Defining Conditional Belonging: The Case of Female Science Fiction Fans

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Abstract
This article offers a rigorous conceptualisation of an undeveloped sociological concept: conditional belonging. It implements and develops conditional belonging in the setting of everyday life by examining female fans of science fiction. Based on 30 in-depth interviews with female fans of Doctor Who and Star Wars, this study defines conditional belonging as a liminal state in which new members are constructed as a threatening ‘other’ and required to demonstrate conformity to the community. Having to align with values established by veteran members disrupts the ability of those who conditionally belong to perceive their identities as authentic. Conditional belonging is explored in offline and online settings, exposing the tactics used online by female fans to ensure their belonging. Through demonstrating the ways in which conditional belonging is cultivated and enforced, this article contributes to a nuanced understanding of belonging, not as a binary condition, but a multi-layered, complex one.

Keywords
authenticity, belonging, conditional belonging, fandom studies, female fans, identity

Introduction
When ‘belonging’, the social state in which individuals feel connected to a particular community or place, is discussed in academic literature, it is traditionally framed as a positive experience (May, 2013; Miller, 2003; Yuval-Davis, 2011a). Belonging, a condition, or process, which provides individuals with feelings of togetherness, well-being, tranquillity, intimacy and comfort, is an essential fixture in the construction and perceptions of our identities (Antonsich, 2010; May, 2013; Miller, 2003; Sporton and Valentine, 2007; Yuval-Davis, 2011a). Through the countries, neighbourhoods, communities and
cultures we belong to, we learn about who we are and what we stand for as part of a collective (Jenkins, 2014; May, 2013; Miller, 2013; Probyn, 1996; Stryker and Burke, 2000).

Despite the positive feelings it could potentially conjure, belonging also bears interpersonal and intrapersonal tensions within its fundamental processes of inclusion and exclusion. In an attempt to keep themselves cohesive (or exclusive), communities are unable (or reluctant) to accept every potential participant (Goodin, 1996). Belonging, therefore, consists of exclusion by default: we define ourselves and what we have in common, to distinguish us from others (Goodin, 1996; Hall, 1996; Jenkins, 2014). Belonging is not an equally distributed social resource, nor is it offered freely: it is petitioned for and is then authorised or declined. Yuval-Davis’ (2011a) differentiation between belonging and the politics of belonging is helpful here. She distinguishes between the emotional, personal attachment of belonging, and the political processes that render it as a resource. Acknowledging the decision-making process and social constructs involved with the politics of belonging reveals their inherent power relations (Antonsich, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 2011b). The powerless petition for acceptance and inclusion while the powerful determine who belongs and who does not (Antonsich, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 2011a; Yuval-Davis et al., 2018).

This article does not focus on individuals who belong, nor does it scrutinise the outsiders; this article sheds light on those whose belonging is conditional. So far, the concept of ‘conditional belonging’ featured in a few immigration studies (Aarset, 2018; Ríos-Rojas, 2014; Rutherford, 2008; Wernesjö, 2014), but was never explicitly defined. I suggest that this hitherto underdeveloped and vague concept, if properly established, can provide an opportunity for a more nuanced understanding of the varying degrees of belonging.

Based on the findings that will be shortly reviewed, I define conditional belonging as a social, liminal state in which individuals are required to demonstrate conformity to the community they wish to join. During the time of their conditional belonging, individuals’ access to the community’s goods is restricted, and they are not allowed to challenge the collective’s hegemonic values and norms. In the qualification process, these individuals are initially suspected to be inauthentic. They are treated as second-class members by founders or veteran members until their allegiance and compatibility to the community are proven.

While most scholars focused on conditional belonging to geographical and physical territories (Aarset, 2018; Ríos-Rojas, 2014; Rutherford, 2008; Wernesjö, 2014), this article examines a community that predominantly exists online. Online platforms are traditionally perceived as arenas that cultivate loose, infrequent ties among their users (Leung and Lee, 2005; Tardini and Cantoni, 2005). However, other studies demonstrate that online participation could provide an alternative community for individuals who would not have been able to know each other otherwise. Due to their omnipresence, online communities can bridge between people with similar interests, transcending geographical and social borders (Baym, 2015; Bury, 2005; Tardini and Cantoni, 2005). These online terrains have yet to be exhaustively explored in belonging studies (Lundby, 2011; Matei and Ball-Rokeach, 2002; Papacharissi, 2010). Scrutinising belonging to a community that congregates both offline and online, can raise significant insights regarding the nature of belonging, particularly on the restrictions put on certain identities.
This article explores female fans’ conditional belonging in science fiction fan communities. As fans have grown in numbers, become more socially visible and trespassed into the mainstream in recent decades (Coppa, 2014; Jenkins, 2007; Pande, 2018), fandom has become an identity and community worthy of academic scrutiny. Fandom studies inform the ways in which individuals shape their worldviews and social perspectives through dedicated engagement with popular culture (Sandvoss, 2005; Zubernis and Larsen, 2018). Fan communities offer a microcosm of society as they encapsulate broader social rifts. These include minorities, such as women, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT+) and Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) individuals, fighting for representation and inclusion in fan communities (Bourdaa, 2018; Busse, 2015; Pande, 2018; Scott, 2019). Another example is fans’ civic participation through fundraising campaigns and political engagement, such as the Harry Potter Alliance, a non-profit promoting social equality (Brough and Shresthova, 2012; Hinck, 2019; Jenkins, 2015). The power structures and gatekeeping politics inherent in fan communities provide a fertile ground for broad sociological discussion, such as belonging.

**Belonging, Conditional Belonging and Hierarchies of Belonging**

Since individuals are simultaneously embedded in different communities and categories, it is important to discuss belongings, in plural, and the ‘hierarchies of belonging’ (Henderson, 2007; Wemyss, 2006). Hierarchies of belonging describe the ways in which individuals organise and prioritise their versatile identities (Back et al., 2012). Under the premise that some identities or social affiliations are disjointed and contradicted, individuals create a hierarchy of their identities and decide which one to emphasise over the others to resolve this tension. This article focuses on two conflicting identities or social groups: fandom and gender.

Even though Goffman’s work does not explicitly address belonging or hierarchies of belonging, he identifies management tactics to reconcile tensions between identities. One such tactic is ‘role segregation’ (Goffman, 1961), in which a specific identity is silenced while another is accentuated. A similar tactic is ‘passing’ (Goffman, 1963), which includes concealing a particular identity, usually, the one that attracts stigma and critique, in order to pass as ‘normal’ and evade exclusion. Despite the effectiveness of these tactics, belonging scholars warn that alternating identities and playing some of them down in different social scenarios can compromise one’s chances of appearing authentic and eligible for inclusion in the community (Griffiths, 1995; Wemyss, 2006).

The second definition of ‘hierarchies of belonging’ accentuates the community’s layered social pyramid. In many cases, belonging feels like a natural condition; it is not questioned nor reflected upon (Griffiths, 1995; May, 2013; Yuval-Davis, 2010). Belonging becomes a discernible resource worth fighting over when it is threatened by the inclusion of minorities who appear to be socially or culturally different from the homogenous majority (Griffiths, 1995; May, 2013; Yuval-Davis et al., 2018). Hierarchies of belonging, therefore, spotlight the differences between ‘natural’ or ‘obvious’ members in the social group and second-class citizens (Griffiths, 1995; Yuval-Davis, 2011a). Therefore, I argue
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that belonging is not binary but a spectrum. Some are comfortably situated at the apex of the belonging hierarchy because they share similar identities or social background with most members in the community (May, 2013). Others, who might be conspicuously different from the others, have to prove they deserve to be included. Such is the case of female fans in male-dominated science fiction communities.

Fandom

Fandom is an emotional connection to a popular culture content or persona, which stimulates behavioural, social and cognitive engagement (Booth and Kelly, 2013; Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 2007; Reinhard, 2018). Fans interact with their fandom through a plethora of diverse practices. These activities include, for instance, what are known as transformative practices, such as writing fanfiction (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Larsen and Zubernis, 2011; Salter and Blodgett, 2017), producing and editing fan videos (Brough and Shresthova, 2012) and cosplaying (Bourdieu’s work, John Fiske (1992) addresses connoisseurship as ‘cultural capital’; fans gain acclaim and recognition in the community by demonstrating sufficient and extensive knowledge of their fandom.

Fandoms are frequently suspected as inauthentic and ‘not good enough’ is female fans. Since science fiction fandoms are traditionally associated with men, female fans are treated as a pestering and unwanted minority (Linden and Linden, 2016; Orme, 2016; Salter and Blodgett, 2017). Female fans, or ‘fangirls’, are stereotypically perceived as hysterical and emotional. It is assumed that female fans are drawn to the object of their fandom for shallow reasons, such as the star’s good looks, and that
they lack the analytical skills needed to think critically about their fandom (Busse, 2013; Jenkins, 1992; Salter and Blodgett, 2017).

Aside from the ‘fangirl’, science fiction female fans are associated with two other distinctive tropes: ‘male fan’s girlfriend’ and ‘fake geek girl’. Some female fans are accused of taking advantage of the scarcity of women in science fiction fan communities and infiltrating male-dominated spaces to draw attention to themselves, feel desired and find a sexual or romantic partner (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Reagle, 2015). Fake geek girls are accused of ‘doing’ fandom incorrectly because they are not thoroughly familiar with their fandom (Orme, 2016; Reagle, 2015; Salter and Blodgett, 2017). According to male fans, they take part in the ‘wrong’ practices by preferring transformative practices over intellectual engagement (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Busse, 2015; Scott, 2017). The threatening ‘infiltration’ of female fans into fandoms traditionally associated with men has caused veteran male fans to articulate strict rules of conduct for belonging to the community. These terms and conditions have led to female fans’ conditional belonging and therefore provide an exemplar case through which conditional belonging, particularly in relation to gender, can be expounded.

**Methodology**

This study is based on 30 semi-structured in-depth interviews with self-identified female fans of *Doctor Who* or *Star Wars* between the ages of 19 and 55. Thirty proved to be an exhaustive number of interviews for the goals of this study, as many participants accounted for similar experiences (Saunders et al., 2018). A crucial motivation to conduct semi-structured interviews was speaking with female fans, and not about or for them. Interviews were utilised to create a vivid and detailed report of experiences previously described in the literature (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Salter and Blodgett, 2017; Scott, 2019), but lacking first-hand accounts of female fans.

The motivation to use this research as a platform to place women’s experiences at the forefront strives from a feminist methodology standpoint. Feminist inquiries recognise the absence of women’s perspectives in the construction of what is perceived as ‘common’ knowledge (Hesse-Biber, 2007; Maynard, 1994). Through feminist methodology, I approached knowledge and meaning as social, contextual constructs (Harding, 1987; Letherby, 2003; Yuval-Davis, 1997). I acknowledge that the accepted definitions for, and perception of, the ‘science fiction fan’ are created and dictated by male fans. In this research, therefore, I chose to provide women with the opportunity to share their own narratives about fan identities by conducting in-depth interviews.

This research focused on two case studies: *Star Wars* and *Doctor Who* fandoms. These franchises were selected for two main reasons: their almost unparalleled commercial success, and their explicit marginalisation of women and other minorities. Both franchises could not have become pop culture phenomena without attracting mass and diverse audiences. Nevertheless, *Doctor Who* and *Star Wars* have historically targeted (white) boys and men (Brooker, 2002; Jowett, 2014). George Lucas (creator of *Star Wars*), for instance, reportedly insisted in the past not to manufacture merchandise for girls because *Star Wars* is a ‘boy movie’ (Brooker, 2002: 200). Later, Steven Moffat (showrunner of *Doctor Who*, 2010–2017) dismissed the idea of creating a female Doctor
by arguing that the series is not created ‘for progressive liberals’ (Walter, 2017: n.p.). When both Star Wars and Doctor Who introduced new female protagonists in 2015 and 2017 respectively, the announcements were met with a massive backlash from male fans who decried the ‘taking over’ of their fandoms by women (Austin, 2018; Eeken and Hermes, 2019).

Thirty self-identified female fans of Star Wars and Doctor Who were recruited through Facebook communities, forums and Meetup groups. The majority of interviewees were British (albeit some were not born in the UK), and seven were from other European countries such as Spain, France, Germany, Italy and Switzerland. Interviewees were from a broad age range, 19 to 55 years old (average age of participants was 37). Despite their age diversity, I acknowledge interviewees’ racial homogeneity. Only one participant from an Asian background was recruited, while all other participants were white. Taking into consideration the recent efforts to diversify fandom studies (Pande, 2018; Young, 2014), I acknowledge the limitation of the findings in representing diverse voices in fan communities.

Interviews lasted 90 minutes on average and were conducted either face to face, via Skype or over the phone. Face to face interviews were carried out with several British participants in the location of their choosing: university, cafes or their homes. Skype interviews were found the most useful as they provided an opportunity for participants to ‘perform’ their fannish identities in the comfort of their own homes, through wearing fannish clothing or sitting in front of shelves with merchandise. Similarly, Skype interviews allowed me to display my own fannish identity by showcasing my fannish merchandise.

A fan researching other fans is not an anomaly in fandom studies. Most fandom scholars are fans themselves (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Hills, 2002; Stanfill, 2013). Given this, Jenkins (2006) coined the term ‘Acafan’, maintaining that fans who study fandom should not be perceived as too biased to conduct academic research on their own identities and communities. Fans’ insider knowledge allows them to produce insightful, in-depth studies. Similar to other fandom scholars, my fan identity was an asset that eased the process of gaining participants’ consent to be interviewed and built instantaneous rapport.

Thematic analysis was utilised to find patterns and recurring trends in the collected data (Aronson, 1995; Boyatzis, 1998). Having conducted extended interviews, which resulted in long transcripts, thematic analysis proved useful for tackling the scope of such extensive data through its organised and flexible approach (Nowell et al., 2017).

Findings

I am not familiar with the entire universe of Doctor Who and Star Wars. If you’re asking about minor characters, I’m not going to be able to answer. I don’t remember everything that’s going on in those universes [...] last night when I thought about the interview; I thought to myself, ‘I should look up Wikipedia’ because sometimes... most of the time... when being a fan comes up, you always need to... I always feel like I need to prove myself. I don’t know if it’s connected to being female, I don’t know, maybe. I kinda think it is.

Anita (35, Italy) opened our interview with this unsolicited disclaimer to prevent scrutiny over the authenticity of her identity as a fan. Like Anita, other participants expressed
anxiety that the interview would challenge their fan identities. In the following sections, I demonstrate how these confessions illustrate female fans’ fear of being perceived as not ‘good enough’ fans, due to their conditional belonging in science fiction fan communities.

**Establishing Dominance and Stigma**

The first step of conditional belonging is veteran members setting dominance over the community. In the context of science fiction fandoms, female fans internalised that these communities and identities were exclusive to men:

My brother came with us [her and her father] to watch *Star Wars*. He enjoyed them, but he didn’t become obsessed by them. He was vaguely interested, but I was the one who knew every tiny detail about it. He was the one who got all the toys. He was the one who got a Dalek, which I stole […] It was me who loved it, I was the actual fan […] I understood that it was boys who got these toys and the girls steal the toys. (Samantha, 46, UK)

Over the years, interviewees recognised a gradual increase of women in fan communities, who openly identified as science fiction fans. This ‘sudden’ interest in what used to be an all-boys club caused tensions between existing male fans and new female fans:

They have been told probably since their childhood that this [being a fan] makes them uncool and unattractive to women, and suddenly women try to take over; ‘how dare they?! With their breasts?!’ They think it’s their space, and it’s now taken over by women. (Zoe, 34, UK)

As argued by Yuval-Davis et al. (2018), belonging becomes a discernible matter when threatened. Science fiction fan is an identity that only recently became a more valid form of masculinity, and is therefore still fragile and in constant need of protection (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Now they have finally become less stigmatised and ridiculed, male fans feel they cannot allow women access to their communities because it might weaken their already unstable position in the hierarchy of masculinities.

After establishing dominance over the community and breaking into the mainstream, male fans moved on to stigmatising female fans. Interviewees reported being frequently referred to as male fans’ girlfriends, based on the assertion that they were not genuinely interested in science fiction. Jamie (39, UK), for example, recalled: ‘when I’m with my husband in conventions, or even in social events, it’s presumed that he is the fan and I’m just kind of there’. When a woman attends a science fiction convention, it is scarcely accepted that she is intrigued in the fandom; she is either someone’s girlfriend or on a boyfriend-hunt: ‘they think I’m faking it to get a guy […] to get attention. Why would I want your attention in the first place?’ (Isabel, 26, Spain). Women’s presence in these traditional male-dominated spheres attracts suspicion, leading to the only ‘reasonable’ assumption: they are there because they are looking for a romantic partner.

Female fans were also accused of being ‘fan girls’ who are ‘only into it because the guys are hot’ (Emily, 34, UK), a presumption that rendered their opinions on *Star Wars* and *Doctor Who* invalid. They frequently experienced belittlement and dismissal because they were assumed to be lacking critical skills to analyse their fandoms thoroughly. Lily
(31, UK), for instance, reported that male fans tend to call her ‘girl’ during arguments: ‘they never call me a woman, even though I’m in my 30s’.

Drawing from Goffman’s (1963: 4) seminal work on stigma, I argue that the tropes and stigma attributed to female fans were used by male fans to disqualify the latter ‘from full social acceptance’. Given this, I argue that stigmatisation is a significant factor in conditional belonging, which contributes to the othering of those situated in this position. Stigmatisation provides existing members (in this case, male fans) justification as to why some individuals (such as female fans) should be treated with suspicion. Because those who conditionally belong are constructed as ‘others’ who hold different values and norms (Griffiths, 1995; Yuval-Davis, 2011a), their inclusion is perceived as a potential threat and contamination of the collective.

**Conditions for Belonging**

To review female fans’ inferior position in science fiction fandoms, I have developed the concept of conditional belonging. Typically, conditional belonging is not a mandatory process for every individual; certain persons who appear a ‘natural’ fit (thanks to their ethnicity, gender, age or other social categories), will be considered as members at the outset. This is true, for instance, in science fiction fandoms, wherein (white) men are generally included automatically. Other individuals, especially female newcomers, will go through a liminal stage of conditional belonging. In this condition, they will have to prove their allegiance by following the collective’s norms and values (Ríos-Rojas, 2014; Rutherford, 2008; Wernesjö, 2014). Those whose belonging is conditional are not allowed to challenge the codes of behaviour of the community (Weir, 2013), nor are they provided with opportunities to contribute to the meaning-making processes within the community (Buonfino and Thomson, 2007; Shotter, 1993). Female fans, for instance, have to follow specific rules of conduct in order to avoid stigmatising tropes, prove their identities are authentic and ensure their belonging. These primarily include demonstrating connoisseurship of the fanned content and aligning with male fans’ fannish interests.

Going back to Anita’s remark, many interviewees referred to connoisseurship as the primary indicator of one’s authentic fan identity. For instance, interviewees such as Lucy (41, UK) described that fans differentiate between one another by ‘being really, really, really niche and knowing every tiny detail’. Failing to demonstrate sufficient, meticulous acquaintance with the object of fandom provoked feelings of shame and inferiority among respondents and jeopardised their inclusion by existing members of the community. The accumulation of trivia and exhibition of connoisseurship of every content related to the object of their fandom is a coveted cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1985) in fan communities. This cultural capital is not only used to elevate one’s prestige but also to create a distinction between ‘real’ and ‘fake’ fans.

Interviewees frequently mentioned science fiction conventions as an arena in which they were often ‘grilled’ about their fandoms:

My friend wanted to buy a lightsaber, she’s buying it for a friend, but at the counter, the guy who sells the lightsabers kept asking her millions of questions about the movies, to see what she knows about it. She just wanted to buy something. (Anaya, 19, UK)
Anaya’s experience exemplifies how conditional belonging restricts access to material and social goods. Anaya’s friend was allowed to consume fannish merchandise only if she proved her familiarity with *Star Wars*. The lightsabre served as an emblem of belonging in the community. Due to her failure to demonstrate sufficient familiarity with *Star Wars*, Anaya’s friend was not only denied purchasing the lightsabre; she was rejected from the fandom.

The use of connoisseurship as a condition of belonging in the fan community demonstrates how standards are dictated by the powerful, veteran members of the collective (Antonsich, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 2011a; Yuval-Davis et al., 2018). Scott (2017: 1057) explains that the emphasis on connoisseurship in science fiction fandoms is designed ‘to structurally support stereotypically masculinised modes of fan engagement such as the collection, critical analysis, and curation of narrative data’. The terms of belonging in the community do not take into consideration traditionally feminine practices, such as fanfiction or fanart, nor value them as much as connoisseurship. The emphasis on connoisseurship, a practice that is already synonymous with male fans, automatically places female fans in an inferior position.

Aside from having to demonstrate connoisseurship, female fans also felt forced to adjust themselves to male fans’ interests. Participants shared that while they wanted to discuss female characters in *Doctor Who* and *Star Wars*, male fans focused on the ‘specification of the ship or the Daleks’ (Samantha, 46, UK). Wendy (50, UK) encountered similar incidents:

> I wanted to talk about Sarah Jane and Ace,7 and everyone else wanted to talk about the Doctor. They were quite a sexist bunch, as well. I tried to introduce basic concepts of gender equality at times, and they just never heard it before, never thought about it before.

To avoid being excluded, interviewees learned to focus on subjects that men found important, such as Ally (39, UK), who shared: ‘I refrain myself from talking about stuff that I want to talk about.’

Having to accommodate male fans’ topical interests during social interactions is another indication of their conditional belonging. Interviewees were not explicitly excluded from discussions. Their second-class status was subtly communicated to them; if they wanted to be part of the conversation, they had to tailor discussion topics according to what male fans found intriguing. Not being able to take an active role in the communities’ production of meaning and values is yet another demonstration of their conditional belonging (Buonfino and Thomson, 2007; Shotter, 1993).

Ally’s quote complicates our understanding of belonging, as practices of exclusion and policing could be detected within what appears as inclusion and belonging. Belonging must be reciprocated to be validated (May, 2013). Perhaps from the perspective of male fans, female fans are included, as they can physically attend conventions or frequent comic book shops. Nevertheless, if female fans cannot discuss subjects they are passionate about or have to prepare for inquisitive interactions, then they might be included, but they do not belong.

**Belonging Online**

Gender did not receive adequate attention in Bourdieu’s theory on habitus, taste and distinction. McCall (1992), however, contended that we cannot disregard gender when
scrutinising cultural capital and the social order. I demonstrate the importance of this argument through examining belonging in online fandoms. As previously stated, most belonging literature examines physical spaces, neglecting the different manifestations of belonging in online communities (Gustafson, 2009; Krzyzanowski and Wodak, 2007; Savage, 2008; Yuval-Davis, 2011a). Studying a community that congregates in online arenas allows me to demonstrate further that belonging is conditional for minorities, such as women in male-dominated communities.

Fandom lives and breathes on forums, blogs, social media communities, memes and more (Gray et al., 2017; Kustritz, 2015). In contrast to earlier hypotheses arguing that belonging is constructed through consistent face to face interactions (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Mellor et al., 2008), fandom proves that online communities can serve as grounds for intimate ties (Jenkins, 2006; Larsen and Zubernis, 2011). For instance, the use of online platforms is widely documented as a positive experience for female fans, serving as space in which they express themselves and bond with others over similar interests (Bury, 2005; Linden and Linden, 2016; Widmayer, 2017).

Despite positive reports (Bury, 2005; Linden and Linden, 2016; Widmayer, 2017), many female fans also encounter the ‘darker’ side of the Internet, which includes toxic behaviours and hate speech in male-dominated platforms such as Reddit or 4chan, or online gaming (Consalvo, 2012; Proctor, 2017). For example, Sandra (31, Spain) commented that using a microphone when playing online video games is ‘the worst thing you can do. I used it a few times, and it was toxicity everywhere.’ Even though Sandra chooses to play as a female character (when possible), she prefers to conceal her actual gender, knowing that it would expose her to verbal abuse.

Female fans’ concealment of their gender in online interactions is yet another indication of their conditional belonging. In contrast to physical spaces, where female fans are conspicuous and visible, online spaces allow participants to conceal the identity that hinders their inclusion: gender. ‘Gendered dispositions’, according to Laberge (1995: 138), are ‘akin to the embodied state of cultural capital’. Once the Internet turned their bodies and gender invisible, female fans were allowed access to the fandom.

Interviewees shared that their initiation processes into virtual communities were smoother when they used gender-neutral usernames and refrained from mentioning their gender because otherwise, ‘they creep at you or shut you down’ (Emily, 34, UK). Another tactic used to conceal their gender was avoiding discussions on relationships or female characters. Emily explained that commenting on these topics will get male fans to send you “back to Tumblr” [an online platform more associated with female users] or essentially kick you out because they identified you’re a female’.

Female fans using anonymous interactions to attain inclusion holds two significant insights regarding their conditional belonging. On the one hand, thanks to the anonymity enabled in many online forums, interviewees were able to ‘pass’ (Goffman, 1963) as men and experience unconditional belonging. Online communities granted female fans the opportunity to feel like equal members and take an active part in group discussions without experiencing scrutiny or ridicule. On the other hand, the mere fact that female fans had to keep their identities a secret emphasises their conditional, restricted belonging to the fan community. The Internet allowed women an alternative path for belonging by passing as males, a tactic which ultimately accentuates their second-class status.
Participants’ concealment of their gender in online platforms also exemplifies female fans’ hierarchy of belonging. Interviewees had to decide which of their identities they want, or should, prioritise and externalise: are they first and foremost fans or women? Eager to be part of a community that celebrates the object of their fandom, most participants prioritised their fan identities over their gender.

**Conditional Belonging and Inauthenticity**

The repercussion of tactics such as passing or prioritising one identity over the other is cultivating feelings of inauthenticity (Goffman, 1961, 1963; Griffiths, 1995; Wemyss, 2006). First, female fans could only feel like they entirely belonged when they provided false accounts of their identities. Then, they assessed their authenticity according to values and practices set by men and therefore felt like they could never measure up to their standards:

> I have often felt that I was inadequately fannish. In my head, I connect that to being a girl [. . .] I have noticed a correlation that amongst my friends, it’s the men who go further, they go deeper. I sometimes feel like my lack of knowledge is a weakness. (Rose, 38, UK)

Rose’s quote remonstrates that female fans feel that their potential to muster cultural capital in fan communities is restricted because of their gender. ‘Authentic culture’, according to Thornton (1995: 105), is ‘depicted in gender-free or masculine terms and remains the prerogative of boys’. Most male fans are perceived as authentic by default. They set the norm for the ‘real fan’ according to practices and values they already espouse and left female fans with no option but to conform.

Female fans’ conditional belonging and inability to receive approval of their fan identities disrupts their ability to perceive themselves as authentic fans. As indicated in Rose’s quote, female fans internalise that they are ‘not good enough’; first, because of their gender, and then because they have to fit into the masculine standards of fannish practice. Conditional belonging led to feelings of self-doubt and self-policing, where female fans were ready to judge themselves harshly or defend themselves even in unthreatening contexts, such as being interviewed for this study.

Female fans had to either conceal their gender (when possible) or prove their entitlement to belong ‘despite’ it. They were ready to gloss over their fannish interests (fascination with female characters, for instance) and modify their topics of conversation following what male fans were keen to discuss. For most female fans, interactions with their male counterpart did not raise feelings of intimacy and togetherness. Instead, female fans’ state of conditional belonging was a source of angst, alienation and self-doubt.

**Conclusions: The Significance of Conditional Belonging**

This article centres on an ongoing conflict in offline and online fan communities while offering an empirically supported conceptualisation of an underdeveloped sociological term. I propose conditional belonging as an analytical tool to perceive the social world through a nuanced understanding of the layered dimensions of belonging, inclusion and
exclusion. Belonging is not a binary condition, but a spectrum: some automatically belong, while others are located on different levels in the social hierarchy and have to prove they deserve to be part of the collective.

To examine the case of female fans in male-dominated science fiction fandoms, I combined belonging scholarship with seminal sociological works by Goffman and Bourdieu. By doing so, I join other critiques on the insufficient attention Bourdieu provided to particular social categories, such as gender (Laberge, 1995; McCall, 1992). As developed in this article, gender might hinder one’s ability to obtain the cultural capital that is required in order to be included in the community.

This article also contributes to the sociological interest in belonging by scrutinising the ways in which it is policed in offline and online arenas. At first glance, it would appear that online communities allow an alternative pathway to access exclusionary communities due to the blur of identifying features such as gender, race or age (among others). By keeping one’s identity anonymous online, belonging becomes a more feasible goal. In a more in-depth inspection, the mere fact that some social affiliations need to be silenced reveals the inherent exclusionary nature of these communities. Inclusion in social groups that relies on concealment and consistent self-policing does not equate to belonging; it is a sign of conditional belonging that enforces conformity on minority members, which leads to feelings of inauthenticity and guilt.

Conditional belonging could be related to broader, continuous sociological discussions on multiculturalism and assimilation (Alba, 1999; Bloemraad et al., 2008). Much like assimilation, conditional belonging restricts new members as they are implicitly and explicitly forced to erase their cultural identities and align with the values and practices dictated by the majority. Conditional belonging leaves limited room for pluralism and multiculturalism, as those who do not fit the requirements are ultimately excluded. Perhaps, if conditional belonging offers no alternative paths to inclusion other than assimilation, the solution is the formation of communities for minorities. Due to the scope of this article, I did not address the alternative communities initiated by the interviewees in this study. The benefits of such a sub-group could include a ‘true’ sense of belonging and camaraderie. The cost of creating another group could result in an even deeper rift between groups, leaving the dominant group’s hegemony stable and undisputed. The advantages and disadvantages of creating such alternative social groups that exist alongside the hegemonic, dominant community should be investigated in subsequent research.

The findings of this research, which led to the conceptualisation of conditional belonging, were developed through a bottom-up framework in a study that focused on a specific research area and social phenomenon. Further research is necessary to demonstrate the manifestations and implications of conditional belonging in other contexts. Since the findings introduced here are limited to a racially homogenous pool of interviewees, I also invite future studies to examine the intersection of different identities (such as gender, race, age and disabilities) and their role in ameliorating or catalysing conditional belonging.

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Notes
1. This article addresses authenticity as a stamp of approval given to a ‘successful’ performance of one’s identity, which passes as an effortless, coherent embodiment of one’s values, norms and beliefs (Erickson, 1995; Peterson, 2005).
2. Dressing up as characters featured in the object of fandom.
3. Fan-made storylines inspired by the original diegesis.
4. The call for participants asked for interviewees from the age of 18 (age of consent in most countries) with no maximum age limitation.
5. Doctor Who’s arch nemeses.
6. The weapon used in Star Wars.
7. Doctor Who’s companions.

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