The Critical Music Fan: The Role of Criticality in Collective Constructions of Brand Loyalty

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Purpose: This article seeks to explore how the act of expressing criticism against a music brand fits with the identity and practices associated with being a loyal fan of that brand.

Design/methodology/approach: Drawing on insights from theories of brand loyalty and fandom, this interpretive inquiry makes use of data from an online forum dedicated to the band, U2, and interviews with forum members. A combination of online ethnography and discourse analysis are employed.

Findings: The findings reveal how interpretations of the act of expressing criticism within a space that ostensibly functions as a place to celebrate all things U2 related, shape the construction of loyalty to the b(r)and in diverse ways. The apparent in-group tensions between being loyal and being critical pose a challenge to the taken for granted nature of brand loyalty and fandom, highlighting the nuanced ways with which they manifest.

Originality/ Value: By examining the role of criticality within otherwise loyal spaces, we contribute to brand loyalty theory by revealing the malleability of the concept, as meaning is constantly reshaped depending on individual realities.

Introduction
The digital revolution has embedded profound changes in the relationship between production and consumption, which have been variously heralded as the age of 'prosumer capitalism' (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010) or 'collaborative capitalism' (Cova, Dalli and Zwick 2011). While prosumption (Toffler 1980), also known as co-creation (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004), has always been a feature of the capitalist economy, recent changes such as the advent of Web 2.0 has given it greater centrality than ever before (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010). In this era, power has been vested in the hands of the consumer, the distinction between producers and consumers has been blurred, and new forms of cultural production have emerged. Encapsulating these practices, Seregina and Schouten (2017) and Jenkins (2007) argue that fandom might actually be a prototype of how consumers relate to and engage with brands in contemporary culture. Fans, particularly music fans, have been recognised for their material productivity and co-creation practices long before the emergence of digital and social media (Jenkins 1992). It is no surprise therefore, that at the first signs of what would ultimately evolve into the internet, fans began using the new medium to build infrastructures and platforms for their fandom, thus pushing practices that had previously remained hidden, such as social interactions and material productivity, into visible and accessible spaces (Baym, 2018; Pearson, 2010)). The digital platform has consequently provided space within which loyal consumers and fans can co-construct and negotiate marketplace meanings, including what it means to be a loyal fan (Obiegbu et al (2019). This study explores how the act of expressing criticism against a music brand fits with the identity and practices associated with being a loyal fan of that brand.

Research on brand loyalty has often approached the subject from the view of the marketer (e.g. Jacoby and Chestnut, 1978; Dick and Basu, 1994; Oliver, 1999) and has tended to conceptualise loyalty in behavioural and attitudinal terms. A consumer perspective (McCracken, 1993; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Fournier 1998; Fournier and Yao, 1997) has been rare by comparison, yet it enables a wider and deeper understanding of the socially constructed meanings and experience of brand loyalty. In the context of the arts, particularly music, loyalty is often expressed as 'fandom', with music fans evoking images of the obsessed individual or hysterical crowd, captive under the spell cast by the object of their passion (Jenson, 1992). Whilst fan studies have demonstrated that fans are "active, and regularly responded, retorted, poached" (Gray et al. 2017, p.3), caricatures of fans and loyal consumers as fawning and uncritical still persist in mainstream circles. The role of critique, which is so central to arts provision, has been largely ignored and even actively written out of representations of (Larsen, 2017), and research about fans. Considering the role of criticism in fandom raises interesting questions. This study contributes insights to brand loyalty theory and fandom by exploring the role of critique in fan loyalty and elucidating how music fans negotiate the tension that arises between being loyal and being critical of the same brand, in this case, the rock music band, U2.

Towards this aim, discourse analysis is employed within a broadly netnographic approach to systematically observe the discursive resources used within the fan community of an online forum to construct the role of critique within loyalty, while ensuring direct contact with fans (Androtsoupouos, 2008). The findings reveal how interpretations of the act of expressing criticism within a space that ostensibly functions as a place to celebrate all things U2 related, shape the construction of loyalty to the b(r)and in diverse ways. We consider some of the peculiarities of the music product that predispose some fans to being critical fans and the role of identity in that process. We also highlight the ways in which different practices associated with conflicting expressions of loyalty to U2 are negotiated on the forum. The apparent in-

group tensions between being loyal and being critical pose a challenge to the taken for granted nature of brand loyalty and fandom, highlighting the nuanced ways with which they manifest.

Brand Loyalty, Fandom and Criticism
Brand loyalty is often presented as the strong intention on the part of the consumer to re-patronize a particular brand regardless of opposing competitive market forces (Oliver 1999). From a marketing perspective there is no consensus on an accepted definition for brand loyalty (Dick and Basu, 1994; Park and Kim, 2000). Instead, it is conceptualized primarily as either a behaviour of repeated purchases over time (Uncles et al., 2003: 7) and/or an attitude that leads to a committed relationship with the brand. However, these approaches are limited in their ability to provide an understanding of consumers' lived experience of brand loyalty. As argued by Obiegbu et al (2019), an experientially driven brand loyalty, characterised by intense brand engagement, socialization and centrality in identity, highlights the active role of the consumer in constructing and negotiating what loyalty means in any given context. This is particularly relevant in the context of experientially-rich cultural products (e.g. Kozinets, 2001) such as music, where the notion of the 'fan' is often evoked by those claiming a position of loyalty.

Fandom is typically characterised by a positive, personal, relatively deep emotional connection with a mediated element of popular culture (Duffet, 2013). Most attempts at conceptualizing the term echo the same sentiment of intense levels of commitment, passion, emotional attachment and involvement (Ferris & Harris, 2011; Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 1992; Sandvoss et al., 2007). The intensity and passion of fans, which has been the focus of fan studies (Gray 2003), has also traditionally served as fodder for critiques of mass culture that present fans as "passive consumers separated from cultural production: a tribe of infantilized, alienated, celebrity-following individuals who could assemble in unstable crowds to pursue their emotional interest in simplistic cultural forms" (Duffet 2013:1). According to Gray et al (2017) this contemptuous caricature of the fawning and uncritical fan has gradually given way to a celebration of their mainstream credentials, and thanks to transformative texts (e.g. Jenkins, 1992) there has been a repositioning of fans as creatively and politically active. For example, scholars have focused on the way fans interpret and identify with their objects of interest. Grossberg (1992) argues that fans have different sensibilities with the media product that are positive, immediate and based on an emotional process of identifying or investing. Fandom is a consumption field that individuals may turn to in identity construction and to gain status and belonging (Seregina and Schouten 2017). Simultaneously, as Harrington and Biebly (1995) argue, being a fan requires "the adoption of a particular identity that is shaped through subjective and affective experiences" (p. 97).

While fandom can be individual, it is also powerful as a collective experience (Harris and Alexander, 1998). Loyal fans typically seek out other similarly highly engaged and passionate fans and congregate within communities online and offline where they share their passions and consumption experiences (O'Reilly et al., 2013). Fans are also semiotically and materially productive: "fans are consumers who also produce, readers who also write, and spectators who also participate" (Jenkins, 1992:214). The intensity of engagement is manifest in co-creative endeavours (Alvermann and Hagood, 2000) such as connecting with other fans and reworking and repurposing cultural texts. Through such endeavours, the meanings of those texts are negotiated and constructed within the interpretive community. Online platforms in general, and social media in particular, are increasingly a core space in which these communities of likeminded fans meet, act and interact.

Fan communities have previously been researched in relation to loyalty, but the majority of this research has focused on sport fans (Kwon et al, 2005; Nash, 2000; Dinisio et al, 2008; Richardson

& O' Dwyer, 2003). Sports fandom and media fandom are however of a very different nature. Sports fans tend to be tribal and invoke instincts that are different in intensity to those related to music (Duffet, 2013). Sports has a separate and unique cultural history steeped in competition (Schiemmel et al. 2007). Media fans display a different style of conduct and set of feelings (Duffet, 2013). As an example, though thousands of music fans gather at concert venues, these are usually not associated with the sort of mass violence between rival fans that, at times, affect sporting events. Rather, live music audiences are often characterised by a sense of community and belongingness.

This feeds into the impression that communities of music fans are cohesive, singular in nature and purpose, and devoid of inter-group tensions. Research on consumption groups would suggest that this is unlikely. Exponents of the tribal construct have previously shown how groupings of online communities centred on specific brands could develop potentially dangerous opposition to the same brand (Cova, Kozinets & Shankar 2007). In contrast to the idea of harmonious communities of consumers who love a given brand, Cova and White (2010) provide a case study of the Warharmmer and Couchsurfer communities where some community members, not wanting to be pigeonholed, generate communities that oppose or contest the management of their favourite brand.

In fandom and cultural studies, Hills (2016) identifies a nascent appetite to problematise the cultural embrace of an uncontroversial fan identity. In particular, he is interested in inter-fandom, or the relationships between different media fandoms that define themselves against each other. Hills (2016) positions inter-fandom in relation to Gray's (2003) anti-fans. Anti-fans are "not necessarily against fandom per se, but strongly dislike a given text or genre, considering it inane, stupid, morally bankrupt and/or aesthetic drivel." He continues that "fan studies have taken us to one end of a spectrum of involvement with a text, but we should also look at the other end to those individuals spinning around a text in its electron cloud, variously bothered, insulted or otherwise assaulted by its presence." (Gray 2003: 70). Anti-fandom is also a subject position that, as Hill (2015) notes, fans can move in and out of during the same event as they engage with the various media texts that comprise the event. Similarly, Haig (2013:12) identified a critical fandom for the Twilight series, noting that similar to uncritical fans they display regular, emotionally involved consumption of the given text, since they "both devour each new book and film and engage in sustained passionate debates about the series and its flaws". For Haig however, 'snark', as he terms criticism, is not incidental to the pleasure taken in the texts; they appear, in large part, to constitute that pleasure. "This form of critical fandom does not simply recognise *a text* as rubbish and enjoy it *in spite of* that recognition; the recognition *itself* and the analysis, discussion and parody that it permits, provide much of the fans' pleasure." (Harman and Jones, 2013:952). Click's (2019) edited collection on anti-fandom in the digital age evidences the increasing interest in a more nuanced and complete understanding of the role of dislike and criticism in fandom.

Against this backdrop, the notion of the critical fan warrants further examination. The current study seeks to answer the question of how the act of expressing criticism against a music brand fits with the identity and practices associated with being a loyal fan of the same brand.

Methods
This study of the role of criticism within otherwise loyal spaces is part of a larger netnographic inquiry (Kozinets, 2002) into how brand loyalty is constructed within the context of community, which was carried out over a period of four years. Methods and techniques drawn from discourse analysis are employed (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) within a broadly netnographic approach, to facilitate systematic observation of discourses within the selected fan community.

The study focused on the rock music band, U2, who are a prototypical mainstream commercial music brand with an active online fan community. During their career spanning several decades, U2 have experienced highs and lows in both their musical output and b(r)and reputation, thus offering much opportunity to explore how loyal fans construct and negotiate criticism in their fandom. Data were collected using a combination of "observation ethnography" (Bainbridge, 2000) which focuses on the static examination of online data without interaction with forum members, and "participant observation" (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994) which involves communication and interaction with community members. As the participant observer, the first author sought permission from the forum administrator to proceed with the research, and also posted a message on the forum stating that he was a researcher interested in what being a U2 fan means to fans. Forum members could opt out of the research, of which only six forum members chose to do. Usernames have been changed to ensure anonymity.

Data collection began with an initial read through the large number of posts made between August 2008 when the forum was started and February 2016, with subsequent rounds undertaken monthly to capture new posts and emerging discussions. Notes were made of what was observed and where (Brown et al., 2003). A second read-through focused on threads and exchanges that made reference to loyalty, fans, fandom or allegiance, particularly those exchanges that seemed to imply a degree of conflict or debate regarding their meanings. The aim of this component of the study was to understand the role of criticism in the collective constructions of loyalty. The downloaded threads comprised 106,000 words from a combination of 28 threads and individual posts. Each thread typically had from 10 to over 50 participants depending on the duration and the interest of participants in the topic under discussion. Data were also collected via participant observation, where the first author initiated threads and engaged in discussions based on emergent themes (for instance, on the importance of length of time as a fan, relationship between heritage and loyalty etc.). Finally, Skype interviews were conducted with forum members who appeared likely to add depth and richness to the data, or to offer interesting perspectives.

Discourse analysis was employed, as it provided a means of identifying the prevailing discursive resources and accompanying discourses within the fan community and of analysing the ways the discourses of being critical and being loyal were negotiated through fans' interactions. Analysis placed emphasis on action, construction and variability of accounts within the interactive text of the community (Potter and Wetherell 1987). This process was guided by a theoretical interpretation of what was represented, as well as from explicit accounts. The analysis of discursive resources was underpinned by the notion of interpretative repertoires put forward by Potter and Wetherell (1987), where talk is viewed as a means by which speakers position themselves and are positioned by others, as they produce a situated construction within a particular interaction (cf. Ellis & Ybema, 2010). Three themes emerged regarding the role of criticality in constructions of loyalty: claiming criticality as a loyal fan; aesthetic appreciation versus idolisation and devotion; and negotiating the tension between 'being critical' and 'being loyal'

Claiming Criticality as a Loyal Fan
The diversity of loyalty constructions can, in part, be seen in the different practices and interpretations of expressing criticism on the U2 forum. While some forum participants express what they see as their right as a fan to be critical of the band, others who see the fan forum as a dedicated space to celebrate U2, express all round positivity towards anything related to the band. These various positions are constantly contested and debated, reflecting a fluidity and

lack of clarity about what it means to be a fan of the band, and how best to express this fandom within the community.

These positions on criticism can be distilled into two poles on a continuum. At one end is the *critical fan* who wants to express their opinions irrespective of how antithetical they might be to the band, and at the other end is the *unconditionally supportive fan*, who believes the band can do no wrong, and goes into attack mode when criticism of any sort is expressed against them. All along the continuum, participants are concerned with what the role of the fan should be. The extract from a thread below highlights this conflict.

large7 -   I have just been accused of bringing lethargy to this forum for having the temerity to suggest the lyrics to U2's new single are rubbish. First of all, (and this being a forum), this is a place where people can debate and openly express their opinions, positive or negative. There's been lots of talk here about people posting negative responses to the new song. The reason may be that it's not very good? Or that people just don't like it.

U2 have written some great songs, some average songs and some terrible songs. Bono is an annoying sycophant completely obsessed with being the biggest and the richest. He will jump on any bandwagon that might further his exposure. That doesn't stop him having a sometimes great voice and being a good showman and part of a sometimes great band. Bono's activism in the third world comes from a good place but he is completely mis-informed - his Red campaign is a disaster. Whatever hanging around with George bush might have achieved (which isn't much given the state of the world), Bono made a complete tosser of himself - even his fellow band members agree.

The Edge gets some cracking noises from his guitar but he is a rather average guitarist surrounded by lots of effects. Musically U2 have always surrounded themselves by people with perhaps a little more musical imagination than themselves. Let's face it, they only became musically imaginative when Eno joined them for the Unforgettable Fire. That doesn't mean some of their music isn't verging on brilliant. (see: 'Bad' 'Bullet The Blue Sky' 'Kite' 'A Man and a Woman' etc etc.

Perhaps a more balanced view is what's needed regarding the relative merits of U2. For my money, their new song is average with lyrics that make me deeply embarrassed. Maybe the album will be better - let's wait and see…

lieu2 -   do you realize this is a U2 forum, and there are U2 fans here, maybe I think the boots song is awesome

large7 -   You're completely missing the point of what I'm saying - obviously. I like U2 also so you could call me a fan. But I am allowed to say their new song is rubbish - which I think it is.

Mariamontreal - I believe this is also going on in another thread. Everyone is entitled to their opinion whether it pleases you or not. It's ok, if he doesn't like the song and you do so be it. No need to continue on and on about it. We must respect each other's opinion good or bad. Freedom of speech. It is not a debate this forum. It's a bunch of cool people (because U2 fans are the coolest, I must say,) who share opinions with one another. No one is right and no one is wrong, opinions will vary. It's all good!

DGordon1 -   Of course you're allowed to say what you want. But if you make very bold and opinionated statements like you have, on a U2 fan site, can you really expect no backlash whatsoever? I wouldn't. Honestly, leaving my opinions out of this, if you heavily criticize a band on their fan page that's fine. But you'll have to accept that lots of people really won't like it. So my advice would be to only say things like "U2 are a big corporation playing the game for big bucks", if you're willing to accept unappreciative responses. The vast majority of peeps here are proud U2 fans, so OF COURSE strong criticism of the band is going to attract a big debate! It shouldn't be a surprise. **(forum.atu2.com: on: January 27, 2009)**

Large7 takes issue with recent ongoing complaints expressed against dissenting voices within the forum. He presents what he sees as a taken for granted notion (first of all) that the online

forum is a space for expressing all sorts of opinions, whether these be of a positive or negative nature in relation to the band. He then goes on to contrast this ostensible position with the negative reception to his criticism against the band by some fans, and attempts to legitimize the act of being critical of U2 within the forum. Later he launches into a critical outburst against the band which stems from a recent single release for a song which he does not like. His distaste goes beyond the particular song, to include individual band members for mediocre work both relating directly to the music, and in relation to what U2 stands for as a band - the activism of Bono, the lead singer and the totality of the U2 brand. Large7 concludes by describing himself as 'deeply embarrassed' by U2's recent work. By expressing embarrassment, it is clear that large7 has incorporated U2 into his sense of self, since a person is more likely to be embarrassed or proud of things that they see as a part of who they are (Belk, 1988). This is interesting as it suggests that despite his criticism, large7 is a fan of the band.

Lieu2 accentuates the opposing view or interpretation of criticism. By posing the questions 'do you realize this is a U2 forum?', and 'do you realize U2 fans are here?' he demonstrates his assumption that the online forum is a space for celebrating the band. He also constructs loyalty and criticism as notions which cannot coexist. This is further evident in his suggestion that large7 should rather be stating how 'awesome' the song is, irrespective of his genuine feelings about it.

Large7 states his position in more explicit terms asserting the fact that he '*likes* U2' and he is a '*fan*' of the band, and that because of that, he has a right to present his critical view that "their new song is rubbish". Mariamontreal acknowledges the ensuing tension, suggesting that 'everyone is entitled to their opinion', while encouraging respect for different opinions within the forum and freedom of speech. She tries to ease the tension by highlighting the shared love for U2 and noting that 'it's all good'. In the final post of the exchange DGordon reinforces and fortifies the view of the unconditionally supportive fan suggesting that 'bold and opinionated' negative statements within a space dedicated to U2 are bound to attract unappreciative responses from 'proud U2 fans'. He concludes that criticism of the band should be carried on within the forum at the participants' own risk. The heat of the debate links back to the perceived understanding of how to be a fan of the band and how that fandom ought to be expressed - the fan as a rational individual whose position as a fan remains unaffected by the expression of criticism, versus the fan as constantly and unquestioningly supportive of the band and their music. Different ways of being a fan and of being loyal are being contested and negotiated through the exchange.

A different view of criticality in fandom is provided here than that expressed in the extant literature. Here, fans' criticisms seem to spring from a place of genuine love for the band and frustration with some parts of their work. Their critiques appear to stem more from a desire to experience a version of the band they have been used to in the past, or one they would rather experience in the future - an idealized version. Schatz et al.'s (1999) evaluation of the distinction between blind and constructive patriotism, from the field of politics is insightful. They conclude that these forms of affiliation constitute two largely different dimensions of positive identification with and affective attachment to one's country: patriotism based in unconditional positive evaluation and unquestioning allegiance, versus patriotism based in constructive criticism and critical loyalty. Blind patriotism is positively associated with political disengagement, nationalism, perceptions of foreign threat, perceived importance of symbolic behaviours, and selective exposure to information. By contrast, constructive patriotism is positively associated with multiple indicators of political involvement, including political efficacy, interest, knowledge, and behaviour. Like nations, brands can attract strong

affiliations. Consumers look to brands as symbols of cultural ideals. They use brands to create an imagined identity that they share with like-minded people (Holt et al., 2004). These affiliations can serve as a backdrop for strong feelings, despite the differences between brands and countries as social constructs. Although nations and brands are different, the relationship between a nation and its citizens can serve as a metaphor for the ways fans and consumers respond to the reputation of a brand like U2 – some with unquestioning embrace, and others with critical interest, nonetheless grounded in positive identification.

Further legitimating the place of criticism in fandom, fans noted the contrast between U2 as a commercial brand selling a product, and U2 as an artist that shares an emotional bond with invested fans.

Imaginary friend -	No band should ever listen to what their fans want when it comes to the music you make. You'll end up making the same album over and over.
Tumbling Dice -	If someone follows U2 religiously, why would they criticize them? Would a religious follower criticize God?
Johnny Feathers -	I was thinking, too--if David Bowie had ever done anything like this, he'd have never gotten past Ziggy Stardust, and still be in makeup and platform boots. The artist calls the tune, and doesn't take requests. It's just up to you if you want to dance to it.
JTbaby -	As consumers of a product we are absolutely in the perfect position to be critical if said product is in our opinion lacking.
Eddyjedi -	I meant to them personally as the question suggests.
JTbaby -	Same answer. I don't think the question relates to their personalities or dress sense, but to their collective output as U2.
Tumbling Dice -	That's the difference; some fans see U2's music as art while other, shall we say, commercially minded fans, merely see it as 'product.' The difference between real fans and unreal fans, perhaps.
JTBaby -	The second they start charging money they have a product. It happens to be art they are selling. It can be both "product" and "art"
TumblingDice -	I'm sure you prefer to describe it as product, while most fans would describe it as art.
JTBaby -	I described as both. Do pay attention. The two are not mutually exclusive. The second anyone charges money for the work of their labors they are a business selling a product. There's an art to IC design, making a quality car, or making music people want to buy or putting on a performance people want to see. (**forum.atu2.com: on May 13, 2013**)

The exchange above frames the question of whether or not fans should express criticism against U2 as a subtext of the longstanding art versus commerce debate. Imaginary friend, Tumbling Dice and Johnny Feathers construct the artist as a reverential figure creating *art* who should not have to capitulate to criticism. Similar to a devoted follower of a religion who receives the word without questioning its potency, Tumbling Dice invokes the religious metaphor as a means of challenging any act of criticism against U2. By so doing she constructs the expression of criticism as contrary to what is expected of a loyal fan. Similarly, Johnny Feathers suggests that an artist responding to criticism only serves to limit the fullness of artistic expression. As

he puts it fans should simply 'dance to the tune'. JTbaby however invokes the rights of a consumer purchasing a *product* as defence of his right to be critical of U2. In the same way that consumers in possession of a defective product might articulate their complaints, Eddyjedi believes fans have a right to be critical of U2. As JTBaby later concludes, U2 is neither just a commercial brand selling a product nor just an artist creating art. The band is both of these things at the same time, and so contrasting views as to how to engage with them emerge as fans try to articulate the notion of loyalty within the community.

Interestingly, in a personal interview, Anna explained that critical fans tend to consist of the long-standing fans within the forum.

> I do notice that there is this, kind of like a group of people in the forum that consider themselves more long term fans, and there is a specific group within them that are much less into the current incarnation of U2 and are much more into the 90's or late 80's incarnation of U2, and so they kind of have this superior thing where they are like, oh yeah, back when they were a group…. it's a really weird dynamic and it's something that has really put me off and gotten me tired of the forum. They seem to frame everything with that lens, and so anything that current U2 does they come on and be like 'they've sold out', 'they're more straight up', 'they're embracing commerciality'. People don't just accept the present day U2 just on their own terms, they sort of go into it with an already cynical frame of mind (Anna, Skype interview, May 5, 2016).

Anna highlights that at least some of the critical contingent within the forum have been fans of the band for a long time, supporting the notion that part of the criticism levelled against the band is grounded in a more idealized view of what some fans feel the U2 project should look like. Unsurprisingly, over a 30 year career, the band's musical style has evolved, perhaps in a bid to remain relevant with younger audiences or in line with the band's changing artistic inspiration. Also the encroachment of commerce has not occurred overnight. Although U2 is currently a massive global brand, the band had modest beginnings playing intimate performances in Dublin. As the band's audience has grown from one project to the next, so too has the band embraced the market. What this means is that the version of U2 that long-standing fans identified with at the start of the band's career might not be the same version of the band that is active today. For example, Eric claims as defence of his critical positions: "My point about big stadiums and being a corporation goes straight to the heart of what used to make U2 great and doesn't anymore. They were always about heart and so much of what they do now seems to be about marketing, being the biggest, being the richest and being seen with the right people". (Eric Skype interview, March 6, 2016). Eric constructs the band's market-centric position as an attack on the 'heart' of the band, or at least the version of the band he fell in love with. The glossy profile of U2 as a massive global marketing machine is at odds with the authentic and intimate feel of the band he used to know.

The question then is, why remain a fan and member of the forum? In a traditional consumer-brand relationship; and in a behavioural or attitudinal view of loyalty, a consumer like Eric who has grown dissatisfied with the performance of a brand would proceed to another band that better meets his needs. Zimmer provides some insight:

> Hawkmoon - But I guess the question I want to ask some of you, is why do you do it? Why do you spend so much time on a U2 forum when you haven't liked anything they've done since the late 90s? And I think that's a fair question – not that you don't belong here, but why does the band today rattle you so much?
>
> Zimmer- It's a slight concern that the answer to this question isn't apparent. Surely it "rattles

them so much" because they care. They want them to produce the output of the 90s and earlier and they think they still can. To a degree, the fact that they feel so strongly about the current output, demonstrates that passion. As has been said elsewhere, it's the same with sports teams- if you follow a club that has had great success in the 80s/90s, but is now a pale shadow, the fan base is less, but many of them will be so strongly critical of the current setup because they care and they want it to be what it once was. Rather than walk away and give up. I'm not sure that view is particularly wrong, even if it might be a little naive in its expectation. (**forum.atu2.com: on May 13, 2017)**

For Zimmer, engaging in criticism serves as a demonstration of a fan's 'passion' and how much they 'care' about the band. The emotional investments in U2, similar to a football club that is underperforming, means that the fan is more likely to wait it out, hoping that the band returns to some ideal version. In this sense, loyalty is constructed as sticking with the band through thick and thin, even if that means expressing dissent and criticism aimed at improving the current situation. This tendency of some fans to take a romanticized view of the previous incarnation of the band is somewhat unsurprising considering the length of U2's career, and the evolution of the band during that time.

The question of why older critical fans remain on the forum, despite their criticisms with the band might also have to do with the extent to which the band is tied up with their sense of identity, as against a simple functional appreciation of their musical output. This is explored further in the next section.

Aesthetic appreciation versus idolization and devotion
This theme elaborates the reasons why fans might be attracted to music as a factor that shapes their interpretations of the expression of criticism. Hargreaves and North (1999), building upon Merriam (1964), identify a number of different functions of music in everyday life. These include emotional expression, which points to the power of music to act as a vehicle for the expression of feelings which might be difficult to convey by other means. This is also connected to the emotional effects of music on mood at a more mundane level (Hargreaves and North 1999). Music is also *communicative* and *symbolically representative*. In addition to conveying specific information through musical structure and messages, extra musical information such as narratives, ideals and values can be actively interpreted and re-interpreted within the social and cultural world so that it makes sense to us. Music helps us to make sense of our world and our place in it, and by extension, plays an important role in helping us construct our identity or sense of self (Shankar, 2000). An important function in this analysis is *aesthetic enjoyment* and *entertainment*. Aesthetic enjoyment of music entails a reflective appraisal and interaction between the characteristics of the person (such as age, gender, musical training and personality) and the characteristics of the music (such as complexity, style and familiarity.) It involves a cognitive appraisal of the music in question. We argue that a fan who is more interested in the aesthetic use value of music is likely to be a more critical fan, paying attention to tone, structure and formulation of the song.

Operator -   Why are you so excited by Get On Your Boots? It is incredibly forgettable. Having
                    been a U2 fan for 20 years, I know that we are a one-eyed lot who melt at pretty much everything
                    they do. This song suffers from the same over-involved, over-produced nonsense that led U2 to
                    release technical-heavy duds like Discotheque & Vertigo. Listen to 'Pump It Up' by Elvis
                    Costello; it sounds almost like a legal rip-off (Costello's version actually has rock'n'roll guts to
                    it). The lyric style is a direct rip-off from Dylan's Subterranean Homesick Blues. Read reviews
                    from non-partisan and partisan sites all over the web. People are incredibly under-awed and
                    disappointed with the song. It will not catch on, it will not be popular, but Bono (who are
                    obviously surrounded by 'yes-men'-a stance they used to rally against) will thrash it like he did

Singnomore -   Can we get rid of this guy - Go annoy someone else!!

Starfish -   I've heard the same story and so far GOYB has ripped off numerous songs since its debut. And it's also newbies that are hating....

Operator -   Oops...this is what I mean by one-eyed U2 fans (I HAVE BEEN A FAN FOR 20 YEARS AND SEEN THEIR CONCERTS AROUND THE WORLD - in case anyone wants to call me a 'newbie-hater' again). A bit of subjective criticism about a much-hyped U2 release, followed up with rational, cited arguments and people want to burn me at the stake...It's this sort of blind, sycophantic fanaticism that makes non-U2 fans cringe. (**forum.atu2.com: on April 1, 2009**)

Operator in the exchange above refers to U2 fans as a "one eyed lot", who are generally impressed by everything the band does. By making use of the *we* descriptor he attempts to align himself with other fans and foster affiliation and identification with them, in spite of the critical stance he takes in relation to the particular song. He also expresses a taken-for-granted awareness of the expectations of the forum that a typical fan of U2 should like the song. He unpacks different structural elements of the song to frame his criticism – the production, the sound compared to other songs, as well as the lyrics. The speaker is attempting, unsuccessfully in this case, to manage the reception of his criticism, by including himself in the community. Also, his criticism is less towards U2 and more towards a specific song, and its failure to meet his aesthetic expectations. As displeasure with his harsh tone is expressed by other fans, Operator underlines the length of time he has been a fan (I have been a fan for 20 years), and his concert attendance as a means of defending his right to be critical. The heart of Operator's criticism is the aesthetic appeal of the song, and this frames his particular view of himself as 'rational' in relation to other fans.

By comparison, a fan whose affiliation with the band is more grounded in devotion and idolization of the band, is more likely to support the artist irrespective of their output, and have an uncritical love for all they do. This seems to be aptly captured in DGordon1's comment in the first excerpt, where he notes that any criticism on a fan site dedicated to U2 is unwelcome since "the vast majority of peeps here are proud U2 fans".

Negotiating the tension between 'being critical' and 'being loyal'
The tensions that emerge between different ways of being loyal to U2 are negotiated in various ways. A key strategy adopted is to align, and thus normalise, being critical with being a fan and to discount the inability to be critical by associating it with fanaticism.

darabois   - Just like most all of you here, I've been a U2 fan for around 25 years, and thought I was a U2 fanatic... UNTIL, I've met with other U2 fans during Elevation, Vertigo and 360 tours. I felt I was a true fanatic for having organized the line outside the venue until I met others while camped overnight...these we truly FANATICS. During the last 360 concert, others in line seemed to be family or at least life-long friends by the way they interacted with each other - turns out they got to know each other while camping out for other U2 concerts, these people have seen U2 since their first concert, and will continue to see them. I live in the US and met fanatics who traveled from England, Germany and Australia to see U2 in Texas. Sure, most fans like myself know how U2 started out, own all of their albums, seen them in concert since the Joshua Tree - but these fanatics speak of U2 personally, as if receiving a phone call any second from Bono, Edge, Larry or Adam wouldn't be a surprise. Before the Vertigo tour, I remember reading an article where Bono mentioned how he noticed the same people in the front of the stage at every show, and he was excited about the new way people were going to screened into the venue - some randomly allowed inside the circle and the rest outside of it. Turns out, it didn't work - the fanatics

found a
way in front of the stage - sorry Bono. I don't have a need to prove I'm U2's biggest fan or need to see the first show of the tour, in fact, I'd prefer to see a more polished show, one where they have worked out all the kinks. The fanatics I've met along the way have widened the line between passion and obsession... I'm a fan of U2 and glad that I'm not a fanatic.

StrongGirl-   I have learned from being on this forum that I lie somewhere in the middle - that dark gray area between U2 fan and U2 fanatic

Tumbling Dice- I'm just a U2 fan and more a fan of their recorded music (albums) than their live performances, not that I don't think that they are one of the premier live acts on the planet.

catcallmc   - This clearly needs one of those personality type questionnaires to create a continuum. If you answered mostly A then you need to stop looking dreamily into Bono's eyes in every poster in your U2 shrine, if you answered mostly D then you've a healthy appreciation of quality music! (**forum.atu2.com: on June 22, 2010**)

The stanza above highlights the negotiation of different ways of expressing loyalty. Darabois reflectively presents her individual views on what being a loyal U2 fan entails, and captures the process of evolution as her individual perceptions are confronted with the views and practices of other fans she has encountered on and off the forum. At different points in her post, Darabois moves back and forth between the footing of a 'fan' and a 'fanatic', reflecting a self-awareness of different positions one can take as a loyal fan. Fanatic in this instance is used as a synonym for parasocial obsession. She uses *fanatic* in a negative and parasocial sense, to evoke excessive or obsessive behaviours in the consumption of the U2 brand. *Fan* on the other hand is used to represent a normalized expression of fandom or loyalty. These two positions are taken alternatively as Darabois negotiates her personal identity in relation to U2 and other fans. She articulates what she sees as the normal practices of 'most fans' – they know about U2's history and heritage, own all of U2's albums, and have seen the band on tour multiple times. Fanatics on the other hand seek out a more personal relationship with the band, travel long distances from their homes to see the band live, and always want to be at the front of the stage. Darabois works to legitimize the normal fandom practices, while at the same time constructing the actions of negatively valorized 'fanatics' as obsessively transgressive and problematic. Subsequently other fans work to locate themselves and construct their identities as they compare their consumption of U2 to other fans on the forum. StrongGirl figures her loyalty "lies somewhere in that grey area between fan and fanatic". Importantly here, TumblingDice and catcallmc build on this and draw a distinction between the "healthy appreciation of quality music", and idolization of the band and its members, thus locating 'being critical' as a healthy and normal fan behaviour.

The inability of some fans to handle negative criticism of U2 is singled out as a threshold, which once crossed puts some fans in 'fanatic' territory. For example:

Blueeyedboy -   For me there is a fine line between being a sycophant and a super fan. A super fan(atic) is a lifestyle choice for the person who decides to put their obsession ahead of most other elements of their lives, such as sacrificing family holidays to go and follow the band touring, not relenting until they have all formats of released material and can reel off stats such as the name of Bono's aunties one eyed cat at the drop of a hat. This lifestyle choice is applied through the good times and the bad times.

The more annoying and much less interesting sycophant refuses to acknowledge any weakness in the band, their back catalogue, or the existence of other good to great musicians out there. They don't know the name of Bono's aunties one eyed cat, but they are 100% certain that it better than the one eyed cat owned by anyone related to a member of Coldplay.

I would class myself as a one-time obsessive fan, possibly bordering on sycophantic at one stage '89-93, but would struggle to class my interest any higher than passing nowadays. That said, my obsession with music in general has never been greater, especially in new and upcoming acts. (**forum.atu2.com: on October 17, 2015**)

Blueeyedboy categorizes fans who fail to 'acknowledge any weaknesses in the band or their music' as 'sycophants', or fanatic. By so doing, he indicates a preference for perceived normal levels of consumption of the U2 brand, while also framing behaviours that cross the 'fine line' as problematic and transgressive. This was a position that was also maintained by some fans in interview sessions. Devin notes:

In terms of myself taking someone serious or not on the forum it really comes down to can someone be objective. U2 have released some bad songs and have made some errors along the way. Some people think every single thing they've ever done is gold. That's just not reality. The forum members I don't take to seriously are the ones who are not objective and view U2 with rose coloured glasses (Email Interview, 4 May, 2016).

Discussion and Conclusions

This article has explored the role and impact of criticism against the fan object in collaborative constructions of what it means to be a loyal fan. The mono-disciplinary, systemic approaches to the study of brand loyalty often tend to approach the topic as if it is objective (for instance by assuming that purchase is synonymous with loyalty). Even as brand focused consumption communities continue to proliferate and attract the interest of consumer researchers, these groups are often presented as unitary, homogenous entities, with the assumption that groups of similarly interested consumers act and behave in exactly the same way. The apparent in-group tensions between being loyal and being critical pose a challenge to the taken for granted nature of brand loyalty, highlighting the nuanced ways with which it manifests, and raising questions as to how the expression of criticism against a b(r)and fits with the identity and practices associated with being a loyal fan of the same brand. Both unconditionally supportive fans and critical fans represent different ways in which loyalty is constructed that are tied to fundamentally opposed perceptions of the relationship between U2, their fans and the music, as well as different reasons for being attracted to the band in the first place. The nature and character of loyalty is influenced by these competing motivations, as well as by particular social classifications (e.g. longevity of fandom) and by broader cultural views of acceptable consumption behaviours in relation to a popular music band like U2. Through the space the forum provides, individual fans negotiate these differences and define their own sense of identity and what the band means to them on a personal level. As noted by O'Reilly and Kerrigan (2013), consumer-to-consumer or fan-to-fan interactions are important, yet often overlooked, in discursive elaborations of brand meanings. This research evidences the importance of online forums as a space for critical debate amongst consumers, about not only what the brand means, but what it means to be a loyal consumer.

The art-commerce dynamic is also used to frame perceptions of how to be a loyal fan of U2. In the marketplace music is not simply made and heard as an art form but is also produced and consumed. The language, practices and demands of the market and the music product are different from the appreciation of music as an art form, and these contrasts are seen bubbling under the surface as another dimension of the expression of criticism against U2 and, by extension, ways to be loyal to them. The framing of music as a product highlights a distinctly different view of loyalty. As emphasized by O'Reilly, et al. (2013), framed as a product,

consumers acquire music in order to avail themselves of particular experiences with certain expectations in mind. Unlike other products, however, precise judgements on quality with regards to the music product are subjective, if not elusive. The variable nature of the music product also makes it problematic to invoke the rights of the consumer when these expectations are not met, which leaves room for variability in loyalty, and demonstrates the need for a socio-culturally grounded understanding of brand loyalty as a whole.

Also related to the complexity of the music product is the reason why fans are attracted to U2 and hence why they remain loyal. Consumers seek a range of different kinds of value from U2 and their music – from the aesthetic to the symbolic and expressive. They might focus on the music singularly or they might consider multiple touchpoints in their engagement with the band. All of these use values create different interpretations for the expression of criticism and trigger varied behaviours and differing perceptions on how to be loyal to the brand.

The diverse expressions, perceptions and practices around how to be a fan, and how to be loyal to U2 necessitate negotiatory practices as fans interact on the forum. Negotiation can be described as the process of articulating critique, acceptance, or disagreement, debating and verbal fist-fighting; making sense of "experiences and conceptions" around loyalty to U2 (Thompson and Haytko, 1997:15). The give and take as fans engage within the forum plays an important role in crystalizing meaning on the attributes of loyal behaviour. This process of sense making entails that the particulars of loyalty keep changing as fans interpret the meaning of the U2 brand to themselves, to the group, in relation to other bands and in relation to society at large. In order to bridge the gaps in how to be loyal to U2, fans either label other fans in ways that serve to cast their relationship with U2 in a normal sense, or embrace their transgression and obsession with the band as part of who they are. Subjective boundaries set by individual fans in relation to the group are by nature arbitrary, and these boundaries are more reflective of the person making the judgement than of the group as a whole. Taken together the divergent views and practices contribute to brand loyalty theory by revealing the malleability of the concept, such that there is no one objective way of defining loyalty to U2 as meaning is constantly being reshaped depending on individual realities.

Our contribution is, therefore, to show how that criticism plays an important role in brand loyalty, and that subjective experiences of those who are brand loyal are multiple and complex. A complete understanding of brand loyalty requires engagement with the unique ways in which consumers make sense of the relationships with the brands with which they identify.

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