consumption communities, like fandom arrangements, are invariably silos for transgression, release, and breaking with hegemonic structures of feeling (Kerrigan, 2014; Podoshen et al, 2018; Richardson and Turley, 2006; Sinclair and Dolan, 2015), we present a different position. We argue that in keeping with – rather than resisting – the dominant structure of postemotionalism, consumers draw upon and attempt to permeate its principles of managing, controlling and containing emotions throughout their community. Conformance with these

principles allows for the consumption community to insulate its collective interests from the potential emotional instability of some participants and therefore preserve overall impressions of the community. Accordingly, we argue that consumption communities must be recognised for their microcosmic potential to incubate and promote wider emotional structures contra to the assumption that they will challenge or resist those structures.

Theoretical Background

Postemotionalism and Collective Effervescence

The dominant emotional discourse – or “structure of feeling” – that helps to shape and influence behaviour in today’s market-based societies has been described as postemotionalism (Meštrović, 1997; Sandlin and Callahan, 2009). Postemotionalism, as Meštrović (1997: 150) explains, is a system of beliefs and values which emerged under late capitalist, neoliberal conditions “to avoid emotional disorder; to prevent loose ends in emotional exchanges; to civilise ‘wild’ arenas of emotional life; and, in general, to order the emotions so that the social world hums as smoothly as a well-maintained machine”. Meštrović’s conceptualisation of postemotionalism, which is influenced by the work of Riesman, Ritzer, Durkheim, and Baudrillard centres on three constituent

processes of emotions – other directedness, mechanisation, and voyeurism (Sandlin and Callahan, 2009).

First, emotions become screened from the perspective of the *other*, and become amenable to intervention and calibration toward reaching “acceptable” presentations of self. This other-directedness allows us to see past the category of emotion as individualistic and view it instead as that which “orients and implicates the self in its social environment” (Illouz, 2009: 382). Second, because emotions can be calculatedly “mechanised”, they are used by consumers as resources for identity seeking and making while marketers engineer planned emotional reactions. This is what Illouz (2007: 109) calls “emotional capitalism”, wherein “emotions have become entities to be evaluated, inspected, discussed, bargained, quantified, and commodified”. Mechanisation ultimately leads to “bite-size, pre-packaged, rationally manufactured emotions – a “happy meal” of emotions consumed by the masses” (Meštrović, 1997: xi). Third, because they mainly encounter and produce “McDonaldised” emotions that have no authentic referent or origin, consumers voyeuristically seek out the eruption of genuine, *raw* emotions by others. This, for example, has been explored through the appeal of “emotional dramas” and “emotional objectification” that take place within the boundaries of reality television (Bonsu, Darmody and Parmentier, 2010; Hackley, Brown and Hackley, 2012).

In Meštrović's view, traditionally spontaneous and impulsive activities such as hobbies, leisure pursuits and social relations have become increasingly subject to the principles of rational organisation and impression management leading to the animation and circulation of "dead" emotions:

Postemotionalism holds that contemporary emotions are "dead" in the analogous sense that one speaks of a dead current versus a "live wire" or a "dead nerve" in a limb or tooth. The current is still on, the nerve is still present anatomically, but neither is functioning as it was supposed to (Meštrović, 1997: 62).

By "dead", Meštrović implies emotions have become denuded of their vitality and unpredictability and simply considered a type of capital that has no agency of its own and must be put to use manually for value to be extracted.

Under postemotionalism's deadening effects, however, Meštrović remains optimistic that the expression of authentic and lively emotional behaviour is nevertheless possible through fostering "collective effervescence". For him, the concept of collective effervescence as originally introduced by Durkheim ([1912] 1965) constitutes the exceptionally amplified feelings of a crowd or group which could rarely be invoked –let alone controlled, regulated or planned– by an individual on his or her own. For both Meštrović and Durkheim, the only authentic category of emotion therefore resides within the social assembly and "arises out of consciousness of being entrained within a collective focus of attention" (Collins, 2001: 29). Importantly, totemism which constitutes putting things – objects or persons – at the centre of a group

of people's attention is assumed to be central to collective effervescence and subsequent feelings of "we", rather than "I" or "me". Here, a source of worship (e.g. celebrity) takes on the role of totemic symbolism while those who cohere around it as "we" (e.g. fans) are considered to participate in "totemic structures of feeling" (Duffett, 2015: 4).

The challenge according to Meštrović (1997: xii) is that "collective consciousness no longer exists" – that feelings of "we" "[have] succumbed to a process of fission", resulting in fragmented group identities that are hostile and competitive with one another. While totemism continues to bring subjects together, the spirit and liveliness of the assembled group is splintered and stratified through self-interest, interpersonal coercions and bureaucratisation (Collins, 1990; Illouz, 2007). As a result, struggles over how best to worship and preserve the totem result in transgressive community conflicts which risk curbing members' enthusiasm for collective interests (Husemann, Ladstaetter, and Luedicke, 2015).

Overall, postemotionalism and the barriers it presents to genuine, unfiltered social assembly have some conceptual overlap with the concept of reification which describes "a relation between people [that] takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a 'phantom objectivity', an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature" (Lukács, 1971: 83). Such "phantom objectivity" is perhaps best encapsulated by Internet-based communities

where subjects presuppose and reify public emotional selves and use these fictive self-constructions to precede and constitute virtual encounters with one another and their totem (Meštrović, 1997; Illouz, 2007). Where internet-mediated interactions become akin to rational economic projects, the abstract concept of emotion achieves a kind of illusory *thinghood*. The genuine or sporadic, effervescent feelings that Durkheim envisioned therefore become muted by the illusion that emotion is nothing more than an object to be used, meaning that “contemporary 'collective effervescence' is staged and rationally induced” (Meštrović, 1997: xii), mostly resulting in the simulation of “dead or pale copies of emotions” (Meštrović, 1997: 63).

With this analogy of death in mind, we now depart to consider how fans who are left only with “dead, pale” versions of emotion in their collective attempts to reclaim effervescence might be considered the living dead whereby they are capable of seeding and producing a mechanical semblance of life, but not life itself.

Zombification and Fandom

While zombies are most often associated with grotesque and macabre representations from the culture industry, there is a long history of calls for the figure of the zombie and its tropes to be taken seriously as worthwhile and critical constructs in fields of social enquiry (Christie and Lauro, 2011; Loudermilk, 2003; Paffenroth, 2011; Ritzer, 2003). Though there remains variance in opinion over what in fact constitutes a zombie, it is

generally agreed that “zombies do all share a common characteristic: the absence of some metaphysical quality of their essential selves... every zombie experiences a loss of something essential” (Boon, 2011: 7). Some have proposed that this metaphysical “loss” is the lack of agency or volition, or more broadly, the absence of –or at least a compromised– consciousness: “the essence of the ‘zombie’ at the most abstract level is supplanted, stolen, or effaced consciousness” (Dendle, 2007: 47). Loudermilk (2003) directly associates the loss with emotion suggesting, “there is no emotional ‘heart’ within a zombie” and that zombies are analogous to “men alive in every way but their minds and hearts” [sic], a construct of “McHumanity” (pp. 86-96).

Zombification, or the process by which one is turned into a zombie, can be understood at its most abstract level as a practice in human reductionism: it is to reduce the emotional complexity of an individual to a subject that does not act personally, but rather reacts impersonally to whatever animates *all* zombies. Lauro and Embry (2008: 99) in their “Zombie Manifesto” suggest that the zombie’s unreflective propensity for group-consciousness and lack of personal thought can stand as a potential metaphor for the mindless consumer who for them is a “ravenous somnambulist, blindly stumbling toward its next meal” and “a machine that performs but two functions: it consumes, and it makes more consumers.” Zombies, in a sense, reproduce as they consume – during moments of their collective consumption, they assimilate others to their group compulsions and create a collective “zombie horde” where little individuality remains.

Being assimilated into a horde-like group and engaging in the spread of its group-consciousness is already a theme well explored in studies of consumption communities and evangelical fan devotion. In the brand cult of Apple fanatics, “Mac believers engage in proselytizing and converting non-believers” (Belk and Tumbat, 2005: 211) while Newton owners spread their views about how they want “the world to operate” thereby “converting the unbelievers and naysayers” (Muñiz and Schau, 2005: 740). Elsewhere, fans of the British Royal Family draw upon and maintain “specific and identifiable ritual performance roles that socialise and educate others” (Otnes and Maclaran, 2007: 58). With emphasis on ensuring longevity and uniformity of the horde through expansion and conversion, the behaviour of fans crosses over acutely with the zombie where the “urge” of the individual subject becomes interwoven with the greater compulsions of the collective.

The exact nature of the collective is not static however, or as Christie and Lauro (2011: 4) suggest, “As the demarcating line between us and them, subject and object, recedes, confusion arises. We must ask ourselves: Are zombies becoming more human, or are humans becoming more like zombies?” And so, a common theme in popular representations of the zombie centres on the paranoia and suspicions amongst humans concerning who is, or might have been, *turned* and thus at risk of turning others (Ní Fhlainn, 2011). Apprehension and mistrust fractures harmony, destroys social bonds, erodes emotional expression and ironically makes “the living” appear more zombie-like,

callous and less human. Quite simply, there is a distinct “terror that comes from an identification of oneself with the zombie” (Lauro and Embry, 2008: 89-90). Such tropes map onto research in fandom studies where many individuals when faced with ontological anxiety of their own fanaticism have the tendency to tone down their “fannish” activities and protest, often with futility, that “*I’m not like one of THOSE fans who...*” in an effort to signal that they have a *life* and to distance themselves from those ‘*Other*’ abnormal fans who do not (Ferris and Harris, 2011).

We now depart to consider how the ideas that surround zombification and its effects provide a versatile and valuable body of tropes to engage with and help theorise fans that consume under postemotional conditions. Just as their emotions are neither living nor dead, or they themselves are considered to be neither one definite group nor another, postemotional fans walk a fine line between self-manipulation and self-expression.

The Study

Research context: The YouTuber-fan community

The video-sharing platform YouTube has been recognised as one of the chief galvanising forces for the formation of fandom communities in contemporary consumer culture (Smith, 2016). YouTube vloggers – referred to interchangeably as ‘YouTubers’, ‘YouTube celebrities’, and ‘YouTube personalities’ – attract an audience of loyal fans

who subscribe to their channels, in part due to charismatic personalities that are co-created, socially activated and made meaningful amongst their fan communities (Cocker and Cronin, 2017). Fans choose which YouTubers to watch, “like”, “dislike” and subscribe to, and even become socially visible themselves through sharing their thoughts and interacting with one another in the comments sections that come with most content (fans can publicly like/dislike, reply to and support or admonish one another’s comments).

As the popularity and commercial success of YouTubers has grown, a greater suite of opportunities for offline variants of “internet-enabled visibility” have become available (Marwick, 2013: 114). Marketised face-to-face interactions between YouTubers and their fan communities are now common at large-scale annual conventions (e.g. VidCon, Playlist Live, Summer in the City, BeautyCon), book signings, product launches and meet-and-greets where carefully performed interactions, surveillance and opportunity for participation continue.

Research design

The empirical work for this study stemmed from a larger investigation of YouTube culture that sought to understand the popularity and appeal of YouTubers to their fan communities. It was during this larger investigation that we noticed that online discussions of YouTube culture tended to spotlight the emergent celebrity status of

some British YouTubers and how fans struggled to manage their emotional reactions to this in both online and offline environments. As such, this paper draws on online netnographic data as well as offline observational data from YouTube-related conventions collected during 2016-2017. Drawing on the second author's familiarity with the channels of many of the UK's most popular YouTubers, a number of videos and corresponding comments sections that relate closely to our research interests were identified. From this initial sample of online material, we undertook an in-depth netnographic analysis of five videos where YouTubers specifically share their opinions on YouTube celebrity status and YouTuber-fan interactions at meet-ups and conventions. These five videos were selected using typical netnographic prescriptions: their relevance for social interaction; their inclusion of recent communications between participants in the comments sections; and their overall construction of a particular kind of experience of interest to our research (Kozinets, 2015). The five videos were sampled from a collection of some of the most popular YouTubers based in the UK: Sprinkleofglitter (over 2.6 million subscribers), Charlieissocoollike (over 2.3 million subscribers), PointlessBlog (over 5.4 million subscribers), Doddleoddle (over 1.5 million subscribers) and Evan Edinger (over 470,000 subscribers) (see stage 1 of Table 1).

As a secondary round of netnographic exploration, we moved beyond this initial subset of five videos, which all happened to be of a 'sit-down' or 'confessional' format

(i.e. where YouTubers sit and talk to the camera usually from their homes), to incorporate additional material organised around more mobile, naturalistic footage whereby YouTubers reflect on YouTuber-fan interactions and fan excitement in public spaces and outside of the home. Here videos from PointlessBlog and Zoella were considered relevant and included for detailed analysis (see stage 2 of Table 1).

Table 1: Table of Videos Used in Detailed Analysis

YouTube Channel	Video Title	Number of Views*	Number of Comments*	Date Uploaded
<i>Stage 1: Confessional</i>				
Sprinkleofglitter (Louise Pentland)	YouTube Culture	593,519	6,305	May 6 th 2014
Charlieissocoollike (Charlie McDonnell)	Respecting Your Audience	451,390	1,406	May 25 th 2014
PointlessBlog (Alfie Deyes)	We Need To Have A Talk...	1,115,341	10,153	June 22 nd 2014
Doddlevloggle (Dodie Clark)	YouTube culture and VidCon	62,324	448	July 12 th 2014
Evan Edinger	I Am A Fangirl & YouTube Culture	33,852	411	July 12 th 2014
<i>Stage 2: Naturalistic</i>				
MoreZoella (Zoe Sugg)	London Fun, Crying in a car & Hair Twins	2,075,424	9,563	Sept 7 th 2014
PointlessBlogVlogs (Alfie Deyes)	My First Book Signing!	498,216	3,002	Sept 7 th 2014
PointlessBlogVlogs (Alfie Deyes)	THINGS GOT TOO MUCH	656,874	3,309	Aug 27 th 2016
PointlessBlogVlogs (Alfie Deyes)	OKAY, LET'S TALK ABOUT IT	1,040,935	447	Sept 1 st 2016

**Figures correct as of 14th October 2017*

All videos were viewed by both authors several times, screenshots of visual content were taken and verbatim transcripts of salient audio content were made. The

written comments posted to each video were read, extracted and studied both during and independent to viewing parts of the videos. We also incorporated data from blogs and online media reports centred on YouTuber-fan relationships.

In order to gain further insight into YouTuber-fan interactions and fan excitement at meet-ups and events, we engaged in offline observation, with the second author attending three YouTube-related conventions held in London, United Kingdom in 2016 and 2017 –Beauty Con 2016 and Summer in the City (SitC) 2016 and 2017. These conventions were one-day and three-day events that brought together content creators (i.e. YouTubers), fans and industry professionals. On-site observations of the three conventions included field notes, digital photographs, and introspective data recorded in shorthand and fleshed out later. A total of 241 photographs were collected and 45 pages of written notes were recorded. During and after attendance at the conventions, further rounds of netnographic enquiry into YouTube vlogs and corresponding comments were undertaken to confirm or disconfirm emergent interpretations and patterns between observations.

In terms of analytic procedures, we used an iterative, back-and-forth, part-to-whole approach and hermeneutic protocols to sort through, code, categorise and abstract from our overall data-pool (Thompson et al. 1994). Our attention to the data was divided between how the other-directed governance and mechanisation of emotions in

the YouTuber-fan community was reified at three (initially presumed) discrete contexts 1.) the YouTube platform itself, 2.) public meet-and-greets, and 3.) official marketised events such as the conventions. It was soon discovered however that the three contexts typically shape and inform one another. Fans would return from offline encounters to express themselves emotionally and share information with others in the comments section of YouTube, or YouTubers might bring discussions from the online platform to steer and inform offline interactions with fans. In working with these amorphous online/offline boundaries, both authors sought to verify, counter and problematise one another's assertions until mutually agreed interpretations were identified. Conceptual categories from these interpretations were then developed and relationships between them were explored and thematised.

In evidencing our themes, we reproduce only comments posted to YouTube that are made publicly available (Langer and Beckman, 2005) and our selection process follows the Association for Internet Researchers' ethical-decision-making guidelines (Markham and Buchanan, 2012). We decided not to disclose usernames in the presentation of our findings as a provision of additional anonymity (see also Cocker and Cronin, 2017). Ethical approval for this study was sought and granted by the University's ethics committee.

Findings

Over the next few sections we theorise the “living dead” nature of emotional behaviour within the YouTuber-fan community. First, we discuss the ideological divisions within the community which concern how emotion should be handled and expressed socially, leading to disagreement over who is the mindless, predictable zombie and who is secure in one’s emotional subjectivity. Here, the “crafty, *rational* creation of ‘community’” (Meštrović, 1997: 82) is fractured by disagreement between affective alliances and indignants over how emotion should be handled and expressed. Second, we discuss YouTubers’ attempts to “pass for human” at the expense of the emotional responsibility that individual community members have to themselves. Finally, we discuss the offline spatial dynamics of the community as analogous to Ritzerian (2003) “islands of the living dead”.

Zombie Wars: Affective alliances vs ‘curdled’ indignants

One of the central concerns of postemotionalism is “to seek a perfectly manipulated community, complete with artificial emotions” (Meštrović, 1997: 76). Within the YouTuber-fan community however, we found that there is discord between those fans who manipulate the community towards the expression of heightened, potentially destructive emotions – the artificial synthesis of effervescence – and those fans who seek the suppression and concealment of their emotions – the complete subdual of

effervescence. Similar to analyses of zombie texts, both factions suspect each other of zombification, or as being *other*, resulting in a “vicious power struggle” (Ní Fhlainn, 2011: 141). First, we observed the formation of localised “affective alliances” (Grossberg, 1992) between fans. These affective alliances can be thought of as sub-tribes within the greater fan experience which temporarily unite offline to organise collective practices which seek to fuel one another’s excitement and make their shared space as emotionally visible as possible. Second, there are “curdled indignants” (Meštrović, 1997), who unite online to express synthetic moral indignation that others in their community do not or cannot keep their emotions in check.

The ideological clash between these two countervailing factions is captured in the fan discourses that surround Alfie Deyes’ (PointlessBlog) vlogs ‘Things got too much’ (published Aug. 27 2016) and ‘My First Book Signing!’ (published Sept. 7th 2014), and Zoe Sugg’s (Zoella) vlog ‘London Fun, Crying in a car & Hair Twins’ (published Sept. 7th 2014). The first vlog captures footage of Alfie being chased by screaming throngs of young fans that worked together as a loose alliance to track him to an Apple store in Edinburgh where he intended to upload his latest content. In the video, Alfie recalls *“I thought there could be some of you [fans] there because you’ve known that I’ve uploaded my vlogs there for the last two days, but I didn’t quite anticipate what happened... you all started going crazy”* and describes his encounter as *“too hard to control and just dangerous”*. Similarly, the second and third vlogs show Zoe and

Alfie arriving at a book signing where they are greeted by hundreds of fans that run alongside and surround their moving car from all sides, screaming with shared excitement as they hold up camera phones, waving ferociously, banging their hands repeatedly on the car windows and pressing their faces to the glass. They can be heard shouting ‘Zoe’ or ‘Alfie’ and ‘I love you so much’. These instances reflect an aggressive dimension to Durkheim’s ([1912] 1965) collective effervescence where individuals are brought together by “shouting the same cry, saying the same words, and performing the same action in regard to the same object” (p. 232).

Rather than being viewed in a positive light, curdled indignants respond to what they see as the “destructive fanaticism” (Chung et al, 2017: 18) of affective alliances by labelling them as “rude”, “disrespectful”, “pathetic”, “insane” and “not true or real fans” in the comments sections:

Any one [sic] who is a true fan would NEVER put Zoe through that insane of a situation!!!

Most of the indignants we observed proclaim themselves to be real (or “true”), self-governing fans and cast those who express displays of heightened, raw emotions as “bad fans”. They engage in “the practice of parsing out the normal and the deviant” within their community (Stanfill, 2013: 121), and communicate that they themselves would ‘never’ partake in such behaviour:

I think that it's absolutely ridiculous and disgusting the fact that all those fans started screaming and pretty much chasing Alfie. Like everyone here is a fan of Alfie but it would never cross my mind to act like that.

Even though such judgemental and self-governing fandom exhibits the dead, unfeeling and homogenising temperament of the zombie figure, indignants are keen to reserve that particular label for the very fans they denounce. Indignants liken the events captured in the vlogs to scenes from zombie movies and television series like *The Walking Dead*. In response to Zoe's vlog ('London Fun...') one indignant suggests: "*When all the girls started banging on the car it reminded me of the walking dead*" to which another replies "*the walking fan girls*".

Comment after comment recirculates the same zombie horde metaphors to reinforce indignation towards the chaotic events documented in the vlogs and to chastise the affective alliances. Even if the label "zombie" is not directly applied, many of its cinematic associations are elicited. One indignant suggests that the effervescent fans confronting Zoe and Alfie appear "*terrifying*" and "*fucking rabid*". Through such callous verbal attacks on fellow fans, indignants share ontological similarity to the popular culture depictions of survivors of a zombie apocalypse who "lose something of their own morality", by "gun[ing] down the zombies... with a zealous cruelty" (Gagne, 1985: 88).

This cruelty is further expressed by both male and female observations that *“It’s like a zombie apocalypse of girl hormones!”* and *“Not sure if fangirls or the zombie apocalypse...”*. Although indignant are quick to identify the zombie-like nature of affective alliances, it is their shared indictment of overemotionalism as a distinctly female problem which reflects deeper and more troublesome phallogocentric power relations at the heart of their fandom. “Fangirl” as a noun and “fangirling” as a verb were found to be in common usage amongst both males and females with flippant and sometimes self-deprecating meaning (e.g. *“if I saw u [sic] in real life I would literally fangirl so hard”*). The gendered nature of the terms nevertheless implicate what Bury (2005: 37) considers to be “a powerful heteronormative minus-male subject position”. Moreover, indignation which associates overemotionalism with “girlishness” is problematic as it can be read to perpetuate broader antipathies towards the illusion of the hysterical female (Lupton, 1998).

Though we could find little data to support the possibility that the community’s dominant forms of indignation “will be cancelled out by competing, fractionalised indignation” as Meštrović (1997: xv) perhaps somewhat naively suggests, we did encounter some attempts to rationalise and palliate the gendered caricatures of the emotional subject. One fan describes how she *“freeeeaked cos I was so excited and I fangirled”* when meeting her favourite YouTuber, and defends her emotional behavior

with “*But hey, at least I give a shit and I’m not a super negative person that just shit talks everyone and everything.*”

Ironically, both affective alliances and those indignants who respond with predictable outrage exhibit the horde mentality and compromised agency of the zombie figure in service of their fractured visions of a postemotional community. Thematically, as collectives, they are both zombielike. Each are guilty of other-directedness and normative assimilation as they only *appear* to exercise authentic, sporadic feelings – the alliances by organising raucous effervescent assemblies where excitement is artificially planned and concentrated; the indignants by responding with expected, though impotent, disapproval. In an economy where “emotions are the very stuff of which social interactions are made and transformed” and “how people acquire networks, both strong and weak” (Illouz, 2007: 67), there is little freedom in how one behaves around others, whether in an offline affective alliance or uniting to express online indignation. In both cases; one must work on one’s emotions in order to produce a performance which others will accept as desirable. Such behaviour is consistent with post-Marxist criticisms of reification, whereby the subject – the *fan* – attempts to make sense of the complexity of inner and outer experiences with an utterly detached, merely economic emphasis on returns.

Passing for Human

Despite the aforementioned actions of affective alliances, a central theme to emerge from our data relates to a large number of fans' postemotional search for egalitarianism, the stripping of the totem's power over them and insulation of the community from the destructive emotions of *the living*. We observed efforts by YouTubers to "pass for human" and fans' complicity to try and view them as human even if this means fans must sacrifice the emotional responsibility that they have to themselves. British YouTuber Charlie McDonnell (charlieissocoollike) asks fans to imagine YouTubers as "complex human beings" rather than as an object of idolatry or worship in order to reduce effervescence and close the gap that has emerged between YouTubers and fans:

We've talked nice and loud now about our big YouTuber problems and apparently we have decided as a group that you [i.e. fans] are gonna be the ones to fix our problems for us. It is your job now to think more about us, to imagine us more complexly, because we are people too you know and we're forgetting that this gap that exists that we're trying to close exists between two groups of people because we're treating it I think in a very one-sided way.
(Charlieissocoollike, *Respecting Your Audience*)

In response to Charlie's video, a fan ponders the otherness that risks dividing the community: "*Yes, both YouTubers and their fans are human, but the distance between [sic] is becoming so large, that they are almost completely different species*" while another advocates that "*'fans' and creators need to see eachother [sic] as complex human beings, it has to work both ways for the wall between the groups to come down*". Such discourse compares with recent work which describes how the "vision of

celebrity” in the YouTuber-fan community is “egalitarian and democratic” and based on the idea of “equal, legitimate subjects” (Smith, 2016: 339).

Emotional neutrality and publicly eliding all divisions between common humans becomes a central pursuit of the postemotional community. Just as zombies were once invoked as a popular culture metaphor for communist infiltration and lack of individuality (or emotion) in 1950s B-Movies like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Cronin and Hopkinson, 2017), here too we can see the applicability of the zombie figure to the extreme veneration and enforcement of egalitarianism, conformism and absence of celebrity class in the YouTuber-fan community. In response to Charlie’s vlog, one fan asserts with neo-Marxist candour that “*I would hate for the intimate culture of YouTube to transform into something more like Hollywood's rampant fetishization of the famous*” while another promulgates the importance of a status-free, equal community:

I understand the concept that we are all equal, that we mustn't all treat you or any other Youtuber as different because you, after all, are a normal human being... Although, some of us have been through different things, I believe that equality is essential.

There is an ideological necessity for all participants in the YouTuber-fan community to pass as equal humans and for intimacy between humans to be fiercely defended. But in doing so participants contrarily must break with what makes them authentically human: their emotions. Sacrificing individual emotion gives way to a

controlled and externalised mentality; personal agency is forfeited in favour of the cold, dead rationality of egalitarianism. It becomes “uncool” to emote, to allow oneself to become elated around YouTubers (*“Recently I've heard so many people get upset because everyone thinks its "uncool" to get excited to see YouTubers and get upset that everybody has to be separated at events”*) and therefore unconditional equality (or, more accurately, the *ideal* of equality) must be upheld even if this means going against one’s own personal feelings. Altogether, the encounters between YouTuber and fans must be “made smooth, foolproof, problem-proof, highly-efficient” and with no margin of possibility for the eruption of “idiosyncratic emotional interplay” (Meštrović, 1997: 148).

Paradoxically, in order to achieve the ideal state of egalitarian relations marked by “foolproof”, rationalised emotions, certain coercions must often occur. Orders are given and taken which regulate the “emotional energy” of the group (Collins, 1990). Here, YouTubers adopt an order-giving role and exert their power and status in a bid to reduce effervescent displays that threaten their community. Alfie Deyes (Pointless Blog) for example, urges his fans to see YouTubers as “normal people” while also providing them with a series of tips on how to behave when meeting him:

... What to do when you meet your favourite YouTuber [...] so I think try and just take it slow, like YouTubers, please remember, tip number 1 please remember that YouTubers...these people are normal people... remember that YouTubers are normal people so treat them as you would like to be treated. (PointlessBlogVlogs, *Okay Let’s Talk About It*)

Alfie tries not just to “pass for human” himself but by providing his fans with specific advice on how to control and properly practice their emotions and manage their interactions, he circumvents *their* humanity. He curtails the authenticity of their affective states and clarifies a moral order of YouTuber-fan interactions, similar to what Reddy (2001) would term an “emotional regime”. These regimes bring with them “ways of expressing, evaluating or accounting for emotions” (Jantzen et al. 2012: 140) and help to stabilise the relationship between individuals and their community by establishing a framework that normalises and controls the emotional states of its participants.

Fans internalise the emotional regime and recirculate Alfie’s rhetoric, whether it is “*Hope people realise that your [sic] just normal and need to remember to respect you*” or “*It is absolutely ok to be exited [sic] when you get to meet or even see in real life your favourite youtuber but you should not go mental but put yourself together and act normal and not compleatly [sic] freak out*”. The programmatic pressures from this emotional regime means that some fans even opt out of social encounters with their totems entirely rather than risk an emotional outburst. In response to Alfie’s vlog, one fan explains that she is too “*scared/ worried to ever meet youtubers*”, choosing instead to avoid meeting them at conventions and other offline platforms “*because I really don’t know what to do anymore.*”

By being urged to accept the egalitarian relationship between creator and consumer, the resultant “zombie-fan” becomes an emotional *tabula rasa*, authored by others and effectively incapable of pursuing agentic action. For the zombie-fan “there is no emotional space for traditional and inner-directed idiosyncrasies” (Meštrović, 1997: 89), instead everything one does must be other-directed in that all actions are validated externally (and publicly) by one’s peers and even the totem itself. All emotion is socially filtered and meticulously appraised before it is carefully communicated. For example, one fan responds to Alfie’s vlog (Okay Let’s Talk about It) with “*I would freak out (inside) but try and act cool (outside)*” while another responds to Louise Pentland’s (sprinkleofglitter’s) vlog “YouTube Culture” with: “*If I see someone who is considered famous that I watch on YouTube, I freak out inside, but I don't scream.*” Here screaming and “freaking out” are indicative of recognising celebrity status and such overt acts of emotion serve only to create distance between the YouTuber and their fans. In ultimately campaigning to close such distance, the YouTubers and their loyal acolytes in the comments sections work together to neuter the community’s emotional self by practicing “self-awareness, critical reflection, self-regulation” (Chung et al. 2017: 23).

Playing Nice at ‘islands of the living dead’

The final theme to emerge from our data centres on how postemotional governance is not entirely enforced by the fan community but is also shaped by corporate attempts to regulate the emotions of the group for commercial gain. Marketers associated with YouTube or its affiliates organise what Ferris (2001: 33) labels “prestaged encounters” that allow for interactions with YouTubers “within tightly orchestrated limits”. These include conventions such as VidCon, Playlist Live, SitC and BeautyCon. All are orchestrated to incubate intense emotional connection between fans and YouTubers in a carefully crafted, predictable and machinelike capacity. This is reflected in detailed literature such as the “VidCon Code of Conduct” (<http://vidcon.com/rules/>) which outlines clear guidelines pertaining to personal conduct, and is couched in rhetoric that attempts to appeal to fans’ sense of community: “Not everyone ‘gets’ this thing we are all into. Let’s show everyone that we are a positive and friendly group”. The Code’s explicit call for positivity and friendliness maps onto Meštrović’s (1997: 44) arguments that the keystone of postemotionalism is “bland, mechanical, mass produced yet oppressive ethic of niceness”. This is reflected by zombification tropes that centre on efforts to seek and create the artificially pleasant or genial automaton and its “designer behaviour”, as captured in texts like Ira Levin’s 1972 *The Stepford Wives* (see Boon, 2011).

The gendered attempt to construct such *Stepford*-esque zombification is not lost on fans, who often reflect on the presence of interventions intended to structure and police female emotion more than the male. One female fan responds to Dodie Clark's (doddlevloggle) 'YouTube culture and VidCon' vlog suggesting "*security still look at us like fangirls*", just by virtue of her gender, while another responds with the following critique of conventions:

Security are pretty vile to "fangirls" being pushed on whilst you're in the middle of a conversation, Youtube is meant to be about community and how can you chat and meet new creators if you're being moved on by security.

Such alleged biases against "fangirls" by security maps loosely onto the masculinist preconception that being able to control one's emotions is a standard to which all individuals are expected to conform, but females rather than males are much less likely to achieve (Lupton, 1998). Most conventions rely on security personnel to monitor and intervene in meet-and-greets while queuing systems are enforced to both manage behaviour and artificially heighten anticipation amongst those waiting in line (Goulding et al. 2009). Louise Pentland (sprinkleofglitter) laments such bureaucratisation and management of her predominantly female fandom at conventions:

I know that that's [security and queuing] efficient. I know that it means as many people who want to, or as like time allows, can meet us so we can have a tiny bit of interaction but I don't feel like it's good enough because girls, and boys, I keep saying girls, like there are boys at these things too, it's just predominantly

girls, queue for hours. ...the security that are there like go, “quickly come on!” and move you all along. (Sprinkleofglitter, *YouTube Culture*)

It became evident from our fieldwork that the security, spatial organisation, design and layout of the YouTube-related conventions are strategically used to quash ‘rogue’ or ‘destructive’ fanaticism (Chung et al. 2017) and manage the docility of fans. The aim is not to completely mute or eliminate displays of excitement amongst fans, but to focus emotions into a manageable, pre-staged and commercially serviceable format. At SitC 2016 and 2017, emotional displays in the form of cheering and screaming were most likely to occur when YouTubers took to the main stage; or in panel rooms when the YouTubers appeared on elevated platforms and introduced themselves to the audience. The emotions displayed at conventions were thus less likely to be moments of raw, spontaneous and genuine effervescence but more of a “pre-planned” or “rationally induced” form of effervescence contained to authorised spaces (Meštrović, 1997: xii-xv).

In this regard, the convention resembles Ritzer’s (2003) “island of the living dead” where such commercial spaces are indeed separate from the mainland of everyday monotony, and are thereby full of some kind of *life* but are simultaneously “dead” as a result of the unnatural and subjugating marketplace controls put in place. They are “enclaves of rationalization” (Ritzer, 2003: 125) and, as such, attempt to safely direct the energies of fans to sites of commerce and market opportunity. The use of

control maps onto the technocratic belief that “the horde” can be made docile and compliant through sufficient security, surveillance and infrastructure which has long been a trope of the cinematic zombie in texts such as George Romero’s 1985 *Land of the Dead* or Andrew Currie’s 2006 *Fido*.

All three conventions visited by the second author had large signs making convention-goers aware that they were being filmed/photographed. These were located at the entrance to the main hall at SitC 2016 and 2017 and a conspicuous “notice of filming” disclaimer was located between the panel stage and creators’ backstage area at BeautyCon. A subtle expectation of Meštrovićian “niceness” was also incorporated into SitC’s 2017 filming disclaimer which read: “*This is a YouTube event, so smile and get ready to be filmed and photographed!*”. To some extent these large signs reiterate social visibility and discipline the behaviour of those in the convention in a way that bears resemblance to the Foucauldian panopticon or the distinct neo-Orwellianism that for Meštrović (1997) underpins the mechanisation of emotions, and for Ritzer (2003: 127) keeps these islands reassuringly “separated from the rest of life”.

The islands were further controlled by “distinctive interactional rules” (Ferris and Harris, 2011: 35), which, if broken, can open the fan up to immense criticism from other fans. At SitC and BeautyCon fans would form orderly queues (even in the absence of any formal queuing system), keep interactions brief especially if there is a long queue

to greet the YouTuber (usually in the form of a hug→brief chat/ handing over a gift→photo) and keep a gap of a few feet between the fan greeting the YouTuber and the rest of the queue. It was evident from our fieldwork that even when YouTubers decided to ‘break the order’ and walk amongst fans without security and outside of controlled meet-and-greet zones, fans still tended to form orderly and fairly lengthy queues, waiting patiently to ask the YouTuber for a photo and/or autograph.

Recognising the limited amount of opportunities for truly authentic effervescence at the conventions, organisers often attempt to artificially engineer the periphery around prestaged encounters to be vibrant and full of life through the use of various “distractions” such as technology, games, fairground rides and dodgem cars. This postemotional strategy of *baiting* can be explained by looking to the more gore-obsessed, filmic representations of the living dead whereby “a zombie rarely finishes his plate when nearby other sources of meat glisten and scent the air to distract zombie desire” (Loudermilk, 2003: 89). Through the inclusion of “lively” and desire-inducing bait, the ideal playground for mindless and subservient consumption is created whereby these “islands are characterised, even dominated, by simulations” and thus are “nothing more than a simulation of life, not life itself” (Ritzer, 2003: 129).

Despite the overall norms of discipline, control and docility at the conventions, there were some instances of what appeared to be genuine and spontaneous forms of

effervescence. These moments of authentic emotion were most likely to occur when fans engaged in “recognition work” (Ferris and Harris, 2011), the split second of processing when a fan recognises his/her totem (e.g. identifying a YouTuber casually walking around outside of the main convention hall at SitC or spotting a YouTuber through a gap in a partition wall leading to the backstage area at BeautyCon). It is the sporadic and unplanned aspects of these encounters that appear to circumvent postemotional composure and generate momentary effervescent energies. Fans would squeal with excitement and run towards the YouTuber but would almost certainly calibrate their emotions to what is expected, subjugate themselves to the queuing norm and form an orderly line to wait patiently and greet their totem.

Discussion

This study set out to theorise the “living dead” nature of fans’ collective effervescence under postemotional conditions. In doing so, our work has provided a more complex vision of the emotional mechanics that underpin the consumption community construct than we have previously seen in Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). Previous research has tended to position consumption communities as platforms where participants counterbalance the emotional structures of their day-to-day lives with raucous and profane collective behaviour in what Bakhtin (1984: 124) calls a “joyful relativity of all structure and order” (see also Cronin, McCarthy and Collins, 2014; Fitchett & Smith,

2002; Goulding et al. 2009). However, our findings shed light on the possibility that consumption communities might not resist but rather act in accordance with the mainstream structure of feeling when such structures are perceived to be of some benefit to their social organisation. In particular, our findings suggest that the “laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary” (Bakhtin, 1984: 122) are not completely suspended in communities such as YouTube fandom; rather they are simply redirected and even reinforced. This comes with a number of contributions for marketing theory.

First, we contend that not all consumption communities invariably function as what Goulding et al. (2009: 768) refer to as “microcosms of ‘free’ culture”. Rather, some collectivities might still be bound by (and even wish to leverage) the same structure of feeling that governs and homogenises broader culture even if it is assumed to be *deadening* in its effects. In keeping with the dominant postemotional culture rather than challenging or resisting it, we uncover how consumption communities can hold more of an “incubatory” rather than “liberatory” relationship with prevailing ideologies of consumption. This contrasts with extant CCT work that has typically understood communities and fandoms as providing some kind of escapist “response” to prevailing ideologies. Sinclair and Dolan (2015: 432) discuss consumers’ communal pursuits of emotional excitement as a response to broader civilising processes and as an “outlet for feeding an emotionally starved society”. Similarly, O’Sullivan suggests that some

transient consumption communities provide their participants with the opportunity to “temporarily elude and evade the marketplace ideology of restraint and moderation” (2016: 1051) and engage in emotional behaviours which are “more carnivalesque and less controlled” (2016: 1036) than those of everyday structured life. Our findings paint an alternative picture, one where the de-escalation of effervescence and the championing of restraint is sought out by consumption communities for its importance in protecting their stability and longevity. Rather than being “unified in ‘crazy’ behaviours” (O’Sullivan, 2016: 1042), it is the maintenance of “carefully managed ‘niceness’” towards one another and its enforcement through “curdled indignation” and idealised egalitarianism that forms the unifying force for the YouTuber-fan community (Meštrović, 1997: 1).

Second, our analysis of fandom indicates a gendered dimension to postemotionalism which had been left curiously underdeveloped in Meštrović’s (1997) original thesis. Our work indicates that the corrective tyranny of postemotionalism does not operate as a univocal bastion of rationalism to which all subjects are equally interpellated but is, at least in contexts such as fandom, particularly gendered in its coercions. The dehumanising – or *zombifying* – machinery of postemotionalism, we argue, must be interrogated particularly at the level of female subjectivity whereby young women have long been represented as the “frenzied or hysterical member[s] of a crowd” (Jenson, 1992: 11). Far from providing some kind of utopian shade from these

biases, fandom exists as a space in the direct glare of masculinist and patriarchal prejudices where subjects exercise heightened awareness of their emotions for fear of being indicted socially for “*fangirling*”. This is consistent with Smith’s (2017: 38) suggestion that when women are “fans”, their modes of emotional engagement are assumed to be somehow different from male fans: “Female fans carry with them the connotation of being “too close” to the object of their fandom”. It is at this interplay of entrenched gender relations and emotions that we suggest future research and theorisation of postemotionalism might be useful (see also Lupton, 1998). Particularly, how might the YouTuber-fan community’s mechanisation of emotion be compared with male football fandom where emotional regimes are reversed? For football fans, there are indeed postemotional rules, other-directedness and imperatives but these circulate around “lads” expectations “to be as vocal as possible”, “to contribute to the atmosphere of the stadium” and not to be “barstool fans” (Richardson and Turley, 2006, 176-177). Football is constructed as one of the only outlets in postemotional society where it is acceptable for men to be openly emotional with one another which contrasts with YouTube fandom and its enforcement of emotionless spaces and fangirl shaming. Attention needs to be paid to the multiple and possibly contradictory ways through which postemotionalism operates and this may have much to do with gender relations and the object focus of the fandom.

Lastly, we recommend caution when conceptualising how individuals can acquire and assert power under postemotionalism. The collective mechanisation of emotion does not comprise individuals using emotions to enact power for themselves, rather it is about monopolising power for the community in general, *the horde*. Identity dividends and sense of community for the individual are derived from the strength of the horde as a whole rather than one's unique or special position within it. We share Illouz's (2007) concern that self-presentation through emotion is doomed to take on a somewhat uniform character; that, through reification, there becomes a desperate search to tie emotions to capital which can ultimately rationalise selfhood to the point of impoverished subjectivity. Just as zombies are the faceless, communal horde, postemotional fans or "zomsumers" regulate and homogenise the emotional make-up of those who participate within their collective. The emotions that the community engages in during moments of its collective life are so denuded of instability, unpredictability and spontaneity that they facilitate only a simulation of life. It is here that we situate our concept of zomsumption whereby emotions are rationalised down to merely lifeless or "dead" capital, but continue to be circulated as "living" to motivate and promote a particular vision of collective consumption.

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