

Literature Review: Music Fandom & the Phish Fan Community

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LIBR 200-12: Information Communities

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INTRODUCTION:

Music fans are not a new type of information community. As long as there has been popular music, there has been a devoted, loyal group of people wanting the latest information regarding the band they love. Music fans have information needs that vary from discovering when new music will be released, to listening to music online to finding tour dates, news about artists and merchandise availability. Currently, one band in particular has fans who are so keenly interested in their music and culture, they often tour with the band, following them from town to town, attending multiple shows over several weeks.

The band is Phish - a group who has been making music and touring for about 30 years. They are a jam bands, which means much of their music is improvised and no two performances are exactly alike. This aspect of their artistry has made fans want to follow and tour with them through the years. Phish fans are everywhere and require a strong information network to stay informed about the band and in touch with one another.

The following is a review of scholarly and popular research related to information communities and information seeking behavior of music fans. It also examines some of the material directly related to Phish fans. The goal is to comprehensively review research on music fandom and ultimately find topics requiring more research and potential areas of future study.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Since the topic of music fandom is extensive, research has been done from different perspectives. The research tends to fall into at least one of three groups. Some authors, including Fisher and Durrance, have written about information communities in a general sense.

This serves to define and characterize information communities. Others, such as Laplante and Downie, have written specifically about music fans and their information seeking behaviors, while Watson, Miller and Rabin have written directly about Phish, their fan community, and the culture associated with them. The scholarly material, the majority found on this topic, focuses on what information communities are and how music fan communities find information, while popular sources focus on Phish fans and live performances that bring this group together offline.

On the topic of information communities, Fisher and Durrance (2003) write about the characteristics and formation of information communities and how they are essentially created around a group's need for information. Fisher and Durrance (2003) describe five characteristics of information communities: they exploit technology, are made up of a diverse group of people, meet specific needs, help overcome trust barriers and foster a sense of social connectedness (Durrance and Fisher, 2003). Phish fans as an information community meet all of these criteria.

Watson (1997) expounds upon the idea of community. He notes that scholars disagree when it comes to calling a group of people sharing information online a community (Watson, 1997). However, he argues that Phish fans who use online forums, such as Phish.net, are indeed a community which has only grown larger and stronger with new and improved computer mediated communication technologies (Watson, 1997). He shows both sides of the argument and discusses why assigning the word "community" to an online group of music fans can be approached with skepticism, but is also appropriate and necessary (Watson, 1997). Watson (1997) would agree with Fisher and Durrance as he also notes that communities are built on common interests and not necessarily relegated to geographic location. He adds, however, that communication (online and/or offline) and intimacy is a necessary component to successful

information communities because without it, the community dissolves (Watson, 1997). This level of intimacy and communication can be difficult given that Phish fans are one of the largest fan communities on the internet but it is an important feature of communities (Watson, 1997).

In also writing on music fandom, O'Regan (2014) notes that it is a rather new area of academic study and that not much research has been done on the topic, unlike other areas of fandom such as film. This could be because it does not fall into "processes of generalization;" in other words, music fandom is a term that incorporates a wide range of tastes, roles, identities and practices (O'Regan, 2014). He notes that fandom can include social networking, collecting, listening and dancing to music and self-expression (O'Regan, 2014). However, he also points out that music fandom can be fickle. It's not necessarily a life-long commitment as fans' tastes may change and fans may belong to multiple groups of fandom at any particular time (O'Regan, 2014). He ends by noting that our love of music, established at a young age, makes us want to engage in fandom and "fuels the curiosity to want to understand more deeply the strange, enjoyable, giddy experience of being a fan" (O'Regan, 2014, p. 78).

As an information community, the research shows that music fans utilize multiple online resources to locate information about and listen to music from their favorite bands. A few of these are Web 2.0 applications, forums and the online "public library" archive.com¹. In researching archive.com, Burnett (2009) found that the site, founded to provide fans with access to digital materials and concert recordings, houses collections that are considered "leisure materials" rather than something more substantive (Burnett, 2009). The author finds, however, that these leisure materials may at times be just as essential and important to a user as the more

¹ Burnett (2009) notes that archive.com, founded in 1995, holds 850,000 audio, video and text files and 85 billion historical web pages. It also hosts more than 200 forums for fans to communicate about the site's collections.

serious materials (Burnett, 2009). This helps establish the Phish community as one with leisurely albeit necessary information needs. Burnett (2009) also notes that his findings serve to show that for libraries, “the value of materials and collections is not primarily defined by how librarians view them, but is a function of users’ worldview; materials perceived to be trivial or unimportant by some may be extraordinarily important and meaningful for others” (Burnett, 2009, p. 708). The article’s theoretical focus is on the theory of normative behavior², which examines facets of information behavior in the framework of groups called “small worlds,” and its idea of “worldview³” (Burnett, 2009). Burnett (2009) notes that librarians must take into account users’ varying worldviews rather than just their own.

Another online platform that has been studied in relation to music fandom is Web 2.0 applications, specifically online forums. Watson’s (1997) research focuses on the online forum Phish.net. He notes that forums such as Phish.net allow for the community to form a “group mind” and participate interactively with other fans (Watson, 1997). He also discusses important points within the fandom such as hierarchies based on fan knowledge and tolerance among fans.

A study by Zheng (2011) which examines the roles online fan forums play in “niche cultures,” such as fans of rock music, found that Web 2.0 technologies have made a huge impact on the way fans communicate (Zheng, 2011). The purpose of the study, utilizing several focus group interviews, was to examine “the paths of influence of online forums on fans of rock music” (Zheng, 2011, p. 735). Zhang (2011) notes that since the new millennium began, there

² The theory, like the idea of information communities presented by Fisher and Durrance, is not “linked to specific geographic locales.” It addresses the relationship between behavior and attitudes of groups and their use of information. The 2001 presentation of theory of normative behavior included virtual communities (695).

³ Worldview is “a collective perception held in common by members of a social world regarding those things that are deemed important or trivial” (696).

has been fast and major progress in the areas of online networking. This has made it easier for bands to have and maintain large fan bases as well as distribute their music to their fans in new and simpler ways. He adds that Web 2.0 and social networking platforms have been important to fans who want to share opinions but that they also help shape the popularity of certain bands and music genres themselves (Zheng, 2011).

Zheng (2011) goes on to discuss innovation diffusion theory (IDT) in order to give a theoretical basis for the examination of relationships between fans' forum use and appreciation of rock bands. His results found that there is a relationship between the two in which three characteristics of IDT (image, result demonstrability and visibility) play a role (Zheng, 2011). He also found that the model used in the study could be used to describe the influence online forums have over the dissemination of rock music (Zheng, 2011).

Authors who have studied fan search behaviors have researched how fans look for music online and the practical and personal outcomes of information seeking. One particular study of music seeking behaviors done by Matson and Shelley (2013) focused on how undergraduate students find music. They surveyed 170 students from the University of Minnesota in an effort to help librarians recognize the current shift in students' information seeking behavior and prepare them to better assist in reference queries (Matson and Shelley, 2013). It focused on the students' search for a particular album (*London Calling* by The Clash) as well as information about the band. Matson and Shelley (2013) note that 21st century technology has made it easier to search for and acquire information. Therefore, students of today expect library services to run as effortlessly and conveniently as a standard web search (Matson and Shelley, 2013). In other words, "the behaviors that library users exhibit every day – such as using search engines to find

information online – lead to changes in their expectations from libraries” (Matson and Shelley, 2013, p. 220). In examining students as “consumers of music” and studying their search behaviors, the article clarifies the nature of their information seeking behaviors and found that 83% began searching for music online and 95% listened to the music for free online (Matson and Shelley, 2013). These statistics show that “students regard the internet as the most important tool for finding and for listening to music” (Matson and Shelley, 2013, p. 227). This led the authors to hypothesize that students would use the same strategies to search library databases. One weakness with Zheng and Matson and Shelley’s research is that the participants groups studied were small and may not reflect the actions and feelings of the majority of music fandom.

Laplante and Downie researched “what contributes to making a music information-seeking experience satisfying in the context of everyday life” (Laplante and Downie, 2011, p. 202). The authors note that there has been little research to date on information seeking for the sole purpose of enjoyment in the activity rather than other purposes (Laplante and Downie, 2011). Their research, gleaned from a study of participants, concentrates on users who look for information about music simply for the satisfaction it brings- the “utilitarian and hedonic outcomes” of music information seeking (Laplante and Downie, 2011). They found that users’ interest in acquiring information about music led them to use information retrieval (IR) systems and several participants conveyed feelings of satisfaction upon receiving new information from an IR system (Laplante and Downie, 2011). This was because they either increased their cultural knowledge, enriched their listening experiences or gathered information for future queries (Laplante and Downie, 2011). Some participants in the study reported that music information seeking was a hobby and others reported getting so engrossed, they’d lose track of time

(Laplante and Downie, 2011). The authors also found that there are two types of outcomes that can make a music information seeking experience enjoyable: the gaining of music itself and the gaining of information about music (Laplante and Downie, 2011). They conclude by noting that “the fact that participants reported appreciating increasing their knowledge of music and music artists through their interactions with IR systems reveals that these systems are used as sources of information” (Laplante and Downie, 2011, p. 209).

In studying music fandom, some have researched fans’ interest in seeking, discussing, sharing, selling and procuring band merchandise, show tickets and other memorabilia online and in person. One study, by Baker (2012), explores how this “material culture of the fans...reflects the values of the people in the online group.” Baker (2012) focuses her research on the trading, gifting and selling objects online between music fans using data from observation of fan groups and about 100 interviews. She argues that the sharing of items brings with it a greater sense of connectedness among community members (Baker, 2012). To find how community members exchange items in an online environment, the author performed a study of fans in a Rolling Stones fan community and found that fans often share items such as recordings and videos that are not available to the public (Baker, 2012). They also buy and sell tickets using credit cards which requires a sense of trust among community members (Baker, 2012). The author notes that her findings show that music fans are more interested in pleasing other community members and developing a sense of closeness than participating in traditional economic practices (Baker, 2012). A weakness in Baker and Matson & Shelley’s research is that they used fans of a particular band. Therefore, their findings may not be able to be generalized to all music fandom.

Similar to Baker, Miller's (2002) findings relate to exchange of commodities. However, her research focused on Phish fans' in-person involvement in the parking lot⁴ prior to Phish shows. This goes to illustrate that there is still information seeking behavior found among this community when gathered for a show at a venue. Miller (2002) writes about the community and in discussing the fans, reiterates the points made by other writers when she notes that they have a vast online presence, tend to share similar ideologies, have a community slang and shared values (Miller, 2002). She goes on to research particular items available on the lot at venues and how the exchange of these items helps to form a bond within the Phish community.

In Rabin's (2013) book, he recounts his personal experiences touring with Phish. In doing so, he gives commentary and insight into this fan community as both a fan and reporter. He notes that Phish fandom involves becoming part of a tribe centered on music and a lifestyle which also offers fans a sense of identity and belonging that accompanies being a part of a notorious but close-knit group (Rabin, 2013). This group has its own beliefs, rituals, traditions and folklore (Rabin, 2013). The author notes that the band assists fans in creating this uniqueness by giving them a "secret language" of sorts based on their use of slang, in-jokes and running gags (Rabin, 2013). Rabin (2013) also speaks to how quickly and easily friendships are made within the community and the sense that other fans will "automatically like you because you enjoy the same music as them." He gives anecdotal evidence to prove his points. He also notes a parallel between Phish fans and baseball fans when he writes that "both baseball and Phish

⁴ The parking lot scene is an important part of the Phish fan culture. Often called "the lot" or "Shakedown Street," this market-like scene is created by fans outside of nearly every Phish show.

fandom [is] about tradition, about friendship, about camaraderie, about being unhealthily fixated on the performances of absolute strangers” (Rabin, 2013, p. 163)

CONCLUSION:

Phish fans make up a unique and diverse information community. The research compiled about them and other music fans finds that they exploit technology to not only access necessary information, but also pursue their interests and hobbies pertaining to music and develop social connectedness. The authors reviewed seem to agree on these points. Some also cite theories such as normative behavior and IDT to strengthen their arguments.

However, after reviewing the literature, some weaknesses and gaps are found as well as areas for further study. For one, the literature does not focus on many online resources for fans besides fan-created forums and it mentions nearly no print sources. This may be due to the fact that information technologies are prevalent, but it assumes other resources have no value to the community. Also, a few authors themselves note that not much/enough research has been done in the area of music fandom. An area of further study could be to find if and how these music fans use brick and mortar libraries and how libraries can assist this community in their information seeking. Also, more research is needed to find how fans use the information they acquire, how they assess its veracity and more ways Phish fans can benefit from information sharing within the community.

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