**1. Rationale and positioning with regard to the state-of-the-art**

The goal of this state of the art is to trace how politics and fandom have become intertwined and where research on this subject currently sits at, starting with how entertainment - which has always been the source material for fandom - has become an integral part of how politics are communicated, to how this has resulted on a very particular form of fandom; as well as gaps left for research to explore.

In the year 2019, when the American political structure was revving its engines in preparation for the 2020 elections that would see president Joe Biden elected; the New York Times dedicated an entire editorial - “How Fan Culture is Swallowing Democracy” (Hess, 2019) - to the pivot that consumption of politics seemed to be experiencing. As the introduction to the editorial puts it,

*“We are witnessing a great convergence between politics and culture, values and aesthetics, citizenship and commercialism. Here, civic participation is converted seamlessly into consumer habit. Political battles are waged through pop songs and novelty prayer candles and evocative emoji. Elizabeth Warren is cast as a “Harry Potter” character and Kamala Harris is sliced into a reaction GIF. This is democracy reimagined as celebrity fandom, and it is now a dominant mode of experiencing politics.”* (Hess, 2019)

Jenkins’, in his 1992 seminal work on fandom, *Textual Poachers*; describes it as “a set of cultural, social, and interpretive practices” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 292) which allow fans to become active producers of content based on the cultural products they enjoy (Jenkins, 1992). Fans are thus, by this definition, readers who appropriate - who *poach*, according to Certeau (1984, as cited in Jenkins, 1992) - popular texts and reread them to serve different interests, transforming the experience of cultural consumption into a complex participatory culture (Jenkins, 1992). Fandom essentially borrows from mass-produced and mass-distributed entertainment, be it particular texts, narratives, genres or even specific performers; and reworks them into “an intensely pleasurable, intensely signifying popular culture that is both similar to, yet significantly different from, the culture of more ‘normal’ popular audiences” (Fiske, 1992, 30).

This is widely known as “transformative” or “participatory” fandom (Jenkins, 1992), which has its base in community and “fan talk” (discussion of the object of fandom with other fans), as the primal instinct of fans is to be able to discuss their common interest with other fans (Cler, 1996; as cited in Deller, 2014). The process makes them active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings (Jenkins, 1992), and Jenkins (1992) observes that fans are the only audience group that has developed the practice of textual poaching into a communal activity and art form, a social process that shapes and reinforces individual interpretations through discussions with other readers. Overall, Jenkins (1992) identifies five different dimensions which defined fan culture and set it apart from other forms of media consumption: a particular mode of reception, a set of critical and interpretive practices, a facilitation of consumer activism, its own forms of cultural production, aesthetic traditions and practices; and an alternative social community.

Firstly, fandom involves a particular mode of reception, with fans consuming texts repeatedly through a combination of emotional proximity and critical distance to take in all their details (Jenkins, 1992). This close scrutiny then translates into social interaction with other fans in a complex process of sharing and debating meanings as they put their interpretations in common (Jenkins, 1992). Secondly, fandom entails a particular set of critical and interpretive practices that fans learn when they join the community (Jenkins, 1992), which extend beyond mere viewing into activities that involve an emotional investment in the narratives that shows or other texts build (Davisson and Booth, 2007, as cited in Chang, 2014). This leads fans to actively seek information about texts, characters and actors they like, and in some cases even to write about the objects of their affection (Davisson and Booth, 2007, as cited in Chang, 2014). These practices aim to facilitate further exploration of the details of the text and resolve any potential gaps found in it, as well as explore underdeveloped potentials; and they lead to the construction of a “meta-text” that is more expansive and complex than the original (Jenkins, 1992). The resulting meta-text is often referred to as the “fanon,” as opposed to the original “canon” - the base text that has garnered the fan following (Driscoll, 2006).

Thirdly, fandom enables consumer activism (Jenkins, 1992). Fans represent a portion of the audience that can and does offer industry creators of media texts (networks and producers) a response to their output, which sets them apart from other consumers, generally mere receivers of said texts (Jenkins, 1992). Fourthly, fandom has its own forms of cultural production, aesthetic traditions and practices (Jenkins, 1992). Fans produce works that appeal to the interests of the community by appropriating elements from the canon (the aforementioned poaching) and repurposing them into a “contemporary folk culture” (Jenkins, 1992, 285). The social process of collective interpretive readings that is generated by fan communities/culture thus crystalizes into a set of recognizable types of works, namely: fan art, fanfiction, fanzines, etc., all of which are considered transformative works, not just derivative ones extracted from the original text (Tushnet, 2017). The “transformative” label stems from the fact that these works don’t merely regurgitate the meaning of the original text, but rather add new insight to it, something that its creators and copyright owners are not always happy with (Tushnet, 2017).

Lastly, according to Jenkins (1992), fandom “functions as an alternative social community” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 286), although there is a proportion of mainstream fans that, despite consuming some forms of fan-generated content that they consider to be a valid source of information or gossip; do not personally discuss their fan object, and might dismiss other types of fan-produced works or only consume them privately, refusing to directly participate themselves in the active fan community and its creative output (Sandvoss & Kearns, 2014).

However, it must be noted that Jenkins acknowledges that fandom also implies affective investment in the fan object, an aspect of the phenomenon that has come to be much more prevalent in the evolution of both fandom itself as well as fandom studies since Jenkins and Fiske’s times. Cornel Sandvoss’ 2005 definition of fandom, in fact, highlights the affective investment as the most relevant part of fandom, characterizing it as “the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text in the form of books, television shows, films or music, as well as popular texts in a broader sense such as sports teams and popular icons and stars ranging from athletes and musicians to actors” (Sandvoss, 2005, 8). This further understanding of the affective dimension of fandom, coupled with the participatory and transformative practices already identified by Jenkins, is what has made it possible for fandom academics to observe its expansion beyond the more traditional entertainment media that it had originally been ascribed to.

In the same 2005 book where he provided his broader definition of fandom, Cornel Sandvoss also wrote that it continued to “mirror conditions of popular culture, consumption and their academic analysis” (3), highlighting how by then it had become impossible to not factor fandom and fan theories when discussing popular consumption of any public realm. This stemmed partially from fandom having expanded exponentially due to the arrival of the internet, with fans being amongst the first groups to set up Listserv forums and archives for their creations (such as fanfiction.net or, more recently, Archive of Our Own) as soon as the technology became available (Jenkins, 2006), and fan production, consumption and interaction eventually all moving to the digital space (Lanier & Fowler, 2013), further moving into online newsgroups and fan sites that have emerged as replacements for fan magazines where fans previously found their gossip (Costello & Moore, 2007), and from these moderated forums and communities to social media platforms like Twitter and Tumblr (Hitchcock-Morimoto & Chin, 2017).

But also the fact that the industry had caught on and was actively encouraging fandom-style consumption of texts as the internet altered the way culture and markets operate also played a part, leading to what Jenkins (2006) terms “convergence culture”, or higher interdependence between forms of media and producers and fans. (Jenkins, 2006). The overall tendency of industry engagement with fans increased between 1994 to 2009 Stanfill (2019), with some media producers actively attempting to turn fandom’s creative drive into revenue by asking fans to use their fan work as promotional material (Lanier and Fowler, 2013), and even incorporating fans into the creation of the media texts themselves by trawling through social media and fan websites to see how fans are interpreting their creation (Lanier and Fowler, 2013). Stanfill (2019) terms this “domesticating”: making fandom useful to the industry, and exploiting it to benefit it (Stanfill, 2019). Academia has come to recognize that what was once only a minority audience practice has now expanded to encompass all audiences, with users across segments increasingly being interpellated as fans by the media industry regardless of whether or not they are (Ford, 2014; Stanfill, 2019; as cited in Driessen et al., 2024) and social media platforms largely modelling their business models on this particular type of participation in a process described as “the mainstreaming of fandom” (Jenner, 2017, 305; as cited in Driessen et al., 2024). Fandom has expanded as the standard desirable model of the active consumer in every part of life (Stanfill, 2013, as cited in Le Clue, 2024), with Stanfill (2013, as cited in Le Clue, 2024) labelling it the “new normal” form of consumption.  This implies that fandom as a consumption model can now be observed in other realms outside of the more traditional ones espoused earlier - including politics, as the New York Times editorial highlights. But how did politics get mixed with fandom to the point that the New York Times feels the need to dedicate an entire editorial to the phenomenon?

First, the relationship between politics and entertainment must be acknowledged. Van Zoonen’s (2005) book *Entertaining the Citizen* makes the case that politics has been merging with entertainment to reach its intended audience in various ways far before the Internet arrived or the New York Times noticed, all the way from classic rhetoric; which some authors argue already employed various techniques of speech and physicality to captivate the public while performing on stages similar to theaters (Van Zoonen, 2005). Van Zoonen understands politics not merely as politicians and their actions, but, rather, as a field in itself that coexists and interacts with others (2005). Said field is structured alongside three different oppositions: left vs right, progressive vs conservative, and libertarian vs authoritarian; with social issues/demands shifting camp depending on the historical moment and context (Van Zoonen, 2005). Most importantly, in the field of politics, politicians and their parties must define their position on these social issues “both *internally* (in competition with each other) as well as *externally* (in relation to their constituencies)” (Van Zoonen, 2005, 5). And politics fails when a “gap” forms between the people doing politics and citizens, when politicians become so internally focused that they no longer have the potential to mobilize externally (Van Zoonen, 2005), and issue that is currently relevant, as evidenced by the appearance of right-wing populist parties all over the Western world that have been expressing a sentiment of exclusion from politics (2005).

On the other hand, Van Zoonen understands “entertainment” not simply as the industries, genres, products and overall cultural condition that are largely agreed to be and categorized as entertainment (and which are entertainment, as well, and thus the texts from which fandom draws, in Jenkins’ definition), but rather as the *effect* that these produce in their audience (Van Zoonen, 2005). This therefore makes entertainment a *quality* that can then be found and applied to “genres and fields usually considered its quintessential opposite—information, journalism, and politics—which can be seen as entertainment as well, since they too can provide gratification and enjoyment.” (Van Zoonen, 2005, 9-10). And this definition of entertainment provides the key for how politics has been trying to bridge the gap it has opened with its electorate by resorting to it: Corner and Pels’ (2003) research shows that “political interest and electoral enthusiasm have generally picked up wherever politics has attained a high level of drama, offering spectacular storylines and flamboyant personalities rather than ideological standoffs or partisan bickering.” (Corner & Pels, 2003, 2).

Of course, the notion that entertainment - particularly television - is mixing with politics has raised much concern: authors who consider this the inevitable downfall of “real politics” see television as a medium that is exclusively suited for entertainment, with the elements that are best suited to work on-air (sound bites, immediacy, personality, celebrity, sensationalism, etc.) making it provide infotainment at best, instead of the serious information that citizens require to fully participate in democracy (Van Zoonen, 2005). This results, according to critics, in citizens being uninformed and easily manipulated without realizing it. Neil Postman, for example (1985, as cited in Van Zoonen, 2005), argues that it is print culture that enables democracy, as it provides a general objectivity that allows for informed judgement. Television, according to Postman, merely shows the epistemology of politics by producing fleeting images of the world that vanish fast and making entertainment the natural packaging for all experiences, which in turn turns politics into a commercial populated with celebrities (Postman; 1985, as cited in Van Zoonen, 2005). For his part, Roderick Hart (1994, as cited in Van Zoonen, 2005); laments that the visual language of television, consisting of short frames of faces, encourages a more psychological read of politicians and their motives, diverting attention from their actual politics. Scheuer (2001, as cited in Van Zoonen, 2005), on the other hand, operates by the premise that television is inherently populated by right-wing actors, from its economic structure to many of its personalities, partially due to the fact that it’s a medium that operates on simplicity. According to Scheuer’s (2001, as cited in Van Zoonen, 2005) diagnosis, conservative inherently carries a simpler message than liberalism, and is thus favoured by television, since there are less diverging views to give airtime to. Thomas Meyer (2002, as cited in Van Zoonen, 2005) argues that television has colonized politics to the extent that it is no longer the media that follows politics, but rather the other way around: politics follows the media.

However, Van Zoonen (2005) points out that, while this idea of “television malaise” was dominant in academia for a long time, these interpretations overstate the impact of television and entertainment on politics, and are built on rather essentialist arguments. The authors cited before all use strong rhetoric and historical callbacks to establish a dichotomy between those who know *real* politics and thus renounce television - the *good* citizens - and the uninformed “others” who have fallen prey to television’s wiles (Van Zoonen, 2005). As Van Zoonen (2005) points out, this type of discourse does nothing but enforce a distinction between elites and masses, and seems to imply that the elites - those who have not fallen prey to television - are better equipped to do politics, and that the masses should be taught to behave like elites via better education, journalism, etc.; disregarding the fact that the current entertainment culture has arrived to stay, and that it might be better to figure out how to articulate it to meet the requirements of democracy and political citizenship.

Indeed, Van Zoonen raises the issue that:

*“There’s nothing controversial about (the) observation that politics needs to be communicated in order to acquire the interest and involvement of its external referents, the average citizens. Nor is there anything controversial about the thought that historical modes of political communication have their basis in the particular culture of their time.”* (Van Zoonen, 2005, 7).

Therefore, Van Zoonen arrives at a significant conclusion: that it is not necessarily an issue that politics needs drama, storylines and significant personalities (entertainment, essentially) to operate (2005). The failure to accept this fact - that politics requires a certain level of performance and entertainment to be engaging enough to draw citizens into active participation, at least in our current age - results in what Van Zoonen describes as “a narrow understanding of politics and citizenship, wherein politics is curbed within the confines of an institutionalized field in and toward which people can articulate their rights and obligations—around which, in other words, they can achieve and perform citizenship.” (Van Zoonen, 2005, 7).

Moreover, she highlights that part of why entertainment has become more prominent in politics in recent times is also due to the fact that participation in politics has mostly shifted to citizen’s leisure time, which means it is forced to compete with other leisure activities, and  the same goes for other more socially considered “serious” cultural forms, such as literature and the arts, which Van Zoonen also classifies as becoming increasingly entertainment formats (Van Zoonen, 2005). This would appear to indicate, according to Van Zoonen’s own research (2005), that politics is being forced to increasingly merge with entertainment due to two main issues: lack of interest, and lack of dedicated time.

As to the practical ways in which entertainment and politics have been mingling, music is a prime example of a form of entertainment that has long interacted with and been linked with politics (Van Zoonen, 2005). From politicians attempting to ban musical genres such as metal due to their “immorality” - such as the case of the Parent Music Resource Center (PMRC) in America attempting to label rock and metal albums with explicit lyrics with the “parental advisory: explicit content” sticker to keep them from children, which saw rebuttals from musicians Frank Zappa and Dee Snider (of Twisted Sister) in front of congress (Gamper, 2006) - to musicians actively expressing their social and political allegiances, music is undeniably intertwined with politics, and has been for a long time (Van Zoonen, 2005). Politicians have also actively appropriated popular songs and artists for their campaigns, revealing an awareness that tapping into widely appreciated entertainment elements will garner them (Van Zoonen, 2005); a practice that has been traced by Street (1986, as cited in Van Zoonen, 2005) as far back as the 1930s.

With the introduction and subsequent explosion in popularity of television - and more recently, of social media - celebrities who had achieved notoriety for their career in entertainment also began making the jump to politics. Such is the case of Ronald Reagan, who, having been an actor and president of America’s Screen Actors’ Guild (White House, n.d.), went on to become the president of the United States (White House, n.d.). Other examples can be found all around the world: Pakistani cricket player Imran Khan became prime minister of the country in 2018 (Soldani, 2016; in Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019);  Bollywood star Jaya Bachchan was elected to the Indian parliament in 2004 (Soldani, 2016; as cited in Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019); Midnight Oil singer Peter Garrett was a Labour MP in Australia for a decade, and of course, the most famous case in recent years: ex-president of the United States Donald Trump, who rose to fame as a reality TV star long before he won the 2016 election (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019).

On the other hand, politicians themselves have also been forced to get involved with the new (and widely popular) communication channels available in order to reach their audience, allowing them to step beyond the political stage as they are “assimilated into general tv culture as celebrities” (Van Zoonen, 2005, 70) to become what Neil Postman baptized as “celebrity politicians” in 1985 (as cited in Van Zoonen, 2005). A symbiotic relationship has seemingly established between certain entertainment programmes such as talk shows and politics: politician appearances in these shows are hugely attractive for the media, as they draw audience numbers; while politicians benefit from the fact that they tend to portray them in much more positive light than what is usual in traditional news programmes (Boukes & Boomgaarden, 2016). While at the beginning - when TV was starting to flourish - appearances on talk shows were widely disparaged as undignified for the seriousness demanded of a politician, by 2012 all of the American presidential candidates running for office were willingly appearing on talk shows, then president Barack Obama included (Loeb, 2017). Appearances on more relaxed entertainment-based talk shows have now become a routine part of campaign strategy for modern politicians, and are no longer a fringe event (Molek-Kozakowska, 2013; as cited in Loeb, 2017). In the 2024 US presidential campaign, for instance, both candidates to the presidency, Kamala Harris and Donald Trump; appeared on popular online podcasts on both sides of the ideological spectrum, such as Call Her Daddy, The Breakfast Club, Club Shay Shay, The Joe Rogan Experience, The Dan Bongino Show, or The Ben Shapiro Show (Podchaser, n.d.)

At the same time, research by Mendelsohn (1996) shows that the media itself also actively plays a part in the entertainment and celebrity overtake of politics by prioritizing the character of leaders over parties in coverage (Mendelsohn, 1996). Iyengar (1996, as cited in Mendelsohn, 1996) makes the argument that the way the media frame issues encourages citizen to put the blame for things on an individual political actor, due to the “episodic” nature in which issues are framed, instead of recognizing structural problems as structural and providing citizens more contextual information to allow them to establish broader connections. Zaller (1992, as cited in Mendelsohn, 1996) focuses on how, when asked to pass judgment, a person’s response will be shaped by what first comes to mind, of which things recently seen or read in the media tend to be first. Mendelsohn (1996) applied Iyengar and Zaller’s research to the 1988 Canadian Election Study (CES) Data, which surveyed opinion dynamics as the campaign evolved around its main issue, the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the US; in an attempt to understand why it showed unstable vote intentions and fluid opinion (1996). His findings indicate that, as the campaign went on, partisanship decreased in importance when shaping vote intention whilst leader evaluations and opinion on the FTA became much more prominent (Mendelsohn, 1996), which he chalks to the effects of “campaign activation” and how media coverage of it pushed for leaders to be more relevant than partisanship. Therefore, as media exposure rose throughout the campaign, voters turned from their partisanship guidelines to determine votes and instead put more trust in the individual candidates (Mendelsohn, 1996). This only reinforces the notion that the media has actively been playing a part in furthering the personalization of politics by lending more coverage to individual politicians since at least the 90s, which primes them to become as known as celebrities.

Drake & Higgins (2012) analysis of the televised debates that preceded the 2010 UK general election also hones in on how the media is aware of the fact that it’s biggest draw for the audience it’s that it’s a medium that offers people the chance to get closer to the politicians “as people”. These were the first televised debates for a UK general election, and Sky TV (the organizing broadcaster) advertised them with the tagline “Nothing gets you closer” (to the politicians, it’s inferred) plastered in billboards all over the country. This promise, as Drake and Higgins (2012) point out, indicates that television is indeed very much largely perceived as a way to connect with leaders on a purely personal level and scrutinize them up close, instead of merely perceiving them through the carefully curated image they put out in campaign images and meetings.

Sky’s choice of words to advertise the televised debates as the place to metaphorically meet politicians up close and personal directly calls to what Horton & Wohl baptized as “para-social relationships” in 1956: a phenomenon they’d observed as a result of the introduction of television consisting on audiences’ increased anticipated responses when actors/performers interacted “directly” with them and adjusted their performance to the expected response - i.e., staring at the camera and directly addressing them as if they were talking to the audience members “personally and privately” (Horton & Wohl, 1956, 215). In particular, Horton and Wohl (1956) highlighted how this new media had generated a new performer: announcers, interviewers and “personalities” in general (dubbed “Personae” by Horton and Wohl); created to serve a new function for the media itself. These new personalities exist, according to Horton and Wohl (1956), exclusively to serve the parasocial relation with the audience, and not necessarily  outside of this particular sphere. Because they appear in media regularly, Personae offer a continuous relationship that is integrated as part of the routine of life, and this accumulation of experience adds perceived meaning to the Personae’s performance (1956). Overtime, the experience stacks to lead the devotee - or “fan”, as Horton and Wohl baptize them (1956) - to believe that they know the Personae more intimately and better than others (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Caughey (1994, quoted in Boon & Lomore (2001)) highlights how this heavy emotional investment in the Personae or idol results in celebrity fandom, and translates into fan practices such as intense media consumption, collecting magazine clippings or mementos, actively being part of fan clubs, and attempting to contact or meet the idol through letters or other practices that symbolically substitute actual interaction with the celebrity (Caughey, as cited in Boon & Lomore (2001)). Social media has also added a new dimension to celebrity fandom by contributing immensely to these relationships, as it offers fans a direct contact point with celebrities that only strengthens the parasocial relationship and, with it, the celebrity fandom (Chen, 2016).

Some of the political leaders that have emerged from this symbiosis to become “celebrity politicians” would be, for example, Barack Obama and Justin Trudeau, according to Wahl-Jorgensen (2019); and she points out that Obama’s X account (previously Twitter) remained in 2019 amongst the top three most followed ones in the platform, ahead of pop celebrities such as Taylor Swift and Rihanna and only behind singers Katy Perry and Justin Bieber (Kellner, 2010; Sandvoss, 2012; as cited in Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019).

Allen and Moon’s (2023) research also reinforces Van Zoonen’s reasoning for the happy marriage between entertainment and politics by observing that it is not just particular celebrity-like politicians that garner fan following, but the field *itself*, politics as a whole, that also garners fan-like following. Exemplified by a tweet by UK journalist Marie le Conte that read “so this is my first proper leadership contest as an actual Westminster person and honestly it’s such a hoot…huge fan of the drama” (as cited in Allen and Moon, 2023, 1503), Allen and Moon’s research is concerned with how a portion of those who engage with politics the most do so in the same way as fans of traditional entertainment, and le Conte’s tweet provides the key as to what allows them to engage with politics in this way: “drama” (Allen and Moon, 2023). The tweet certainly seems to back Van Zoonen’s definition of entertainment, as it shows that politics is definitely something that can produce its effect in a certain type of audience, despite not being what would traditionally considered an entertainment genre (Allen and Moon, 2023).

People who are heavily invested in politics might reject the fan label (due to its historical connotations of irrationality and lack of critical judgement), but they derive entertainment from them in the same way: politics “done right” (or, performed right) are enjoyable in themselves, rather than merely the result of them being enjoyable (Allen and Moon, 2023). It’s the performance itself, or the “drama” as Le Conte labeled it in her tweet, that produces entertainment and satisfaction “because of *what it is* not *what it does”* (Allen and Moon, 2023, 1511). Those who would label themselves “politics nerds”, if not fans, enjoy consuming the actual process; and they also react well to politicians appearing on more traditionally entertainment-geared shows such as talk shows (Allen and Moon, 2023). Those who are intensely involved with politics are able to treat as if they’re not entirely real, but rather an object towards which they have developed “deep emotional investment” (Allen and Moon, 2023).

As to that “deep emotional investment”, in her 2019 book “Emotions, Media and Politics” Karin Wahl-Jorgensen argues for the fact that, to start, we have arrived at  a point in History when emotion seems to be paying much closer attention to the role of emotions, with the culture being characterized by emotionality (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). These observations stem from perceived changes in the political sphere with the rise of populism - already mentioned by Van Zoonen -, which is a form of politics that relies heavily on “emotional appeals to disenchanted citizens” (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, 2), from both the left and the right. These new populisms have reacted to the failure of mainstream parties to deal with economic crisis and austerity, a failure that has pushed for what Mishra (2017; as cited in Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019) calls an “age of anger” due to generalized disenchantment and lack of positive social change.

Alongside the rise of populism, Wahl-Jorgensen (2019) points out that there has been a general change of the emotional climate of public discourse, with “a perceived rise of an emotional of an emotional culture, one where emotion is granted a central place in contexts ranging from the workplace, to education and media” (3). Emotional intelligence has been revalorized, and is now considered a necessary life skill, something that is chalked up to capitalism and the “commercialization of private life” (Goleman, 1996; as cited in Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019) and the rise of “emotional capitalism” (Illouz, 2007; as cited in Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). Furthermore, emotion has been baked into fields that have been considered “objective” for a long time, such as Pulitzer-Prize winning journalism, which, much like what Van Zoonen (2005) posited about politics needing to be communicated and performed in a way that connected with the citizen; also must be packaged in a way that resonates with the audience and grips their interest (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). Wahl-Jorgensen argues that, despite the fact that objectivity is something that is at the core of how a “serious” field such as journalism is conceived, there is still an emotional dimension to it, something that aligns with Van Zoonen’s (2005) own observations about politics always having required a certain level of performance and emotionality in order to be properly communicated, despite being perceived as a serious and eminently rational discipline (covered earlier).

Wahl Jorgensen (2019) observes that the fact that emotions are baked into the strategies that truly make an audience invested in an issue in journalism is also baked into how performative politics is. Politics is tending towards “informalization”, with political leaders being forced more and more to turn towards a more informal mode of communication in order to cultivate affective bonds with their voters due to the breakdown of institutional trust (Manning et al., 2017; as cited in Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). However, this cultivation of emotion through a performance of authenticity and informality is not that new: Wahl-Jorgensen (2019) points out that US presidential rhetoric has featured it since the times of Franklin D. Roosevelt, who performed a mediated form of intimacy in his “fireside chats”, in which he talked as if to his friends, and engaged closely and emotionally, despite the fact that they were all taped in the very White House (Enli, 2015; as cited in Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). And this practice of projecting approachability through an engagement with emotionality has kept until today, with Donald Trump’s so-called “cult of authenticity”, labeled so due to his spontaneous and informal language, which is seen as an indicator of the emotional engagement of his voters (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019).

For politicians, maintaining a performance of the emotional register that indicates they are ordinary, normal and human is what makes them come across as authentic (Wood et al., 2016; as cited in Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019), and there already exists research, conducted by Miller & co. (1986, as cited in Van Zoonen, 2005), that analyzes election data to identify the five categories that people use to perceive politicians. They found that three of said categories (competence, reliability and integrity) are related to political performance and how successful the candidates have been, as the basis for whether or not they can be trusted to deliver on their campaign promises; while the other two (charisma and personal traits) are perceptions of entirely private features that are more related to celebrity and, importantly, personal like (the more explicit affective dimension) (Miller & co., 1986, as cited in Van Zoonen, 2005). For the different stages or spheres of action that a politician must perform in, John Corner (2003, as cited in Van Zoonen, 2005) identifies three:

1. *The political field*, or the political institutions and processes in which they are embedded. In this particular stage, performance is related to negotiation, exercising administrative power, and policy development (Corner, 2003, as cited in Van Zoonen, 2005).
2. *Private lif*e, which Corner also identifies with “offstage” but recognizes as a significant platform nonetheless (2003, in Van Zoonen, 2004). This is where “lifestyle, leisure preferences, cultural taste, family life and friendship networks” (Corner, 2003, as cited in Van Zoonen, 2005) all come into place to form a performance of the self within one’s own private life, and it’s also the strongest point of connection with celebrity culture (Corner, 2003, as cited in Van Zoonen, 2004).
3. *The public and the popular*, which is the field that most explicitly requires performance. This is where the two previous stages condense and combine into one to try to appeal to a wider audience, and the performance demanded is more intense and wide-ranging (Corner, 2003, as cited in Van Zoonen, 2004). This stage encompasses things such as political speeches in front of a live audience, visits to institutions/sites, door-to-door canvassing; and even the politician’s presence in online forums and tv debates with journalists, citizens or other politicians, as well as appearances on more entertainment-geared talk shows and even game shows or behind-the-scenes/tell-all documentaries (Corner, 2003, as cited in Van Zoonen, 2004). Performance must be consistent throughout all the genres that make up this stage, as it must not be perceived as a performance and inconsistencies will give it away, and said performance must also fit exactly what is culturally perceived as a politician as well as the audience’s idea of a celebrity, making it a delicate balancing act (Corner, 2003, as cited in Van Zoonen, 2004).

Looking at the UK, James Stanyer and Dominic Wring (2004, 2, in Drake & Higgins, 2012) posit that the personalities of politicians and the personal like audiences have for them have come to be a key issue of election campaigns and beyond, going as far as their various parliamentary activities. Tony Blair appeared on a television chat show already in 2001 only to only discuss his family life, instead of more pressing political matters at the time such as the Northern Ireland peace process. Even before the televised debates arrived in the UK in 2010, Drake & Higgins observed a concerted effort to “package” individual party leaders, though proper branding only came later (2012). When David Cameron went head to head with Gordon Brown’s more traditional “politician” image, based exclusively on “old-fashioned conviction and substance, rather than celebrity” (Drake & Higgins, 2012, 5), Brown was much more vulnerable to any economic or electoral setbacks experienced by his party, as they were the only thing reflecting on him.

Therefore, if politics are more entertaining and emotional than ever, with media driving personalization, celebrities becoming politicians, politicians performing celebrity, and people tuning in for the “drama” of it all; which Le Clue (2024) argues “suggests a shift in the way people participate in political discussions, where elements typically associated with fandom, such as passionate support and intense emotions now manifests in the political realm. This blurring of boundaries between fandom and politics underscores the transformative impact that fan culture has on public online discourse” (349), then it only makes sense to apply the academic discipline entirely dedicated to the consumption of (media) objects towards which the individual has developed a strong emotional investment: fan studies.

Stanfill (2020) makes the case that fandom has, technically, always been perceived as political, as positioning it as a force of resistance against the status quo makes it inherently so, and both domains being fundamentally participatory has led to scholars operationalizing fandom as an “interpretive frame for politics” (Stanfill, 2020, 127). Cornel Sandvoss defines political fandom as “the emotional investment in and active support for political figures, parties, or ideologies...Political fandom exhibits similar characteristics to other forms of fandom, such as the creation of communities, the spread of misinformation, and the formation of echo chambers” (2005, 3). At the same time, Ashley Hinck posits that “we have entered a historical moment in which political communication is filled with fandom” (2020, 32).

Dean (2017) acknowledges that the notion of fandom as something political and therefore public might seem unlikely, as fandom has notoriously been mostly performed in the private sphere (as fans have often been considered too “emotional” for polite society); however, he refers to Sandvoss’ (2013; as cited in Dean, 2017) previously cited research on fandom, which indicates that fandom has become a widespread form of media consumption due to the massively increased access to different media texts. As Dean points out, if fandom has indeed become an ubiquitous form of consumption, then it should not be overlooked that it might now be being applied to politics by younger audiences (2017).

On one hand, the direct interaction between fandom and politics has been researched in terms of established media fandoms activating in order to directly participate in politics. In her 2019 book “Politics for the love of fandom”, Ashley Hinck examines what she terms “fan-based citizenship” (6), or the ways in which organized media fandoms have turned to equally organized civic action for the love of their fan object. The Harry Potter fanclub “Harry Potter Alliance” (HPA for short), for example, organized campaigns on issues they deemed relevant to support, such as same-sex marriage, bullying, mental health, climate change or even social change (Hinck, 2019). In 2013, they ran a campaign titled “Not in Harry’s Name” to protest that Warner Brothers were not using fair-trade chocolate in their Harry Potter sweets (Hick, 2019), which forced the company to make public a report that they were using ethical practices to source their chocolate. The campaign was organized around a website, a petition, an article in the Huffington Post, and youtube videos made by various members of the community and famous vloggers, and it paid off by 2014, with Warner Brothers directly reaching out to the HPA to guarantee that all the chocolate used in their products would be fair trade by the end of the following year (Hinck, 2019).

This is only one example - albeit a very prominent one - of the ways in which fandom allows for active political participation, something that Van Zoonen had already pointed out in her own research in 2005 by highlighting the ways in which fan activities and political mobilization overlap, and how fandom cultivates skills that are relevant for mobilization, such as information-seeking, activism and discussion (Van Zoonen, 2005). Deliberating, doing careful research, writing and art are all fan activities that come in handy when it comes to political participation, and fandom also provides tight-knit communities, which are a key structure in political mobilization and are the foundation of public formation in general (Hinck, 2019).

Likewise, fan communities are constituted audiences in themselves, which is relevant for the development of political arguments, since they provide the structure and the norms for circulating information in a determinate manner (Hinck, 2019). As Henry Jenkins posits, “the political effects of these fan communities come not simply through the production and circulation of new ideas (the critical readings of favorite texts) but also through access to new social structures (collective intelligence) and new models of cultural production (participatory culture).” (2006, 257)

At the same time, fan objects themselves also directly enable this fan-based political participation (or, as Hinck (2019) refers to it, “fan-based citizenship”). Television shows like the original Star Trek or the Wonder Woman comic books invite fans to imagine a better world, providing them with a framework from which to imagine an ideal future (Hinck, 2019). From there, fan-based participation in the political field consists of taking actions to bring the world closer to those fan-object-inspired fantasies (Hinck, 2019). Likewise, characters belonging to the fan object can also act as role models, providing fans with characteristics that they can model themselves after, and which will inform their political ideals and participation choices (Hinck, 2019).

On the other hand, research has also been conducted into so-called “political fans”, or sometimes called “junkies” (Coleman, 2003, as cited in Hernández-Santaolalla & Rubio-Hernández, 2017) - the very engaged in politics individuals identified by Allan and Moon; which are generally defined as people who pay particular attention to political actuality, and make an active effort to stay on top of it (Hernández-Santaolalla & Rubio-Hernández, 2017). The choice to call them fans stems, for Hernández-Santaolalla and Rubio-Hernández, partly from the fact that the effort that this constant attention requires does not pay off in the value that it reports, which comes in the form of an expertly cast vote in an election (2017). This is a phenomenon that is observed in another fan environment: sports fandom, where fans also put significant amounts of effort into staying up to date with everything that goes on in the sport despite the fact that it will not impact the results at all, since they have no way of directly contributing to them (Wilson, 2011; as cited in Hernández-Santaolalla & Rubio-Hernández, 2017).

Political fandom is motivated by an emotional relationship with the object (Erikson, 2008; Madore, 2009; Bronstein, 2013; Sandvoss, 2013; as cited in Hernández-Santaolalla & Rubio-Hernández, 2017), which in itself helps shape the fan's own cultural and social identity (Jenkins, 2013; as cited in Hernández-Santaolalla & Rubio-Hernández, 2017). Political fans, much like regular fans, also appropriate texts and elements disseminated by the media and political parties, sharing them, commenting on them, discussing them, transforming them and even subverting their original meaning (Wilson, 2011, Sandvoss, 2012; as cited in Hernández-Santaolalla & Rubio-Hernández, 2017).

As stated earlier, the Internet’s particular strength in contemporary politics came into full evidence during Barack Obama’s 2008 campaign. However, Hernández-Santaolalla and Rubio-Hernández pose that it was really the advent of social media, and of the platform X (formerly known as Twitter) that truly make political fans come into their own, as it allowed for real-time commenting of televised events (Highfield; Harrington; Bruns, 2013; as cited in Hernández-Santaolalla & Rubio-Hernández, 2017), from sports matches to political debates and other parts of electoral campaigns. Hernández-Santaolalla and Rubio-Hernández (2017) specifically look at the case of the joint municipal and regional elections that took place in Spain in 2015, and for which the smaller left-wing party Izquierda Unida (IU for short) developed an overwhelmingly social-media based electoral campaign run by a team called *La Cueva* (lit. “the cave”) due to fears that they would be practically invisible in the big legacy media channels (Hernández-Santaolalla & Rubio-Hernández, 2017). This generated a discourse that set them apart from other formations and explicitly conformed to the codes and vocabulary of communication typical of social networks by using memes including characters or scenes from popular and mass culture current and past, music (they even prepared a Spotify playlist for the elections), cinema (live-commenting Star Wars films), comics, sports, television or video games (Hernández-Santaolalla & Rubio-Hernández, 2017). The party also actively tried to engage with their audience by running polls and surveys about their preferences in different areas, from cultural or gastronomical to the campaign’s performance on X itself, to the point that users started actively requesting follow-ups, musical recommendations and responses, which *La Cueva* provided (Hernández-Santaolalla & Rubio-Hernández, 2017). Finally, *La Cueva* also developed a system to reward audience contributions with the hashtags #LaCuevaApproves and #CavernaAwards (Hernández-Santaolalla & Rubio-Hernández, 2017).

The online bet paid off, with followers of IU explicitly organizing in a fandom with its own distinct name, “Garzoners” (after IU candidate Alberto Garzón), in the same way that Taylor Swift fans call themselves “Swifties” (Hernández-Santaolalla & Rubio-Hernández, 2017). IU even turned the noun into a verb, transforming it into an act - “garzonear” (#vallekasgarzonea, #sevillagarzonea, #teruelgarzonea...) (Hernández-Santaolalla & Rubio-Hernández, 2017). At the same time,  accounts dedicated exclusively to political content or to the figure of Garzón emerged, created by individuals, and both IU and Garzón as a candidate developed communication strategies designed to address this interest by showing different dimensions of the candidate: Garzón's profile as a representative of the party was linked to a more serious and institutional facet, while other accounts showed a more personal side, documenting different moments of his day to day life. The clearest example is #GarzónOnTheRoad, a web series launched during the following 2016 national election campaign that constantly recorded his activity, like a diary, and allowed him to get closer to the fandom and fueled interest in his private life (Hernández-Santaolalla & Rubio-Hernández, 2017). Most importantly, a deliberate attempt was made at constructing an image of the candidate as a sex symbol, emphasizing his charisma and attractiveness (Hernández-Santaolalla & Rubio-Hernández, 2017), with *La Cueva* exploiting this dimension by promoting him as a mass idol through hashtags such as #besoscongarzón (lit. “kisses with Garzón”) (Hernández-Santaolalla & Rubio-Hernández, 2017).

Jonathan Dean’s 2017 research into the UK’s 2017 political climate shows that this phenomenon is not by any means exclusive to Spain. His article “Politicising fandom” covers the so-called “Corbyn-Mania” that emerged in the UK in the year 2016 around the Labour party candidate Jeremy Corbyn. American Democratic politician Bernie Sanders, Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, UKIP party leader Nigel Farage, Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau and American ex-president Donald Trump are also examples of politicians that are supported by communities that arguably behave like fandom (Dean, 2017). This would seem to indicate that this phenomenon is indeed international, and that, as Dean (2017) states, “fandom is now an established feature of contemporary politics deserving greater analytical attention than it has thus far received from political scientists” (408-409).

Dean’s research focused on the left-wing UK political scene, and it is here where he finds the examples to illustrate his theory on politicised fandom, though he takes care to specify that this phenomenon is not exclusive to the left (Dean, 2017).  The first example posed is that of Ed Miliband, Labour Party leader between the years 2010 and 2015 was a conventional career politician often criticized for his lack of charm, who, nonetheless, cultivated a small but significant teenage girl fanbase during the 2015 general election campaign, identified and generated mainly through the hashtags #CoolEdMiliband and #Milifandom on social media (Jewell, 2015; as cited in Dean, 2017). Though it started more as a joke, it seemed to turn genuine as girls and young women joined with the explicit goal of subverting the poor image of Miliband painted by legacy media, which they perceived like a ‘deliberate distortion’ to undermine him (Bromwich, 2015; as cited in Dean, 2017). The other remarkable UK case is that of Jeremy Corbyn, who succeeded  Miliband in the Labour leadership, and whose appointment saw the party divide between those loyal to him and those who considered him a liability; with his followers displaying what Dean describes as “a number of features associated with fan communities” (Dean, 2017).

Dean observes that both with Milifandom and Corbyn-mania, the phenomenon happened bottom-up, with fans turning the politicians into their fan objects to their bewilderment (2017). Milifandom was, as stated earlier, mostly comprised of young girls who were already active on social media fandom, and who proceeded to recreate their usual fandoms for Milifandon, resulting in declarations of love for Miliband or the production of memes that superimposed Miliband’s face on very masculine film icons such as James Dean or Daniel Craig (Dean, 2017). Corbyn-mania, on the other hand, took other shapes, with wider forms of productivity manifesting in viral selfie campaigns with Corbyn and more embodied participation in rallies, meetings and events in which they treated Corbyn much like a rockstar (Crace, 2016; as cited in Dean, 2017). This, Dean highlights, appears to be in direct contrast to Corbyn’s own unassuming persona, pointing to the fact that it is the fandom that has been building up an image of the politician as a fan object that does not necessarily correspond to his reality, and which exceeds his personal qualities (Dean, 2017). On top of that, Corbyn fans have actively organized events on his behalf, such as the Jeremy Corbyn for Prime Minister tour which enlisted several pop culture icons to perform for other Corbyn fans/supporters across different UK cities (Dean, 2017); as well as producing fan art, fan  videos, figurines, coloring books, mugs, facebook pages and even a trend where people would write “We’re with Corbyn” on the sand of UK beaches (Dean, 2017). Many left-wing activists also actively professed deep emotional ties to Corbyn, which led to his supporters being accused of being the “Jeremy Corbyn fan club” or a “cult” dangerous for the Labour party as a whole (Crines, 2016; McTernan, 2016; in Dean, 2017).

Corbyn’s supporter community displayed a level of personal loyalty to him that made them willing to mobilize on his behalf (Richard, 2016; as cited in Dean, 2016), and they are organized not just through the Labour party constituencies, but also through their own organization “Momentum”, which was explicitly set up to support Corbyn exclusively (Klug et al., 2016; as cited in Dean, 2017). Furthermore, Dean posits that Corbyn’s status as a fan object and his subsequent fandom only intensified when he was challenged for his leadership throughout 2016, with his supporters/fans defending him on a very personal level (2017).

At the same time, Stanfill (2020) also points out that the fandom phenomenon is particularly prominent within reactionary politics, since we are now “in an era in which fandoms have increasingly overtly embraced reactionary politics and reactionary politics has increasingly taken fannish forms” (123). Donald Trump fans are infamous for their racist and sexist behaviour, which Stanfill classifies as manifestations of both reactionary politics and fandom at the same time (2020). While fan studies for a period saw fandom as being fundamentally progressive, on account of transformative fandoms largely being made up of minorities (women, poc, and LGTBQ+ folk) (Jenkins, 1995), this “fandom is beautiful” (Gray et al. 2007; as cited in Stanfill, 2020) approach has been criticized for being too focused on countering the existing stigmas around fandom - namely, that fans were irrational fanatics and criminals -, a stance that led to the more reactionary sides of fandom being ignored for perhaps too long (Stanfill, 2020). While authors like Jenkins also pointed out that fandom is not *always* progressive, and sometimes can produce readings that are not progressive, eventually the belief that fandom is overwhelmingly progressive prevailed (Stanfill, 2020).

However, reactionaries also want to change the world according to their views, and also perceive themselves to be on the fringes and marginalized, regardless of whether that is truly the case (Stanfill, 2020). And this means that they, too, can utilise the mechanisms of fandom, as identified by Jenkins (1995), to organise and mobilise their backlash against those they feel threaten their conservative privilege (Stanfill, 2020). This has manifested in episodes like Gamergate - which started with a targeted harassment campaign against game developer Zoë Quinn based on a malicious post made by her ex-partner accusing her of bribing games journalists for good reviews of her game; and then expanded to any female devs and gamers with a public presence, who were targeted by male gamers who perceived women and feminism to be encroaching on their geek space (Blodgett, 2019). Using the hashtag #GamerGate, the narrative spread that feminist presence in these spaces was the result of a decades-long marketing conspiracy to take away their rightful place, and resulted in doxxings, boycotts, and even targeted attempts at making those who supported Quinn and other women in the gaming community lose their jobs (Blodgett, 2019). Another example would be phenomena like the QAnon conspiracy, which, as per Reindhart et al.’s (2022) research, presents recognizable fandom patterns in the way the worldwide conspiracy operates; with participants collectively poaching meaning from the mysterious “Q drops” and building their own communal interpretations around them.

Therefore, fandom is now fully part of the political process, and the intersection between fandom and politics is not always inevitably progressive, which makes it present on both sides of the political spectrum. It is possible, as Proctor and Kies (2018, as cited in Stanfill, 2020), that new forms of fascism might be mobilizing directly under fan culture forms, instead of the other way around, and it is worth exploring that phenomenon as well as whether a similar one might be happening on the left, as evidenced by the cases of Corbyn or Garzón. Therefore, to get the full picture of how politics and democracy are shifting in the current digital age, fan studies must continue exploring different avenues.

**2. Scientific research objectives**

Having mapped out the existing research in this field, it is clear that it is a young field that is tracking a relatively recent phenomenon that continues to shift and grow fueled by social media, enough for legacy media to start echoing academic findings on it (see the New York Times editorial). However, as will have hopefully become explicit in the previous section, research on the intersection between politics and fandom has, so far, been more concerned with proving that there is indeed an overlap between the two; with much of the research being focused on proving that existing media fandoms are indeed capable of mobilizing for political causes (see Hinck) and on comparing the behavior patterns of political supporters to those of media fans - from Van Zoonen to Dean, touching on Sandvoss and Jenkins - to prove that there are, indeed, fans of politics, or at least political enthusiasts who consume politics in ways very similar to fandom. It has only recently started expanding, and, therefore, the general research objective of this PhD project is to further advance the field by **combining this existing literature with a direct application of fandom theory and audience research, as well as communication studies to this phenomenon; in order to move beyond the focus on proving the fandom consumption of politics, and rather analyze how it operates on a practical level, and its consequences.** This is a fully diagnosed phenomenon by now, and it is time to move forward and observe how it might be expanding to unexpected corners of the internet, if different online environments are producing previously unobserved forms of fannish audience interaction with/participation in politics; and how it all might be impacting electoral results and transforming campaigns and coverage. In order to accomplish this research goal, the project will be split into two sub-objectives (RO), which correspond to three work packages (WP) and address this primary research questions: ***How are political fandom practices manifesting and influencing politicians and elections/campaigns? How are audiences manifesting their citizenship through fandom practices on social media?***

To this effect, the **first research objective** (RO1) is to understand the practical consequences of fandom logics becoming ubiquitous across political consumption online. In order to do that, this PhD wishes to explore what perceptions of politicians and politics the fandom practices deployed are producing. Following the logic that fandom has expanded as the most common form of consumption across the internet, this objective will seek to map out the perceived image that results from very active communities on social media who exchange regular impressions of politicians/politically adjacent figures, regardless of whether or not they self-identify as fans. Likewise, the goal would be to observe whether new, previously unidentified fandom practices are emerging amongst different communities, as there is a significant reactionary community forming around not just politicians like Donald Trump or Jair Bolsonaro themselves, but also around the likes of Ben Shapiro or Andrew Tate (the so-called “manosphere” (Ging, 2017, 2)

The **second research objective** (RO2) is to examine the practical details of the social media strategies and specific performances that politicians and their teams might be knowingly deploying in order to tap into new audiences/voters, which this PhD wishes to tackle by utilising the tried and tested social media strategies of influencers and other celebrities who have perfected the art of cultivating a parasocial relationship with their audiences (such as Kpop idols) as the basis for their income as a reference. The research objective is to map out the posting patterns of those politicians that appear to have successfully mastered the social media game, and receive regular engagement which then translate into votes, and observe if they match up to those of relevant internet celebrities who have managed to maintain their place in the spotlight through their online activity. The goal is therefore to observe whether it is possible to either encourage or manufacture fandom consumption by utilising social media in particular ways as a way to foster a quick political rise, and if so, which methods are being utilised and the practical consequences they might be having in the way audiences perceive and interact with politics.

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