



UNIVERSITÄT
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**“How Can You Say Young Girls Don’t Get It?”:
The Evolution of American Fangirl Agency
from 1910-2010**

Hausarbeit als Abschlussprüfung des Seminars

„A Right To Childhood? Young Americans in the 19th and 20th Centuries“ (SS 2022)

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1. Introduction

Many scholars agree that “fandom remains a pathologized and stereotyped identity.”¹ This is further exacerbated by the fact that literature on fandom characterizes it as deviant, excessive, and insane.² Before the aca-fan³ involvement, publications, and social perception predominantly centered around notions of irrationality, loss of control, and negative influences by, e.g., the mass media that lead to presumed destructive fan behavior.⁴ Moreover, as Lisa A. Lewis maintains: “[F]andom is overwhelmingly associated with adolescence or childhood, that is, with a state of arrested development or youth-oriented nostalgia, not mature adulthood. Furthermore, the fan impulse is presented as feminine.”⁵ Consequently, affected the most by these previously listed stereotypical preconceptions and frequently ignored by history were and continue to be adolescent girls, commonly referred to as fangirls.⁶

Although many academic achievements focus on the empowerment of fans through their fanhood nowadays, Mel Stanfill contends that both the collective perception of and the scholarship on fandom have “a tendency to consider fans as subjects *with no history* – both assume from the outset that these individuals or communities are already fully formed.”⁷ But when historically engaging with fandom culture and fangirls from a feminist standpoint, the intersection of girls’ studies, in particular teenage girl studies, and fan studies provide valuable insight with a myriad of scholarly output on different fangirl phenomena and primary sources dating back to as early as the beginning of the 20th century.

Deploying this theoretical background in the context of various primary sources such as movie fan magazines, oral histories, and digital fan websites, this paper traces the

¹ Paul Booth and Lucy Bennett, “Introduction: Seeing Fans,” in *Seeing Fans: Representations of Fandom in Media and Popular Culture*, ed. Lucy Bennett and Paul Booth (New York City: Bloomsbury, 2016), 1, hereafter Booth, Bennett, “Introduction.”

² Joli Jenson, “Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization,” in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (New York City: Routledge, 1992), 9, hereafter Jenson, “Fandom as Pathology.”

³ The abbreviation “aca-fan” refers to academic scholars who identify as fans.

⁴ Jenson, “Fandom as Pathology,” 13.

⁵ Lisa A. Lewis, “‘Something More Than Love’: Fan Stories on Film,” in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (New York City: Routledge, 1992), 157.

⁶ See, e.g., Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York City: Times Books, 1994), 5, hereafter Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*. The notion of “fangirl” was first recorded in a novel called *Holy Deadlock* by Alan P. Herbert in 1934.

⁷ Mel Stanfill, “‘They’re Losers, But I Know Better’: Intra-Fandom Stereotyping and the Normalization of the Fan Subject,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 30, no. 2 (2013): 118. Emphasis added.

evolution of the American fangirl from 1910 until 2010 and intends to contextualize changes and developments in fangirl behavior during this century. As indicated by the quote by singer, songwriter, and actor Harry Styles borrowed for the title, this paper asks, “[h]ow can you say young girls don’t get it?”⁸ and argues that the behavior of and personal accounts produced by American adolescent fangirls themselves persistently chronicle female claims to agency,⁹ identity, and self-expression through the decades. In doing so, this paper identifies a threefold allocation of these claims concerning gender, sexuality, and culture. It analyzes the resistance to stereotypical preconceptions of fangirl behavior and celebrates fangirls as self-determined and empowered agents within society. To restore the concept of fangirl and to reclaim their positive social impact, this paper investigates primary sources produced by female teenagers living in the US who relate their experiences with fanhood from the early 20th until the 21st century.

Historically, the hegemonic image of female fans losing their minds has been strongly connected to music and its live performances.¹⁰ For this reason, most of this paper focuses on fangirl culture related to music and the male musicians they idolize to trace the historical evolution of the American fangirl and its most significant highlights.¹¹ Only the “screen-struck girl”¹² falls out of this category but was deemed necessary and worthwhile to analyze as it constitutes a cornerstone for all subsequent developments of fangirl culture, as the following chapters will reveal.

To successfully reconstruct significant eras of these developments, in Chapter Two, this paper presents the theoretical cornerstones required to understand the subsequently analyzed phenomena of female fandom through revealing the harmful

⁸ Cameron Crowe, “Harry Styles’ New Direction,” *Rolling Stone*, April 18, 2017.

⁹ This term paper employs the complex notion of agency as a concept of “freedom, autonomy, rationality and moral authority” in a feminist poststructuralist sense, Bronwyn Davies, “The Concept of Agency: A Feminist Poststructuralist Analysis,” *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology* 30 (1991): 42, hereafter Davies, “Concept of Agency.” In poststructuralism, the female agency is characterized as a “discursive constitution” of locating oneself in a visible position of being able to speak and be listened to, of establishing oneself as an “author of their own multiple meanings and desires” and the ability to subvert dominant discourses to create new alternative discussions, Davies, “Concept of Agency,” 51. Overall, this interpretation of agency allows for “the capacity [...] to resist, subvert and change the discourses themselves through which one is being constituted,” Davies, “Concept of Agency,” 51.

¹⁰ Jenson, “Fandom as Pathology,” 13.

¹¹ In analyzing selected eras that influenced fangirl practices, this paper does not claim to give an extensive overview of the last 100-plus years about female fandom phenomena. Other significant instances of fangirl culture, such as Frank Sinatra or Elvis Presley in the 1940s and 1950s will not be covered due to the length of this paper. Rather, it spotlights three chosen decades to allow for a more in-depth analysis of these artists and the fangirl practices surrounding them.

¹² Diana Anselmo-Sequeira, “Screen-Struck: The Invention of the Movie Girl Fan,” *Cinema Journal* 55, no. 1 (2015): 1, hereafter Anselmo-Sequeira, “Screen-Struck.”

etymology concealed behind the label ‘fan’ and heavily gendered stereotypical classifications, which both lead to discriminatory othering of fangirls. Chapter Three focalizes the practices of movie fangirls in the early 20th century by examining fangirl-authored letters to the editor in movie fan magazines and discusses the proud self-labeling of fangirls, their role as amateur movie critics as well as their attempts at movie careers. Chapter Four discusses fangirl culture in the context of The Beatles, who took mid-1960s America by storm. Through oral history excerpts, this paper emphasizes Beatlemania as a source of sexual revolution and experimentation with gender norms and focuses on the role of screaming as a fangirl practice. Chapter Five dissects the 1990s phenomenon of boybands in America as “a cornerstone of girl culture.”¹³ It highlights the role of fangirls as (digital) media practitioners and cultural creators and examines the ‘fangirl gaze’ as a perspective that subverts hegemonic ideals of hyper-masculinity.

The variety of sources selected for this paper trace the development of resources available to fangirls and their diverse engagement with different media outlets. The evolution from movie fan magazines in the 1910s to digital fan websites in the 1990s and beyond underline the transformation of highly selected fangirl output to the ubiquitous availability of practiced fandom. Oral history was chosen as a third type of primary source to achieve an unfiltered portrayal of the singularity of the Beatles’ stardom and to resonate with the paper’s claim of The Beatles’ fangirls as a significant influence of the 1960s soundscape.¹⁴

2. The Etymological Origin of the Fan

Looking at the term “fan,” its etymology reveals a negative connotation. “Fan” as an abbreviation stems from the word “fanatic,” which originated in the Latin language as

¹³ Sharon R. Mazzarella, “Boy Bands,” in *Encyclopedia of Children, Adolescents, and the Media*, ed. Jeffrey J. Arnett (London: Sage Publications, 2007), 132, hereafter Mazzarella, “Boy Bands.”

¹⁴ The chosen primary sources for this paper do not allow for a generalization of *all* American fangirls and their practices, much less for general statements about female teenagehood across race and class. The sources discussed in this paper overwhelmingly focalize white, middle-class girls who occupy a privileged position in society that allows them to spend their leisure time and money on their favorite artists. This paper recognizes their privileged status as a starting point to being able to practice fandom while primarily highlighting gender issues within this privileged status instead of race and class in a stratified American society. Therefore, questions of, e.g., Black female fandom or queer fandom are worth investigating in additional research to offset the limitations of this paper.

“fanaticus.”¹⁵ According to Henry Jenkins, “fanaticus” was previously attributed to religious contexts and described temple servants but rapidly implicated a more negative meaning.¹⁶ The Oxford English Dictionary reveals that, at first, the adjective and noun “fanatic” referenced unbridled religious belief and “possession by a deity or demon” until it began, more broadly, to label any “excessive and mistaken enthusiasm,” albeit still especially regarding religion.¹⁷ In the second half of the 17th century, visionaries and dissenters were portrayed as “unreasoning enthusiasts” and derogatorily called “fanatic.”¹⁸ However, the abbreviated form did not occur until the late 19th century, when journalists began referring to sports audiences and soon other entertainment as fans.¹⁹ Especially noteworthy for this paper is that the term fan was first and straightaway pejoratively used for women regarding female theater goers,²⁰ a prototype form of fangirl culture that is at the roots of the enthusiastic movie fan,²¹ an early American fangirl phenomenon analyzed in more detail in Chapter Three.

2.1 Dividing Key Elements of Male and Female Fandom

Next to its etymological origin that discloses an inherent negative connotation, the fan is often characterized as a passive consumer of a “modern celebrity system,” as Joli Jenson calls it.²² She divides fans into two groups: “the obsessed individual and the hysterical crowd.”²³ Either they suffer “from a disease of isolation” or “from a disease of contagion.”²⁴ This division and its societal reception are heavily informed by underlying gender assumptions, as other scholars also contend.²⁵ In often resembling the binary opposition of male and female, the obsessed individual is generally assumed to be a male fan, while the frenzied crowd primarily consists of female teenagers, generating lots of noise in the form of screaming or crying.²⁶ Although Jenson also mentions male sports

¹⁵ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York City: Routledge, 2012), 12, hereafter Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*.

¹⁶ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 12.

¹⁷ Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “Fanatic.”

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 12.

²⁰ See, e.g., Albert Auster, *Actresses and Suffragists: Women in the American Theatre, 1890-1920* (New York City: Praeger, 1989).

²¹ Anselmo-Sequeira, “Screen-Struck,” 9.

²² Jenson, “Fandom as Pathology,” 10.

²³ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁵ See Jenkins’ remarks in the following sentences.

²⁶ Jenson, “Fandom as Pathology,” 11-12, 14-15.

fans,²⁷ the element of hysteria, given its requirement of a uterus per its etymological origin and overall misogynist history,²⁸ is predominantly prescribed to female fans. While male fans can be targets for ridicule, their depiction is often not concerned with gendered aspects, as society and the media primarily portray them as asexual, impotent, psychotic, and antisocial. As Jenkins further postulates, the female side of fandom is prescribed an erotic character and depicted as screamers, fainters, and groupies.²⁹ It is the *fangirl*, who “becomes an erotic spectacle for mundane male spectators.”³⁰

What results from these harmful impressions is the pervasive othering of female fans as inferior, abnormal, and obsessed which functions as a deliberate separation to reassure those not belonging to fandoms as superior.³¹ One biased practice of othering to reinforce this superiority is elaborated on by Joli Jenson as the distinction between aficionados and fans. Strictly separated from each other by society at large, it discloses the arbitrariness of what constitutes high culture, i.e., the environment of the aficionado, and what embodies popular and cheap culture, i.e., the environment of fandom.³² Being recognized as an aficionado by society means that one is “unemotional, detached, ‘cool’,” while “emotional, passionate, ‘hot’ behavior” associated with the fan(girl) is devalued.³³ Additionally, Jenson posits that at the root of this distinction are questions of class and status underlying the collective perception of the aficionado as occupying the position as an educated and reasonable member of the high class in contrast to the fan who belongs to the uneducated lower classes that dangerously act out their infatuation. This unidimensional and unfounded classification resulting in questions of worthiness posed by society lies at the heart of many debates surrounding fangirl culture.³⁴ As Jessica Hopper, a music critic and author, is quoted in the epigraph to *Fangirls: Scenes from Modern Music Culture*: “Suggestion: replace the word ‘fan girl’ with ‘expert’ and see what happens.”³⁵ To this day, and as this term paper will show concerning adolescent

²⁷ Jenson, “Fandom as Pathology,” 12.

²⁸ For a general overview of the history of hysteria, see, e.g., Mark S. Micale, “A Short “History” of Hysteria,” in *Approaching Hysteria: Disease and Its Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). For a more detailed historiography by the same author, see, e.g., Idem, “Hysteria and Its Historiography: A Review of Past and Present Writings (I),” *History of Science* 27, no. 3 (1989); Idem, “Hysteria and Its Historiography: A Review of Past and Present Writings (II),” *History of Science* 27, no. 4 (1989).

²⁹ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 15.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Jenson, “Fandom as Pathology,” 23-27.

³² *Ibid.*, 18-23.

³³ *Ibid.*, 20.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁵ Hannah Ewens, *Fangirls: Scenes from Modern Music Culture* (London: Quadrille, 2019): n.p.

female fans, individuals acting out fan behavior or referring to themselves as fans have been unable to detach the etymological origin of their label and its concomitant negative associations from society's perception of them.

3. The 1910s: Screen-Struck Girls

As scholar Kelly Schrum argues, mainstream teenage girl culture emerged as early as the 1920s while the public primarily regards the 1950s as the time of birth of American *male* teenagehood.³⁶ However, preceding even the 1920s, young girls and women were identified as fans of the emerging movie culture, laying the foundation as young consumers of subsequent teenage girl culture.³⁷ Called “screen-struck girl[s]”³⁸ or “movie-struck girls,”³⁹ they designated the first American fangirls who, unintended by the powerful machinery behind the movie industry, rapidly predominated the cinemas and range of products created specifically for consumers of movie culture.⁴⁰ Coming from middle- and working-class backgrounds in urban and rural regions, their visibility significantly increased by the second half of the 1910s.⁴¹ Some scholars posit “that this generation of adolescent girls helped craft prototypical practices of film fandom that are now vital to our study of fan reception.”⁴²

Quickly becoming aware of this new phenomenon, American media pathologized movie fangirl culture as immature and susceptible.⁴³ Thus, already these early American

³⁶ Kelly Schrum, *Some Wore Bobby Socks: The Emergence of Teenage Girls' Culture* (New York City: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 2, hereafter Schrum, *Some Wore Bobby Socks*.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

³⁸ Anselmo-Sequeira, “Screen-Struck,” 1. The notion of the “screen-struck girl” was preceded by the “stage-struck girl,” who was an enthusiastic young female theatergoer during the second half of the 19th century, allegedly fantasizing about male actors and longing for fame. Soon, she became a pervasive figure in American culture who endangered the status quo of passivity for girls and women and consequently was deprecated by popular culture to ensure no deviance from traditional gender roles, *ibid.*, 10. The “stage-struck girl” is not analyzed in detail in this term paper because it, on the one hand, falls out of the selected time frame from 1910 until 2010, and, on the other hand, its immediate successor, the “screen-struck girl” shows more relevant patterns of fangirl behavior that help contextualize the evolution of the American fangirl within the claim to agency, identity, and self-expression of fangirls.

³⁹ Shelley Stamp, *Movie-Struck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture after the Nickelodeon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). This monograph presents an extensive overview of female audiences in the cinema. However, it does not primarily focus on young fan culture practices and thus will not be quoted in more detail in this term paper as other sources are more suitable.

⁴⁰ Schrum, *Some Wore Bobby Socks*, 154; Anselmo-Sequeira, “Screen-Struck.”

⁴¹ Anselmo-Sequeira, “Screen-Struck,” 5.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 3.

fangirls faced ridicule and prejudice.⁴⁴ What may have aggravated this stereotyping of the screen-struck girl, according to Diana Anselmo-Sequeira, is the coincident theorization of adolescence as defined by G. Stanley Hall, who highlighted the alleged emotionality of adolescent girls,⁴⁵ serving as a ready-to-exploit template for mass media.⁴⁶ By universally disseminating the young female fans as vociferous and narcissistic girls controlled by their emotions, a new stereotype to mock young girls was born.⁴⁷ However, as the following chapters will dissect, movie fangirls actively resisted these stereotypes and made claims to their agency as proud fans, movie critics, and aspiring actresses.

3.1 Making Their Voices Heard: Fangirls and Movie Fan Magazines

Media products such as *Photoplay* or *Motion Picture Magazine* occupied center stage in the early expressions of fangirl culture as they amassed a dedicated number of increasingly young and female readers, who perused these magazines and their additional information on their favorite star's private life, plot summaries of specific movies and most importantly, pictures of their favorite actors and actresses.⁴⁸ Miss Mary Crozier from Dallas, Texas, a devoted movie fan magazine reader, particularly commended that the Chats with the Players (one of *Motion Picture Magazine's* columns) "make us [the readers] feel that we are personally acquainted with the people that we see on the screens."⁴⁹ For her and many other girls, reading movie fan magazines quickly became a favorite pastime, and some even went as far as comparing them to the Bible.⁵⁰ Gradually, the monthly publications found their way not only into the girls' rooms to be read, but they began to use the contents beyond that as decorations or creative material for

⁴⁴ See, e.g., Schrum, *Some Wore Bobby Socks*, 160; Anselmo-Sequeira, "Screen-Struck," 1-2.

⁴⁵ G. Stanley Hall, *Educational Problems* (New York City: D. Appleton and Company, 1911), 22-23.

⁴⁶ Anselmo-Sequeira, "Screen-Struck," 3.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁸ Schrum, *Some Wore Bobby Socks*, 154-155.

⁴⁹ *Motion Picture Story Magazine*, November 1913, 170. Miss Mary Crozier's remarks indicate the development of a parasocial relationship with her favorite movie stars. This shows that early fan magazines were already able to foster parasocial interaction and not only TV or social media and their accelerated immediacy in later years. For additional information on this concept, see the fundamental article by Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl "Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance," *Psychiatry* 19, no. 3 (1956): 215-229.

⁵⁰ *Motion Picture Magazine*, April 1914, 167. Here, Miss Margaret J. Austin from Buffalo "says that this magazine is her Bible and that the photoplay is her chief recreation," *ibid.*

scrapbooks.⁵¹ As assertions of their identity, and self-expression, teenage girls exerted their dedication to movies and their stars as a productive and creative hobby, albeit as one still located within the capitalist logic of the magazine and film studio profit.⁵² Nonetheless, this paper argues in line with Anselmo-Sequeira that engagement with movies, stars, and fan magazines enabled teenage girls to negotiate their coming-of-age.⁵³

As part of this coming-of-age journey, screen-struck girls proudly labeled themselves cinematic fans and thus defined their identity in relation to their favorite movie stars. Proclamations of their fangirl identity were frequently printed in the letter to the editor section of movie fan magazines such as the *Motion Picture Magazine* (named *Motion Picture Story Magazine* before 1914). There, the early fangirls called themselves “ardent Motion Picture “fan”,”⁵⁴ or highlighted dedicated fangirl behavior as a prized achievement.⁵⁵ Portrayed as “the truest and most faithful movie fan,” an anonymous writer, who was also a fan and subscriber to *Motion Picture Magazine*, enclosed a picture of their 18-year-old friend Miss Mary Curtin and proudly depicted “her habit of almost living at the movies,” leaving no space for a future husband, at least temporarily.⁵⁶ Additionally, female fans claimed a specific fangirl vocabulary that identified them as fans of their favorite actor or actress, reifying the labeling as fans one step further and creating a distinct reference point for other fangirls who were knowledgeable about this kind of vocabulary. For example, in the *Motion Picture Magazine*, “Wilburites”⁵⁷ argued freely with “Bushmanites”⁵⁸ about their favorite actors.

Next to arguing among each other, much of the young female readership did not shy away from expressing their opinions about different film genres and movie stars in the letter to the editor-section to a more general audience. For example, in one letter to

⁵¹ Schrum, *Some Wore Bobby Socks*, 155.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 160.

⁵³ Anselmo-Sequeira, “Screen-Struck,” 4.

⁵⁴ *Motion Picture Magazine*, March 1915, 176.

⁵⁵ *Motion Picture Magazine*, November 1916, 168.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 168, 170. In their letter to the editor, the friend, referring to herself as “One of Her Converts,” characterizes Miss Mary Curtin as a young woman who watches over 30 movies a week and decorates her room with hundreds of pictures of the actors and actresses, *ibid.* 168. She emphasizes that the enthusiastic movie fan prefers her movies to finding someone to marry and writes: “When joking about her marriage she [Mary Curtin] exclaimed: “The man I marry must be twice the movie fan I am.” Some one [sic!] in the party said: “You’ll stay single all your life if you stick to that at the rate you’re going.” She gave Eva T.’s famous cry, “I don’t care,”” *ibid.* 168, 170.

⁵⁷ *Motion Picture Magazine*, November 1915, 165. Fans of American actor Crane Wilbur referred to themselves as “Wilburites” to show their dedication.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 169. As with Crane Wilbur, fans of American actor Francis X. Bushman called themselves “Bushmanites” to express their devotion.

the editor, Miss Grace Falvey from Dorchester, Mass., who claimed the previously quoted label “ardent Motion Picture “fan”,” criticized Mary Pickford and her, in her opinion, undeserved publicity for her “childish roles” while highlighting other actresses’ talents.⁵⁹ Letters like these exemplary reveal how young female fans did not exclusively focus on romanticizing actors but ‘fangirled’ about actresses too, all while assuming the role of amateur movie critics. Of course, some young female subscribers also proclaimed their admiration for their favorite actors at length.⁶⁰ However, many adolescent girls regularly demonstrated that they had no romantic interest in their beloved actors. Miss Alma E. Hilton from Melrose, Mass., a faithful “Wilburite,” wrote in her letter to the editor that “[w]hile I like him [American actor Crane Wilbur] immensely, I have never been able to wax romantic over him, but simply *like him, admire his ability and enjoy his playing* [...]”.⁶¹ On top of that she displayed a reflective assessment of famous actors such as Francis X. Bushman and highlighted his “physical and personal charm” all while criticizing his lack of “*real acting*.”⁶² Both remarks heavily contrast the stereotypical perception of hysterical screen-struck girls popularized by the mass media who worship their favorites unconditionally, lacking any capability for independent opinion-forming or even profound criticism.

3.2 Dreaming Big: From Watching on the Screen to Acting Out the Scene

Apart from expressing themselves in fan magazines, movie fangirls regularly dreamed about pursuing movie careers themselves, a desire fueled by the movie fan magazines that printed advice from famous movie stars on how to become an actress.⁶³ Fueling this

⁵⁹ *Motion Picture Magazine*, March 1915, 176.

⁶⁰ *Motion Picture Magazine*, May 1914, 166-168. In this letter to the editor, Miss Orra Johnson from Des Moines, Iowa, writes about why she admires her favorite actor Jack Kerrigan, whom she feels like she “knew,” *ibid.*

⁶¹ *Motion Picture Magazine*, November 1915, 165. Original emphasis.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 164-165. Original emphasis.

⁶³ See, e.g., the *Motion Picture Magazine* series “How to Get In! Authoritative Advice on How to Become a Photoplayer, by Leading Players and Directors.” In their November 1916 issue, actress Kathlyn Williams offers concrete tips to readers on how to start a career in the movies. These range from remarks about appearances, listing exact numbers of preferred weight and height to the proper behavior in the film studios, “How to Get In! Authoritative Advice on How to Become a Photoplayer, by Leading Players and Directors,” *Motion Picture Magazine*, November 1916, 61-62. In the same issue, Mary Fuller, another famous American actress refers to “screen beauty” as an essential prerequisite to a successful movie career, further emphasizing the rigid beauty standards in place, *ibid.*, 62-64. Although all contributors to this issue’s “How to Get In!” highlight that the movie industry is overrun by aspiring actors and actresses, they make the possibility to become an extra at first and start a career based on this first experience sound easy and promising, *ibid.*, 61-65.

desire further, *Photoplay* launched a competition called “The “Beauty and Brains” Contest” in October 1915,⁶⁴ where young girls could send two pictures and a statement “of not more than 150 words stating: Why I would like to be a photoplay actress” to obtain the chance to test their acting skills at the Fort Lee, New Jersey studios under the watchful eye of the directors and judges.⁶⁵ With these requirements, *Photoplay* allowed young girls to highlight or construct their personas. As Diana Anselmo-Sequeira summarizes, “the would-be actresses root their aspirations for stardom not in love-struck fantasies or far-fetched chimeras – as intimated by most press pieces on screen-struck girlhood – but in remunerative employment and personal optimization.”⁶⁶ Even though contests like these offered the girls a platform to gain attention, they did not use it to proclaim their love for their favorite star or reveal delusional self-appraisal as anticipated by mass media. Contrary, they determinedly listed “aspirations in self-betterment, prosperity, and pleasure.”⁶⁷ The applications to become a movie star defeated the homogenization and pathologizing of *the* screen-struck girl and emphasized their varying personalities. Although the contestant’s individuality was highlighted, one has to be cautious in presenting the movie industry at the beginning of the 20th century as an inclusive space since usually, this inclusivity remained a myth.⁶⁸ Nonetheless, competitions like “The “Beauty and Brains” Contest” underline that young girls dared to dream of an improved life as movie actresses, and this self-conception of fandom and their roles within it “reroutes them all back to female self-awareness and agency.”⁶⁹

When comparing the movie fangirl culture of the 1910s to subsequent fangirl phenomena, scholars classify it as the first tentative examination of young female (hetero)sexuality, fantasy, and romance. According to them, while later episodes of fangirl culture engage with these topics much more openly, the screen-struck girl at the beginning of the 20th century expressed sexual desire within the confines of her friendship group and own room.⁷⁰ As Kelly Schrum contends: “Movies and fan magazines offered high school girls a chance to flirt with sexuality safely.”⁷¹ Overall, she continues to write that “in their relationship with fashion, beauty culture, and music, girls also absorbed,

⁶⁴ *Photoplay Magazine*, October 1915, 27-31.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁶⁶ Anselmo-Sequeira, “Screen-Struck,” 24.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁷⁰ Schrum, *Some Wore Bobby Socks*, 160.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

although not unquestioningly, the norms of consumption, femininity, and heterosexual romance.”⁷² However, one always has to contextualize this compliant behavior regarding the role and place in the society of girls and women as occurring in a pre-feminist time, at least for mainstream society.

Even more so, this paper argues that although fantasizing about romance and discovering (hetero)sexuality might have played a central role in the lives of some movie fangirls in the 1910s, it is not the defining aspect of what constitutes this particular fangirl culture. As the exemplary primary sources chosen for this paper demonstrate, young girls’ favorite pastime of spending their time in the cinema goes beyond adoring their beloved actors and actresses on screen, imagining either being them or being with them. Instead, these Progressive Era fangirls used media outlets such as *Motion Picture Magazine* or *Photoplay* to form and express opinions, to proudly proclaim their fangirl identity, and to highlight their agency in light of its constant abnegation by the popular press. Overall, in their act of claiming a specific consumer good, i.e., movies and associated magazines as their own without ever having been intended as the primary audience, these early fangirls actively insisted on a partial level of independence, power, and influence in an ever-growing capitalist market. As they participated in a newly institutionalized form of fan culture, many tried to emulate their idols’ lives and become movie stars themselves. Only a few screen-struck girls transitioned from fangirl existence to renowned household names as famous actresses. But in trying to succeed in the movie industry, many young girls deviated from prescribed and expected roles in the patriarchal society to determine and enjoy, at least, what we nowadays classify as adolescence and the formative lifespan between childhood and adulthood, on their terms.

4. The 1960s: Beatlemania

Leaving behind movies and turning to music, this term paper examines the meteoric rise of The Beatles in the early 1960s as another formative period of American fangirl culture through the decades. In doing so, it uses oral history and focuses on Beatles fan experiences and the words with which they remember this defining period in their early life. Barbara Allen, who saw the Beatles up close when she sat in the press box for the

⁷² Schrum, *Some Wore Bobby Socks*, 168.

Beatles' concert in Philadelphia on September 2, 1964, vividly summarizes the experiences of many fangirls during that time:

I think a lot of it was a mass kind of hysteria took over in the way that a crowd reaction takes over. People get very excited—they're always searching, even at that age, for something exciting to break the tedium. And this was so new and different. And it came after the President's death, a very sad time that November, and that was still hanging heavy in the air. And all of a sudden, there were these young, vibrant men from a different country who were really cute ... and I'm not a child psychologist, but we were young girls at an age where young girls start to have boyfriend fantasies. And because back then young girls were so sheltered, incredibly sheltered—not cloistered, we didn't go to Catholic school in my family—but we were very sheltered, protected, naïve, so this was a very safe thing. All of this early attraction to boys was played out safely with these kind of “boyfriend Beatles.” Everybody had their favorite Beatle. For me, it was Ringo. So that became a “boyfriend” for these young girls who were starting to have these feelings toward the opposite sex but weren't able to express them. It was safe. It was OK for the parents—this is innocent, “they just have a photo of the guy, nothing's going to happen.” I think that played a role. And they were attractive looking as well.⁷³

Her statement highlights the lived reality of young fangirls in search for change and safe boyfriend fantasies as defining elements of Beatle fangirl identity that this paper will address in the following, and which have also been identified as one (albeit contested) element for movie fangirls of the 1910s. In addition to the elements mentioned in Barbara's recollection of her time as a Beatles fan, the band's success was primarily paved by the circumstances that they acknowledged and respected their fangirls' agency and related to female experiences,⁷⁴ offered relief from Cold War anxieties,⁷⁵ enabled a partaking in a revolt against parents' and elders' dated social concepts,⁷⁶ and, at the core of it all, were “an expression of joy.”⁷⁷ With the help of other fan statements, this paper will further dissect the Beatles as a source for sexual revolution that reconfigured American female teenagehood that goes beyond searching for a male counterpart and puts the girls' agency at the center.

4.1 Breaking Barriers: Fangirl Empowerment on an Unprecedented Scale

All over America, four young British men were confronted with millions of screaming teenage girls, a phenomenon quickly and derogatorily labeled “Beatlemania” by the

⁷³ Garry Berman, *“We're Going to See the Beatles!”: An Oral History of Beatlemania as Told by the Fans Who Were There* (Santa Monica: Santa Monica Press, 2008), 254, hereafter Berman, *“We're Going to See the Beatles!”* Please note that the page numbers refer to the e-book version of this publication.

⁷⁴ Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, 116-117.

⁷⁵ André Millard, *Beatlemania: Technology, Business, and Teen Culture in Cold War America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 38, hereafter Millard, *Beatlemania*.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 201.

popular press.⁷⁸ This neologism of “Beatles” and “mania” is associated with connotations of manic fangirl behavior, as markedly indicated by the second half of the compound word. Early news coverage focused on the young female fan masses and their transgressive behavior.⁷⁹ Therefore, the term “Beatlemania” obtained a significantly gendered connotation that invoked images of screaming girls,⁸⁰ and thus, same as for the screen-struck girls in previous decades, young female Beatles fans were stereotyped as overly emotional and hysteric.

However, oral histories reminiscing and detailing the unique Beatles fan experiences include self-references of fangirls as “Beatlemaniac”⁸¹ or “Beatle nuts.”⁸² These claims to specific fan labels parallel the self-labeling of movie fangirls in the previous decades as ardent fans and underline the reclamation of the derogatory usage of Beatlemania-adjacent words for their identity expression. Nonetheless, parents and adult observers increasingly reinforced the stereotypes surrounding young female Beatles fans by accentuating their perceived possession,⁸³ “Zen-like trance” and “seizure.”⁸⁴ They watched well-behaved teenage girls transform into rioting fans wanting to glimpse their four idols.⁸⁵ Nonetheless, this transformation entails a critical turning point in fangirl culture practices and teenage girl culture at large.

Visiting the States for the first time in February 1964, the Beatles arrived “at a time of profound loss,”⁸⁶ as indicated by Barbara Allen’s previous statement. A few months prior, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated, leading some scholars to argue that The Beatles resembled many of the former presidents’ character traits, effecting “a powerful and collective transference of hope.”⁸⁷ Fans such as Jim Rugino refer to the reasons why The Beatles became popular so quickly that

[p]art of it was the grief reaction to Kennedy. That was the first time after Kennedy’s death that any of us thought there was going to be a future... and that’s I think a lot of what they [The Beatles] represented. It was just this rush of excitement. I think it was a very strong, indirect factor.⁸⁸

⁷⁸ Millard, *Beatlemania*, 32.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Nicolette Rohr, “Yeah, Yeah, Yeah: The Sixties Screamscape of Beatlemania,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 29, no. 2 (2017): 3, hereafter Rohr, “Sixties Screamscape.”

⁸¹ Berman, “*We’re Going to See the Beatles!*”, 131.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 175.

⁸³ Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, 115.

⁸⁴ David Dempsey, “Why the Girls Scream, Weep, Flip; The Path to Understanding is Psychological, Anthropological and a Whole Lot Besides,” *The New York Times*, February 23, 1964.

⁸⁵ Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, 115-116.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Berman, “*We’re Going to See the Beatles!*”, 58.

However, other scholars contend that The Beatles' unparalleled success in the US cannot be solely attributed to the former president's assassination. Instead, they cite the "stale and empty pop formulas" of the American musical landscape for young people at the time from which The Beatles offered a welcome relief and which enabled their instant success.⁸⁹ This is further underpinned by Cathy McCoy-Morgan, another interviewed fan, who claims that

[i]t was very sad losing John Kennedy but I didn't think that had anything – I don't know if that set the mood. I was already in the mood for something new musically because it was boring. And I like music, and I like to dance, and I was waiting. And they [The Beatles] did it."⁹⁰

Touring New York City and Washington, DC, during their first visit to America, the musicians were met with large crowds of girls of unprecedented scale. Frequently, the excitement threatened to turn into violence, and their concerts transformed into riots.⁹¹ But who were these girls, waiting for them at the airport, watching their appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*⁹² on February 9, 1964, go down in history, and attacking police officers during the concerts? According to a poll of the American branch of The Beatles' fan club, most of their fans were between 13 and 17 years old, raised Christian, a white, middle-class girl, and a B-student in school.⁹³ For them, among many other highly individual reasons, the Beatles meant a non-threatening exploration of sexuality and a safe environment to experiment with androgyny.⁹⁴ As previously highlighted in Barbara Allen's interview statement, the Fab Four embodied 'safe boyfriends,' feeding into hegemonic interpretations of heterosexuality. However, these safe fantasy boyfriends (if even recognized as such by the female fan) introduced many fangirls to the concept of

⁸⁹ Millard, *Beatlemania*, 39.

⁹⁰ Berman, "We're Going to See the Beatles!", 59.

⁹¹ Millard, *Beatlemania*, 26-27.

⁹² The American television show *The Ed Sullivan Show* was broadcasted from 1948 to 1971 and enjoyed immense popularity. It aired each Sunday night and introduced foreign performers, who often became famous after their appearance on the TV show, to a large American audience.

⁹³ Gloria Steinem, "Beatle with a Future," in *Read the Beatles: Classic and New Writings on the Beatles, Their Legacy, and Why They Still Matter*, ed. June S. Sawyers (New York City: Penguin Books, 2006), 62. In addition to these fangirl demographics, it is important to highlight the development of the teenager as an entity separate from both child- and adulthood, which will not be discussed in this paper at length for reasons of conciseness. As previously underlined, female teenage culture first emerged in the 1920s. But its marketability significantly increased in Postwar America due to the affluent baby boomers buying products marketed distinctly to them, such as clothes, magazines, and entertainment. Additionally, they were able to enjoy significantly more leisure time than ever before, see, e.g., Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess and Gloria Jacobs, "Beatlemania: Girls Just Want to Have Fun," in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (New York City: Routledge, 1992), 97, hereafter Ehrenreich et al. "Girls Just Want to Have Fun." For more general information on the emergence and development of the teenager, see, e.g., Schrum, *Some Wore Bobby Socks*.

⁹⁴ Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, 116-117.

androgyny, and, consequently, young teenage girls found an outlet to reinterpret fashion for themselves to tap into new sources of female identity formation and self-expression through the Beatles. As Carolyn Long Paulk, who, like so many others, adopted the gender-blurring style of the Beatles, recounts:

On *A Hard Day's Night*, those girls were wearing a red tie and black & white herringbone jumper. My mom made me one of those, and I had a white Oxford cloth shirt, and my dad gave me this red tie he had. And whenever I wore that to school, I always had to wake him up early to tie my tie, 'cause I wanted to look like one of those girls with the long bangs and long hair. And mine was shoulder-length like that, and we thought we were so Jean Shrimpton/Liverpool. But it was a mod look from London.⁹⁵

This statement highlights how she took inspiration from the clothes worn in the Beatles' musical comedy film *A Hard Day's Night* and created her interpretation of the iconic outfit based on the movie. Here, gender-blurring becomes very literal through the combination of clothes from both her parents to create the distinct 'Beatles look.' Scholars emphasize that the imitation of the Beatles' androgynous style, in combination with choosing a favorite Beatle based on one's physicality and personality, was an attempt to "become a Beatle yourself, part male, part female, out in the world having fun," fully detached from mundane responsibilities as future housewives that society wanted to box them in.⁹⁶

4.2 'Screaming Like a Banshee': Fangirls and the 60s Soundscape

The hype around The Beatles considerably characterized the 1960s American soundscape. Dale Ford, a Beatles fangirl who saw the band during their first US tour in San Francisco on August 19, 1964, at the Cow Palace, describes the excessive screaming that drowned out everything else:

When they [The Beatles] finally came out, it was deafening, just absolutely deafening! Nothing but shrill screams, I didn't even know what song they were playing until maybe 30 seconds before the song ended, then I finally caught wind of what they were singing. But nobody seemed to care! They just wanted to see the Beatles. And this whole place was totally illuminated with everybody's flashes going off. And all this screaming. I was going nuts. I was screaming my head off like a banshee.⁹⁷

As Nicolette Rohr postulates, the screaming fangirls are acoustic signals of "a rebellion and a rehearsal for rebellion."⁹⁸ At first glance, the screams represent a raw and primordial act of self-expression. However, by connecting the screaming to rebellious behavior, she,

⁹⁵ Berman, "We're Going to See the Beatles!", 188.

⁹⁶ Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, 119-120.

⁹⁷ Berman, "We're Going to See the Beatles!", 197.

⁹⁸ Rohr, "Sixties Soundscape," 1.

and other scholars, link The Beatles' concerts and other public appearances to broader issues of gender, sexuality, society, and politics. Rohr continues to explain that the screaming constitutes one of "the liberating elements of fandom" that heavily contrast with the prescribed gender roles for girls at the time.⁹⁹

Mary Ann Collins's recollection of her visit to a Beatles concert in Baltimore's Civic Center on September 13, 1964, highlights this juxtaposition of being aware of one's role and expected behavior as a girl in public and the act of screaming as unconscious defiance of these patriarchal constructs:

And I'm sitting there saying to my friend, "You know, I hope for Pete's sake when they come out, people will not just scream and go absolutely bonkers, because I want to be able to hear them." I really did say that, believe it or not. So, just the way Ed Sullivan said, "Ladies and gentlemen, THE BEATLES!" whoever was the announcer said it almost exactly the same way. And sure enough, here they come, running out from the side. Well—I leapt out of my seat, I don't know how many feet up in the air, and screamed my head off. I mean, screamed like a banshee. I just totally forgot everything I had just been saying the minute before about "I certainly hope people act responsibly and maturely." I just screamed, I could not help it. It was like I had no control over myself whatsoever. I really and truly had been genuinely sincere just a minute before. Well, forget it. The minute they came out, you lost all sense of—anything, all control. You were just given over to the experience. And we had binoculars. And one by one, I went to each one, following them. To tell you the truth, you couldn't hear! You could not hear them playing, you could barely tell what song they were playing because it was just so loud in there.¹⁰⁰

Even as she first connects the desire to listen to the music to the well-being of Pete, a band member, she simultaneously links the screams to irresponsible and immature behavior. Thus, her screaming can be situated within the wider debate of gender roles at the time that coded (and to this day codes) immaturity and irresponsibility through overt and 'over-the-top' expressions of emotions as female. While the public primarily perceived the girls as acting inappropriate for their gender and mistaking their piercing screams during concerts as disinterest in the actual music, scholarly discourse interprets the girls employing the screaming as an outlet for all the feelings they were told to suppress, all while unmistakably claiming public space and time. These girls loudly expressed their agency and identity and defied gender preconceptions and allegedly appropriate public behavior.¹⁰¹

As fangirl testimonies demonstrate, the screaming was not confined to concerts or other public appearances but took place in the private sphere at home, too, far away from any Beatle. Carol Cox recounts the band's first appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* on

⁹⁹ Rohr, "Sixties Screamscape," 6.

¹⁰⁰ Berman, "We're Going to See the Beatles!", 244.

¹⁰¹ Rohr, "Sixties Screamscape," 2, 5.

February 9, 1964, when “Beatlemania exploded” in America.¹⁰² She remembers their groundbreaking performance for her inexplicable screams:

I was like two inches from the screen, screaming. I was a screamer. We had a next-door neighbor and many years later she said to me, “We thought somebody was being murdered over there, we could hear you screaming for the Beatles. So we always knew when they were on!” I can’t articulate it all these years later. There was something about them. They were fresh, they were new, there was just something really special and magical. I wish I could pinpoint it. I still get it now, to this day. When I see the *Sullivan* shows, it takes my breath away.¹⁰³

What makes these screams, both in private and public, so unique is that The Beatles fandom designates the first mass outbreak of the 1960s that centers around girls and women that could not be overlooked.¹⁰⁴ Barbara Ehrenreich et al. write that “[t]o abandon control – to scream, faint, dash about in mobs – was, in form if not conscious intent, to protest the sexual repressiveness, the rigid double standard of female teen culture. It was the first and most dramatic uprising of *women’s* sexual revolution.”¹⁰⁵ Simultaneously to confronting these hypocritical concepts of sex and sexuality, The Beatles fangirls publicly proclaimed their sexual desires, and years after the concerts, some fangirls realized the connection between their screaming and the sexual element to it. Linda Cooper, who attended three Beatles concerts in 1964, 1965, and 1966, depicts her realization: “Years later I was thinking, well now I know why everybody was screaming, it was all of this sexual energy, but at the time I was stupid or naïve, or too young to understand what the heck was going on.”¹⁰⁶ Especially for young teenage girls, this behavior was a novum.

Moreover, they did not just openly express sexual feelings through screaming but “lay claim to the *active*, desiring side of a sexual attraction: the Beatles were the objects; the girls were their pursuers.”¹⁰⁷ Ehrenreich et al. classify this assertion of sexual agency in an environment that regarded teenage girls as asexual beings as a groundbreaking caesura in the identity formation of young female teenagers.¹⁰⁸ Reinforcing this, The Beatles fandom allowed the fangirls to configure “subversive versions of heterosexuality.”¹⁰⁹ Concerning the inflexible gender role prescriptions of the 1960s, The Beatles’ behavior and style fell out of accepted social categories the American middle

¹⁰² Berman, “*We’re Going to See the Beatles!*”, 121.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 135.

¹⁰⁴ Ehrenreich et al. “Girls Just Want to Have Fun,” 85.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* Original emphasis.

¹⁰⁶ Berman, “*We’re Going to See the Beatles!*”, 81.

¹⁰⁷ Ehrenreich et al. “Girls Just Want to Have Fun,” 90. Original emphasis.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 90, 95.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 100.

class dictated. This subversion allowed fangirls to experience sexual self-expression in a safe space detached from gender inequality and the doom of unwanted teenage pregnancies.¹¹⁰

Taking all of these fangirl practices together, The Beatles fangirls functioned as “a bridge between the peripheral countercultures of the 1950s and the widespread cultural movements of the 1960s.”¹¹¹ They adopted The Beatles’ behavior and style, which highlighted carefree joy, self-expression, and authenticity, all central elements of many cultural movements at the time.¹¹² Overall, Rohr summarizes that

Beatlemania exhibited the challenges to convention, the public disruption and chaos, and the young people in the streets that would characterize the protest movements of the sixties. Seen in the broader sweep of the 1960s, screaming-girl Beatles fans were instrumental in the broadening of American society and culture in the 1960s and the myriad of changes, both personal and public, for individuals, the larger culture, especially as they related to women, gender, and sexuality.¹¹³

Thus, The Beatles fangirls and their (sometimes subconscious) challenging of gender and sexuality norms were at the forefront of heralding a new era of civic engagement and influenced the zeitgeist of the 1960s extensively, much more than the public perception gave them credit for.

5. The 1990s and Early 2000s: Boyband Phenomena

As wide-ranging as The Beatles and their young female fans were historicized in academic engagements, the same cannot be said of 1990s boybands, for whom The Beatles served as a prototype.¹¹⁴ American boybands such as the Backstreet Boys and *NSYNC rose to fame during the 1990s, “*the* decade of boy band culture,”¹¹⁵ and some even likened their popularity to Beatlemania.¹¹⁶ As previously mentioned, on the one hand, The Beatles are categorized as a prototypical precursor to boybands of the subsequent decades. On the other hand, as the previous chapter examined, they were the first all-male pop group admired not only for their music but also their unique styles and personalities, leading some to argue that “the Boy Band as we know it first emerges with

¹¹⁰ Ehrenreich et al. “Girls Just Want to Have Fun,” 101-102.

¹¹¹ Rohr, “Sixties Screamscape,” 7.

¹¹² Ibid., 6-7.

¹¹³ Rohr, “Sixties Screamscape,” 10.

¹¹⁴ Georgina Gregory, *Boy Bands and the Performance of Pop Masculinity* (New York City: Routledge, 2019), 11, hereafter Gregory, *Boy Bands*.

¹¹⁵ Judith Halberstam, “What Is a Drag King?” in *The Drag King Book*, ed. Del LaGrace Volcano and Judith Halberstam (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1999), 32. Original emphasis.

¹¹⁶ Gayle Wald, ““I Want It That Way”: Teenybopper Music and the Girling of Boy Bands,” *Genders OnLine Journal* 35, (2022): paragraph 6, hereafter, Wald, “Teenybopper Music.”

the Beatles.”¹¹⁷ However, what distinguishes The Beatles from their successors is the artificial manufacturing within the music industry that began with The Monkees as early as 1966.¹¹⁸ Bands like the Backstreet Boys were cast in talent searches and put together by music managers and did not form naturally in somebody’s garage, to employ this stereotypical metaphor of ‘genuine’ band formation here. They lack, as Gayle Wald phrases it, an “authenticating space.”¹¹⁹ However, selling 27 million album copies and creating five hit singles from their first album *Backstreet Boys*, which charted as the third most popular album of the year 1997, they proved the success of music industry-manufactured boybands.¹²⁰

Nonetheless, Mark Duffett contends that “the representation of boy bands has been characterized by a period of *relative historical stasis*.”¹²¹ He argues that boy bands are continually represented in the public sphere in terms of their youth, the exploitative and job-like nature of being a boyband member, their performance of non-hegemonic masculinity, and most importantly for this paper, concerning their predominantly young fangirls who were degraded to hysterical masses.¹²² According to him, “boy bands are really conceived, reproduced and deployed as *boyfriend bands*.”¹²³ As this paper will demonstrate in line with examinations of fangirl practices in previous chapters, boybands can be regarded as a safe space to experiment with sexuality and romance: they fulfill a “psychosexual purpose” without the risks of physical or emotional proximity.¹²⁴ That especially parallels the fangirling over The Beatles as the impetus for a sexual revolution and further underlines that the sexual agency of girls should not be underestimated.

However, this paper further posits that young female boyband fandom goes distinctly beyond this purpose of being a fan and reveals them as “strong-minded, imagined media practitioners who provide evidence of creativity while healthily rejecting preferred readings [of their fangirl culture by society].”¹²⁵ They share testaments to their

¹¹⁷ David Smay, “A Brief History of Boy Bands,” *Bubblegum Music*, October 30, 2015.

¹¹⁸ For more information on the construction of boybands in the music industry, see, e.g., Chapter 3 in Gregory, *Boy Bands*.

¹¹⁹ Wald, “Teenybopper Music,” paragraphs 9-10.

¹²⁰ Mazzarella, “Boy Bands,” 131-132.

¹²¹ Mark Duffett, “Multiple Damnations: Deconstructing the Critical Response to Boy Band Phenomena,” *Popular Music History* 7, no. 2 (2012): 187, hereafter Duffett “Multiple Damnations.” Original emphasis.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 188-195.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 191. Original emphasis.

¹²⁴ Michelle Ann Abate, “‘Soda Attracted Girls Like Honey Draws Flies’: *The Outsiders*, the Boy Band Formula, and Adolescent Sexuality,” in *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (2017): 47.

¹²⁵ Gregory, *Boy Bands*, 6.

identification as fans on dedicated fan websites, as the following chapters will highlight. This cultural agency will first, be examined in itself and, secondly, contextualized as a prerequisite to negotiations of sexuality and romance *through* these creative products.

5.1 Creating Fandom: Fangirls as (Digital) Media Practitioners and Cultural Creators

Young female teenagers exert agency, form an identity and express themselves through their media consumption and output in the 1990s and early 2000s and the cultural products they create via their fangirling – a practice often ignored or belittled by the public sphere. As Georgina Gregory maintains: “Dismissing female pop fans as empty-headed consumers denies them of the agency they so often display as *cultural creators*. Indeed much of the work of being a fan is eminently purposeful and at times, mind-expanding.”¹²⁶ Through their productive engagement with the boybands, the girls transcend the stereotypical perception of them as exclusively passive consumers of the sold product, i.e., the boybands, within a capitalist system. The

fan fiction, [...] fan forums, and databases – appears organized around a product or commodity, everyone knows that buying a product is not the point, not the beginning and end of things. Rather, it is the product world that counts, the worlds that unfold from the product.¹²⁷

Backstreet.net that “serv[es] fans since 1997” constitutes an example of these fan-made websites.¹²⁸ It exemplifies the network and community fans created to engage among themselves and write about the band members “in intensely personal, individually empowering, and occasionally unsanctioned ways.”¹²⁹ This primary source demonstrates that fangirls of 1990s boybands created digital engagement within their fandom community that transcended listening to their favorite band’s albums, watching their music videos, and attending their concerts. They established fan sites where fans could share their poetry, fan fiction, pictures, reviews, audio clips, and much more. On Backstreet.net, there is a section dedicated to “Reader Poetry” where fans posted their creations for the community to read. Occasionally, their poetry transcends the dedication to the Backstreet Boys and touches on larger subjects in life, like love, heartbreak, or

¹²⁶ Gregory, *Boy Bands*, 103. Emphasis added.

¹²⁷ Thomas Lamarre, “Introduction,” *Mechademia* 6 (2011): ix.

¹²⁸ <http://www.backstreet.net>.

¹²⁹ Wald, “Teenybopper Music,” paragraph 16.

friendship, and are often explicitly signaled as such. However, the majority of poems are inspired by specific band members or the whole band as a group.

One poem titled “In Your Eyes” by Kristy from Pine Bluff, Arkansas, mediates the fangirl culture surrounding the Backstreet Boys:

In your eyes / I see a smile / a laughter that carries / like a dancing child / dancing to the beat of / “We’ve Got It Goin’ On” / singing every word / to every single song / you make us all happy / so we’re proud to give to you / a love like no other / that is loyal and true / We decorate our room / with your pictures on our walls / and search for Backstreet merchandise / at all the local malls / We agri-vate [sic!] our families / by playing our music loud / over and over you are played / we hope we’ve made you proud. / We know that you get tired / of show after show / so we scream a little louder / just to let you know / that we love you / and we always will / we’re thankful for your work / and our love for you is real.¹³⁰

Here, Kristy enumerates some key markers through which Backstreet Boys fangirls (and, for that matter, many fandoms, especially those addressed in the previous chapters) identify themselves as part of the community. On the one hand, her poem expresses the allegiance to the band as one embedded in their reception as commodified entities and whose commercialization the fangirls’ consumption accelerates, i.e., the reference to buying their merchandise and albums and attending their concerts. On the other hand, the dedication she and other fans show to the boyband exceeds this material level and highlights the overarching motifs of happiness and unconditional love for the band. The very act of writing this poem and publishing it on a fan site is a testament to her commitment to the band that transcends consumer-driven motivations since Kristy is no *passive* young girl who considers herself satisfied with consuming their material output, but she *actively* created poetry and published it online to express her adoration for the band or a specific band member, both of which identifies her as a media practitioner and cultural creator. Thus, she expanded the ‘product world’ surrounding the Backstreet Boys on her own through her poetry without any monetary objectives.

Given the increasing ubiquity and immediacy of internet access in the 1990s and early 2000s, her poetry had an even greater chance to reach and inspire fangirls globally to assume their roles as digital media practitioners and cultural agents within their fan community. In comparison to the screen-struck girls of the 1910s who needed a magazine subscription to engage with other fans beyond their immediate social environment or The Beatles fans of the 1960s who often met other fans only at their high school, the

¹³⁰ Kristy, “In Your Eyes,” *Backstreet.net*, March 26, 2002. See Appendix A for the complete poem. In another poem that will be discussed in Chapter 5.2, Kristy reveals that she was around 14 years old when she wrote much of her Backstreet Boys poetry and posted most of it at the age of 20 to the website, see <http://www.backstreet.net/opinions/opine.cgi?x=view&d=poems&i=434>.

Backstreet Boys fangirl was able to connect with other fans on a much broader level. Additionally, her digital participation shows a degree of media and cultural literacy that became increasingly acknowledged outside her fangirl community, and scholars highlight how fan labor provides skills sought after in the creative sector.¹³¹

Thus, even though 90s boybands were blatantly commercialized, the transmission of this commodification into a genesis of fangirl-made cultural products emphasizes their proud identification as fans and expression through this fandom. Their fangirl identification was informed by assuming an active role as digital media practitioners and cultural creators, an exertion of agency that even had the potential to prepare them for a future occupation in the creative sector.

5.2 Adoring Androgyny: Catering to the ‘Fangirl Gaze’

As with movie fangirls of the 1910s and The Beatles fangirls in the 1960s, young female fans of boybands in the 1990s and subsequent decades found and continue to find themselves in “a gendered hierarchy of “high” and “low” popular culture that specifically devalues the music consumed by teenage girls.”¹³² Gayle Wald’s distinction parallels Joli Jenson’s previously established notion of ‘aficionado’ in high culture and fans in cheap, i.e., popular culture (see Chapter Two), albeit it situates the othering of fangirls in an exclusively pop cultural environment where the hierarchization is taken one step further. Now, young female adolescents are not simply fans of an adult-male-approved popular musician or music group, they are part of what has been coined as “teenybopper” music,¹³³ and thus they are hierarchized at an even lower position than Jenson’s distinction places them in the spectrum from popular culture on the low end to high culture at the top.

¹³¹ Gregory, *Boy Bands*, 104.

¹³² Wald, “Teenybopper Music,” paragraph 2.

¹³³ The gendered term teenybopper was originally established in the mid-1960s to distinguish allegedly bad/undeveloped musical taste of young girls in opposition to refined adult male taste in rock music and significantly gained visibility in later examinations of the mid-1960s musical landscape, Norma Coates, “Teenyboppers, Groupies, and Other Grotesques: Girls and Women and Rock Culture in the 1960s and Early 1970s,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 15, no. 1 (2003): 68, hereafter Coates, “Teenyboppers.” This misogynist assumption is compounded by the belief that “female teen audiences didn’t know better than to fall for the fake teen idols whose managers and record companies preyed on their girlish fantasies,” Coates, “Teenyboppers,” 70. Thus, the notion of teenyboppers strips young female fans of their ability and agency to choose their cultural products for consumption, characterizing them as passive and unrefined blind followers.

Despite this stereotyping demotion, fangirls of boybands occupy a space as spectators who exert their power of *looking at* the band members and thus subverting the hegemonic male gaze into a female one.¹³⁴ In contrast to the previously examined cinema culture or The Beatles, this catering to the ‘fangirl gaze,’ as the ways fangirls look at and perceive their favorite artists will be referred to in this paper, is intensified in this era by music videos that center on corporeal elements such as exposed chests of the band members.¹³⁵ What makes this corporeality especially noteworthy is its “girlish masculinity” that Gayle Wald refers to as distinct features of male Black singing groups that white boybands in the 1990s appropriated and modified.¹³⁶ For Wald, all these elements have “enormous implications” for “women’s and girls’ social, sexual, and cultural agency.”¹³⁷ Additionally, boyband performances such as those of the Backstreet Boys are saturated with androgyny,¹³⁸ which compounded with this ‘girlish masculinity’ reveal the fangirls’ desire to mediate their *fluid* sexual and gender identity.¹³⁹

Pairing the fangirls’ empowerment through the productive creation of cultural goods in a digital community with their negotiation of fluid gender and sexual identities through a ‘fangirl gaze’ that subvert hegemonic corporeal masculinity traits, albeit still within an environment informed by heteronormativity, this paper once again turns to poetry published on Backstreet.net. Another poem titled “Nickolas Carter,” again written by Kristy, shows her appreciation for Nick Carter’s non-normative and androgynous representation of masculinity in the music video for *Quit Playing Games (With My Heart)*. She writes of “the blonde hair that falls in your face / the gentle touch of your

¹³⁴ Gregory, *Boy Bands*, 97-98.

¹³⁵ See, e.g., the music video for the Backstreet Boys’ single *Quit Playing Games (With My Heart)* where the boys (except Nick Carter) sing half-naked in the rain toward the end of the video. Camera techniques such as close-up or blurry shots and slow motion intensify the focus on their corporeality.

¹³⁶ Wald, “Teenybopper Music,” paragraph 6. The appropriation and adaptation of Black cultural property and their whitewashing and incorporation into mainstream culture and capitalism should not be disregarded. However, it would go beyond the scope of this paper that centers the fangirls as agents, not the agency, identity formation, or self-expression of the subjects over which they fangirl. For an introductory overview regarding the Black roots of contemporary boybands, see, e.g., Chapter 2 in Gregory, *Boy Bands*.

¹³⁷ Wald, “Teenybopper Music,” paragraph 19.

¹³⁸ Frequently, scholars highlight the androgyny of Nick Carter in Backstreet Boys’ early years and the queering of especially the physical characteristics of hegemonic masculinity in boyband practices. See, e.g., Daryl Jamieson, “Marketing Androgyny: The Evolution of the Backstreet Boys,” *Popular Music* 26, no. 2 (2007): 245-258; Jennifer J. Moos, “Boy Bands, Drag Kings, and the Performance of (Queer) Masculinities,” *Transposition* 3 (2013): 1-25, hereafter Moos, “Boy Bands.”

¹³⁹ Wald, “Teenybopper Music,” paragraph 6.

sweet embrace / the beautiful smile that makes my heart race.”¹⁴⁰ Here, she singled out ‘soft’ and androgynous characteristics she attributes to Nick Carter’s appearance and with which she is infatuated instead of the other band members’ evident markers of their (albeit still girlish) masculinity, i.e., their exposed chests in the rain. Next to this, she addresses the proximity the music video creates between the band member and the (female) audience looking at/listening to him: “[W]hat was that song you sang *to me* so sweet / “Quit Plaing [sic!] Games” was the name, but were you talking *to me*.”¹⁴¹ Later on in the poem, she reiterates “when you sing *to me* I can see the emotion.”¹⁴² Kristy perceives Nick Carter as directly singing to her while she unabashedly enjoys his performance and the deliberately created proximity through Nick’s singing and gesturing into the camera. The poem renders watching the music video to *Quit Playing Games (With My Heart)* an intimate spectacle between Kristy and Nick Carter, who presents his androgynous self just for her to look at, or so Kristy believes at that moment. She is most likely very aware that millions of other people also get to watch Nick’s performance, but this does not diminish her experience of claiming Nick for herself and championing his androgyny.

In another poem titled “You (Nick),” which was contributed by someone with the username “moonlit-heart,”¹⁴³ Nick’s androgyny is metaphorized even further:

Your face is beauty itself / With loveliness more radiant than wine / [...] Your lips are sweeter than berries / It owns the crimson color of the rose / Your complexion is soft and creamy / Warm within a cold winds’ blows / Your eyes are blue as sapphires / Enticing brightly twinkling stars / Your hair is of a golden fountain / More precious than a thousand gold bars.¹⁴⁴

In focusing on Nick’s bodily features, the fan employs various analogies to nature that are generally connotated with beauty, fertility, and serenity, which encode femininity in a binary understanding of masculine and feminine. The poem further underlines the fan’s preference for a feminine-appearing boy/man. Through this, she actively resists expectations directed toward her by society to prefer the hyper-masculine stars often broadcasted on movie screens, especially in the decade before the 1990s.¹⁴⁵ Although this

¹⁴⁰ Kristy, “Nickolas Carter,” *Backstreet.net*, March 26, 2002. See Appendix B for the complete poem.

¹⁴¹ Ibid. Emphasis added.

¹⁴² Ibid. Emphasis added.

¹⁴³ Although the person did not use their real (female) name, it can very likely be assumed that this poem was written by another *fangirl* since the overwhelming majority of poems published on *backstreet.net* was written by girls, assuming that their chosen names can be taken at face value. The website’s privacy policy states that 90% of its users are female, see <http://www.backstreet.net/pg-privacy.html>.

¹⁴⁴ moonlit-heart, “You (Nick),” *Backstreet.net*, July 27, 2002. See Appendix C for the complete poem.

¹⁴⁵ Moos, “Boy Bands,” 5.

definition of sexual and romantic attraction still understood heterosexuality as the dominant mode, fangirls increasingly defined it on their terms.

Thus, these exemplary poems demonstrate that fangirling over boybands can be read as a valiant rejection of normative masculinity traits. Or, going even further, as Wald phrases it, fangirl behavior and practices “are nascently “queer”” and “threatening to hegemonic conceptions of (male) desirability.”¹⁴⁶ Boyband fangirls of the 1990s and early 2000s brazenly utilized their ‘fangirl gaze’ to look at their favorite band members and did not shy away from claiming their androgynous appearance as a preference compared to other (hyper-) masculine representations of the male body through their cultural creations.

6. Conclusion

As Joli Jenson wrote over 30 years ago but which remains highly relevant today:

I believe what it means to be a fan should be explored in relation to the larger question of what it means to desire, cherish, seek, long, admire, envy, celebrate, protect, ally with others. Fandom is an aspect of how we make sense of the world, in relation to mass media, and in relation to our historical, social, cultural location. Thinking well about fans and fandom can help us to think more fully and respectfully about what it means today to be alive and to be human.¹⁴⁷

In analyzing three distinct periods where American fangirl culture experienced remarkable heights, this paper aimed to reconstruct specific evolutionary aspects of one hundred years of fangirl history that propelled it into the fangirl culture and practices we know today. It tried to emphasize how female teenagers in their years between child- and adulthood ‘made sense of the world’ through participating in fangirl culture. Although the screen-struck girls of the 1910s, the ardent admirers of The Beatles in the 1960s, and the boyband fangirls of the 1990s and early 2000s employed different practices to act out their fan identity, all of them underlined how this identity designated an integral part of their personality. One that they continuously asserted through self-labeling as fans, without conceding to stereotypical perceptions of their behavior as presented by mass media that was readily adopted by the public sphere.

Already the movie fangirls of the 1910s, when the first wave of feminism gained momentum, proved that they did not exclusively fantasize about becoming their favorite male movie stars’ wives. Rather, they engaged with their beloved movies as critics or

¹⁴⁶ Wald, “Teenybopper Music,” paragraph 31.

¹⁴⁷ Jenson, “Fandom as Pathology,” 27.

even dreamed of pursuing a career as an actress themselves, resisting the prescribed gender norms of that time. Jumping five decades into the future, the unprecedented hype around The Beatles heralded the beginning of a sexual revolution that had young female girls boldly claiming sexual and romantic desires and public spaces as their own, loudly refusing to adhere to the gendered roles assigned to them. As one key element for this endeavor, this paper demonstrated the role of screaming as an avenue to express fangirl agency, influencing the soundscape of the 1960s like no other. Last but not least, the exemplary analysis of Backstreet Boys fangirls as part of the popular culture in the 1990s and early 2000s surrounding boybands showed how these female teenagers openly championed non-normative representations of masculinity and established themselves as well-versed digital media practitioners and cultural agents.

In future research endeavors, it is worthwhile to investigate how the milestones in fangirl culture development addressed in this term paper influence the most recent history. cursory research reveals an increased queering of fangirls and fandom per se that goes beyond the queering addressed in this term paper. Since queer folks gained significant visibility in mainstream culture, queer female teenagers negotiate their fangirl identity in new terms.¹⁴⁸ Additionally, in the last ten-plus years, bands such as One Direction or BTS have, not least because of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, or Tumblr, risen to fame in America and beyond. Nevertheless, what all fangirls past and present have in common is their unabridged adoration for their favorite stars. One that they channel into meaningful avenues to exert gender and sexual agency, proudly form an identity around their fanhood, and express how they view and make sense of the world through fandom: They get it.

¹⁴⁸ See, e.g., Hannah McCann and Clare Southerton, "Repetitions of Desire: Queering the One Direction Fangirl" *Girlhood Studies* 12, no. 1 (2019): 49-65; Jessica Pruet, "Lesbian Fandom Remakes the Boy Band," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 34 (2020): 1-16.

Appendices

Appendix A

In Your Eyes

In your eyes
I see a smile
a laughter that carries
like a dancing child
dancing to the beat of
"We've Got It Goin' On"
singing every word
to every single song
you make us all happy
so we're proud to give to you
a love like no other
that is loyal and is true
We decorate our room
with your pictures on our walls
and search for Backstreet merchandise
at all the local malls
We aggravate [sic!] our families
by playing our music loud
over and over you are played
we hope we've made you proud.
We know that you get tired
of show after show
so we scream a little louder
just to let you know
that we love you
and we always will
we're thankful for your work
and our love for you is real.

(Kristy. "In Your Eyes." *Backstreet.net.*)

Appendix B

Nickolas Carter

Nickolar [sic!] Carter with the beautiful eyes of green and blue
like the waves of the ocean I'll always return to you
never worry of others opinions if their friendship isnt true
for your love there is no limit to what i would do
you make me crazy, im going insane
like you in that video where you sing in the rain
what was that song you sang to me so sweet
"Quit Plaing Games" was the name, but were you talking to me
surely not for i would never break your heart
the thought of you in pain just tears me apart
when the sun goes down and the lights go out...I dream of you
I guess to get close to you thats all i can do
the blonde hair that falls in your face
the gentle touch of your sweet embrace
the beautiful smile that makes my heart race
when you sing to me i can see the emotion
i wish the critics could see your devotion
your name and face cross my mind everyday
for the chance to hold you, i'd go outta my way
down and road at any cost
for ill have so much to gain and nothing is lost.

(Kristy. "Nickolas Carter." *Backstreet.net.*)

Appendix C

You (Nick)

Your face is beauty itself
With loveliness more radiant than wine
Oh, what will you do, dear angel
If I were to yield my love unto thine
Your lips are sweeter than berries
It owns the crimson color of the rose
Your complexion is soft and creamy
Warm within a cold winds' blows
Your eyes are blue as sapphires
Enticing, brightly twinkling stars
Your hair is of a golden fountain
More precious than a thousand gold bars
I see your face everynight
No doubt, in love, am I
Yet I am so young, this just can't be
But to forget you, I'd rather die

(moonlit-heart. "You (Nick)." *Backstreet.net.*)

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