

From Hoops to Hope: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Political Fandom on Twitter

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The study uses political discourse on Twitter as political texts to evidence how Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's political fandom is fueled by affective structures of power, resistance, gendered power dynamics, political ideologies, culture, hope, and encouragement. The study argues for a more modern approach, amalgamating all three waves of fandom studies, that considers a more holistic and nuanced inquiry of fan studies that is contextual and inclusive. The political fandom of Ocasio-Cortez signals a sociopolitical shift in political fandom in which fans' affective identification is intrinsically tied to power, resistance, and within-party hierarchies.

Keywords: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, politics, fandom, political fandom, affective identification, Twitter, social media

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez became a household name seemingly overnight. The then 28-year-old Bronx native was waiting tables and bartending before winning the 2018 U.S. House of Representatives election in New York's 14th District (Morris, 2019). Ocasio-Cortez's win was viewed as major upset, unseating a 10-term incumbent who had not been challenged in more than a decade. According to a 2019 Gallup poll, half of U.S. adults were unfamiliar with, or had no opinion of, Ocasio-Cortez in September 2018. By March 2019, that figure had shrunk to 29%. The attention, however, was not all positive. Only 31% of those polled viewed the congresswoman favorably, while 41% viewed her unfavorably (Gallup, 2019). Those who support Ocasio-Cortez admire her platform, relatability, and innovation, and the tenacity she brings to Congress (Goldmacher, 2019). She is an embodiment of hope and a reflection of the people in the district she represents. Conversely, those who criticize Ocasio-Cortez condemn her as inexperienced, dumb, naïve, and a "little girl" incapable of successfully fulfilling her role (Viebeck, 2019, para. 6). These sentiments, of either valence, are often shared online.

Online communities bounded by shared political values continue to form and grow in popularity on social media. Within these communities is an emerging trend of political figures being transformed into icons, paralleling traditional fandom that historically focused on fictional figures and sports teams (McMillin, 2020). These political figures are viewed as heroes and heroines similar to Hollywood celebrities and

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athletes. As with sports, political identification and participation can vary; some simply vote every election cycle, while others are deeply invested in their preferred political party and candidate's campaign (McMillin, 2020). This process has been called political fandom.

The goal of the study is to explore fandom, not necessarily the politics, in fans of politicians to better understand affective structures. Specifically, the study employs political fandom to explore what affective structures drive Ocasio-Cortez's fandom on Twitter, providing insight into the motivations and practices of political fandom. The study defines political fandom as "the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text" (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 8) in a political context. This definition emphasizes "practices and affective engagements," thus providing more critical examinations of forms of fandom outside the domains of traditional pop culture (Sandvoss, 2012a, p. 70), particularly in politics.

The study evidences how political fandom is fueled by affective values and convictions that manifest in the symbolic form of a fan object—in this case, Representative Ocasio-Cortez. The study highlights that political fandom for Ocasio-Cortez is specifically driven by fans' identification of culture, gender, power, resistance, and hope, allowing for a deeper interpretation of affect for political enthusiasm. We argue that a more modern approach amalgamating all three waves of fan studies and considering a more holistic and nuanced inquiry in the modern U.S. sociopolitical atmosphere is needed.

Background

Ocasio-Cortez's background is similar to many of the constituents in the 14th District she represents. She is a third-generation New Yorker of Puerto Rican descent, born to working-class parents who held multiple jobs to support their family. Ocasio-Cortez studied at Boston University and worked in the office of Senator Ted Kennedy during college. Shortly after she graduated from Boston University in 2011, her father passed away. Faced with this tragedy during a financial crisis, and quickly accruing student debt, Ocasio-Cortez doubled as a community organizer and a bartender in the service industry to help alleviate her family's financial burden (Morris, 2019).

Five years later, in 2016, Ocasio-Cortez raised money to visit protesters at Standing Rock, North Dakota, which proved to be both an emotionally and politically motivating experience (Relman, 2019). In an interview with *The Guardian*, Ocasio-Cortez stated, "It was really from that crucible of activism where I saw people putting their lives on the line. . . . When I saw that, I knew that I had to do something more" (Solnit, 2019, para. 3). After the 2016 presidential election, Ocasio-Cortez's brother Gabriel sent her name to the group Brand New Congress—a Bernie Sanders-inspired group recruiting candidates for the U.S. House and Senate (Solnit, 2019). After a bit of convincing from her family, Ocasio-Cortez's began a full-fledged political campaign for Congress.

Ocasio-Cortez teamed up with a pair of young socialist filmmakers and produced a low-budget social-media-focused campaign video. The two-minute video went viral, with more than 300,000 views, increased donations, drew hundreds of new volunteers, and attracted a complimentary profile from *Vogue* magazine (Relman, 2019). Ocasio-Cortez focused on economic inequality as "the issue of our time" (Relman, 2019, para. 45). This message resonated with the people in her community, as well as people all across the

country, and on June 26, Ocasio-Cortez clinched the primary election with a difference of 4,000 votes. In the wake of this stunning upset, roughly 1,000 media outlets requested interviews with her (Relman, 2019).

Ocasio-Cortez attributes her rise in popularity to social media and the relationship it has allowed her to form with her followers. The transparency, directness, and connection that social media affords has allowed her to craft her narrative in a way that transcends traditional media messages (Minsberg, 2018). In addition to politics, social issues, and world events, Ocasio-Cortez also tweets and posts about all instances of her daily life—including her favorite lipstick shade from Stila, which caused the brand to sell out almost instantly (Bruculier, 2019). She actively uses Facebook Live to communicate with the public in real time while making instant mac and cheese (Minsberg, 2018). Her social media habits resemble those of a celebrity and social media influencer, with many political pundits comparing her tweeting habits and clout to then President Donald Trump. Despite the many praises for breaking traditional norms of political practices and appearances, her relatable rhetoric, and her progressive political agenda, Ocasio-Cortez also faced intense scrutiny and condemnation.

A simple search on Twitter or Instagram will reveal thousands of posts and memes aimed at diminishing Ocasio-Cortez's credibility and reputation. That she is a self-proclaimed Democratic Socialist, young, female, and Latina, coupled with her policy platform of eliminating the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and a federal jobs-for-all guarantee, has negatively triggered many conservatively aligned individuals (Coaston, 2018). Her primary policy, the Green New Deal, has been severely criticized as unreasonable, impossible, and naïve and prompted conservative writer Ben Shapiro to offer Ocasio-Cortez \$10,000 to debate him (Coaston, 2018). Regardless of the negative backlash, Ocasio-Cortez has made it clear that she has no intentions of decreasing her media appearances and practices. She credits the attention for bringing her policy platform to the forefront of discussion and chooses to ignore the negative commentary.

The spike in Ocasio-Cortez's popularity parallels that of the Palin phenomenon (Ouellette, 2012). This phenomenon attributed Palin's celebrity status to her everyday relatability and ordinariness, much like the fame associated with a celebrity or online influencer (Ouellette, 2012). Palin's self-presentation to the "average Joe" as the common, everyday hockey mom is quite similar to Ocasio-Cortez's self-presentation as a relatable, multicultural working-class person from the Bronx. Similar to Palin, Ocasio-Cortez continues to redefine the outdated idea of what a politician should look and act like. She tweeted, "Next time someone tells Bronx girls to take off their hoops, they can just say they're dressing like a Congresswoman" (Solá-Santiago, 2019, para. 8).

Ocasio-Cortez's communication style and unapologetic rhetoric have also garnered her attention from media outlets not traditionally associated with political coverage. *Vogue*, *Glamour*, and *Allure* cover Ocasio-Cortez just as diligently as *Bloomberg*, *CNN*, and *The Economist*. This mainstream coverage highlights the public influence the Congresswoman has in both the political and pop culture spheres, contributing to the trend of the celebrity politician. This trend turns politicians into celebrities and celebrities into politicians, thus warranting studies in politics, fandom, and social media studies.

Fandom and Fan Studies

Jenkins (1992) conceptualizes fans as active consumers of media products who create their own cultures and subcultures from popular culture, differing from ordinary consumers in the extent that they are intellectually, emotionally, behaviorally, and ideologically involved with media texts. Fandom, then, is "regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text" (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 8). Research on fandom has primarily been classified into three waves. Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington (2017) maintain that the first and second waves were focused on examining community, power, and resistance (or their absence) in pop culture fandom. The first wave was primarily concerned with questions of power and representation. Mass media in popular culture provided a site for power struggles, and scholars viewed fandom as "the tactic of the disempowered, an act of subversion and cultural appropriation against the power of media producers and industries" (Gray et al., 2017, p. 2). Fandom was not simply being a fan; it also included the utilization of collective strategies to form communities whose interpretation of fan objects subverted the preferred meanings of the cultural elite (Jenkins, 1992). The research during the first wave centered on ethnographic approaches of fan activities and practices, such as convention attendance and fan-fiction creation.

The second wave of fan studies primarily focused on the reproduction of social and cultural hierarchies within fandom. Researching these spaces of reproduction, as well as the choice of fan objects and fandom practices, was still concerned with power and resistance. However, instead of fandom as a means of empowerment, researchers argued that "fans' interpretive communities (as well as individual acts of fan consumption) are embedded in existing social and cultural conditions" (Gray et al., 2017, p. 5). The social and cultural hierarchies within each fandom culture or subculture were examined for a broader indication of social inequalities.

The first two waves of fan studies neglected the individual fan's motivation, enjoyment, and pleasure. Thus, the third, and current, wave is primarily focused on "conceptualizing the affective bond between fans and their fan object" (Sandvoss, 2012a, p. 73). Academic inquiry within this wave has mostly comprised research on sports fandom, fictional characters, and celebrity worship. Fandoms across these genres often share many similarities. Using sports fandom as a basis, Reysen and Branscombe (2010) correlate the subgenres of fan research by comparing sports fans with other interest fields such as political fandom, investigating elements such as identity, sense of belonging, and psychological sense of community (Groene & Hettinger, 2016). The degree to which fans identify with their sports team, and the outcome of the game/match, can dictate fans' emotional and physical states (Devlin, 2021). For example,

For highly identified fans, a win feels like a personal victory; a loss, on the other hand, feels like a personal defeat. After wins, highly identified fans are more likely to bask in the glory of victory, tying themselves to the team through the use of language like "us" and "we." (Devlin, 2021, para. 13)

Similarly, in politics, fans actively search for and consume candidate-affiliated media, purchase campaign merchandise, and regularly demonstrate their support both in public and on social media (Devlin, 2021).

The studies within the third wave broaden the scope of academic inquiry to various audiences, propelling the study of fandom into many diverse disciplines and areas (Gray et al., 2017). Methodologies that focus on the relationship between the fan object and self, the relationships between each other, and how fans read and engage with mediated texts are central to this wave. The “duality of community and identity” (Gray et al., 2017, p. 11) are paramount, and the current study is positioned within that nexus.

Political Fandom and Celebrity

Political fandom can be traced back decades and includes U.S. Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln, as well as UK Prime Minister Winston Churchill. These political figures boasted fans during their tenure in office, as well as posthumously, as they continue to be depicted in modern pop culture media. Perhaps the most notable example of a celebrity politician is John F. Kennedy, who won the American public’s hearts and votes with the first-ever televised presidential debate—after which many politicians started to manage their public persona as media platforms expanded (Sandvoss, 2005). This media expansion also influenced the fans of politicians, who slowly began to mirror the fans of celebrities (van Zoonen, 2005). It has been argued that Ronald Reagan’s fandom and Hollywood affiliation influenced modern celebrity politicians, further explicated next, including U.S. politicians Arnold Schwarzenegger, Hillary Clinton, and Donald Trump. However, it is only in the past two decades that media scholars and political scientists have conceptualized political fandom (Smith, 2017).

Fandom places emphasis on “practices and affective engagements,” rather than relying solely on self-classification of audience groups as self-proclaimed fans, enabling more critical examinations of fandoms outside the domains of traditional pop culture (Sandvoss, 2012a). Both political and pop culture communities “can be both short- and long-lived, but . . . significant overlap between fan communities in both genres is the emotional constitution of electorates that involves the development and maintenance of affective bonds between voters, candidates and parties” (van Zoonen, 2005, p. 66). The greater access to, and choice between, media content—fueled by media deregulation and media convergence in the digital era—has caused fandom to become an increasingly ubiquitous mode of media consumption and has eroded the boundaries between spheres of political and popular communication (Sandvoss, 2013).

Politicians and leaders are represented on multimedia platforms in a very similar way to celebrities. Online, mediated political texts are accessed, commented on, reposted, and repurposed, creating intimate relationships between politicians and the public (Stanyer, 2013). News outlets sometimes use “fan” to describe supporters for U.S. political candidates, such as Bernie Sanders, Hillary Clinton, and Donald Trump, and argue that affective support in political candidates often results in trolling and antifandom practices directed at rivals (Gray et al., 2017). These practices are found in the form of “emotive attachments, digital interpretive communities, and fan-generative paratexts to public performances of fan identities and collective action” (Gray et al., 2017, p. 20).

Previous studies in political fandom have focused on three main areas. The first is the relationship between celebrities in the world of entertainment and their endorsement of political parties and/or candidates. Studies in this area (Nisbett & DeWalt, 2016; Wood & Herbst, 2007) have found that celebrities have an influence over political participation, particularly young voters. These endorsements, deliberate and

not, signify wider political movements in sociopolitical culture (Sandvoss, 2012b). The second area of studies has centered on fans of politics and their parallel to fans of celebrities and pop culture (Inthorn & Street, 2011; Jenkins, 2006, 2015; Smith, 2017; van Zoonen, 2005). These studies highlighted pop culture as a form of engagement for the political process and political enthusiasm. Jenkins (2006) found that activists employed various ways to mobilize pop culture in an effort to foster voter awareness and participation in the 2004 U.S. presidential election, generating "the same levels of emotional energy challenging the current Powers That Be in Washington that fans routinely direct against the current Powers That Be in Hollywood" (p. 245). Political awareness and participation appear as stand-alone objectives. In a later study, Sandvoss (2013) argued that political awareness and participation were "components of, but not by themselves indicators of, a functioning democracy" (p. 254). This same parallel in fandoms also appeared in the 2016 U.S. presidential election with Hillary Clinton (Smith, 2017).

Political Affect

The third faction of studies, albeit limited at the time of writing, examines the affective attachment of fans on particular political figures (Ouellette, 2012; Sandvoss, 2012a). This approach specifically looks at the relationship of the affective bond in political enthusiasm. Ouellette (2012) examined Sarah Palin's brand membership across her media products as a form of civic and political participation and dubbed it the "Palin phenomenon." Palin integrated branding in her campaign, encouraging individuals to engage with social media by posting photos and other content, not only building her brand, but also fostering loyalty and political participation. Sandvoss (2012a) interviewed fans of Barack Obama and found trust to be a motivating factor of support, as well as political enthusiasm that was rooted in expectations of future political action and expressed through social media. The trust that supporters placed in Obama was based on an affective attachment, which, Sandvoss argues, is a form of fandom, and functioned as a catalyst for greater and more intense political enthusiasm.

Politicians in this third approach have often been referred to as celebrity politicians, a concept that has been reconceptualized over the last two decades. Celebrity politicians achieve celebrity status by acting like entertainment stars, associating with famous celebrities, appearing on pop culture media, or engaging with their public about pop culture media (Street, 2004; Wood, Corbett, & Finders, 2016). Street (2004) made a distinction between two types of celebrity politicians. The celebrity *politician*, or CP1, is defined as "the traditional politician—the legitimately elected representative (or one who aspires to be so)—who engages with the world of popular culture in order to enhance or advance their pre-established political functions and goals" (Street, 2004, p. 437). In contrast, the *celebrity* politician, or CP2, is defined as "the entertainer who pronounces on politics and claims the right to represent people and causes, but who does so without seeking to acquire elected office" (Street, 2004, p. 438).

Other academics have also explicated the concept. Mukherjee (2004) distinguishes between celebrity endorsers (those who promote certain policy options) and celebrities who become politicians. 't Hart and Tindall's (2009) distinction outlines four categories of celebrity involvement in politics, one of which is the celebrity politician. Celebrity advocates are often more active and committed policy pursuers. Celebrity endorsers support specific political parties or candidates. Celebrity politicians are those celebrities who go above and beyond single-issue politics and seek political office. Finally, politicians-turned-celebrities are those politicians who leverage

media to communicate and brand themselves. Wood and colleagues' (2016) typography uses the concept of normality to define "everyday" celebrity politicians and "superstar" celebrity politicians. Celebrity politicians who want to promote an image that they are "normal" or "just like us" are considered everyday celebrity politicians, whereas those who present themselves as "different" and isolated from common life challenges are considered superstar celebrity politicians. Street (2019) argues that theorization of celebrity politicians often focuses on how individuals became famous, rather than on how they act out their celebrity role, highlighting Donald Trump's celebrity treatment by journalists and commentators in the media.

Political Affect and Social Media

Digital media have enabled both individual agency and participatory culture in the form of fandom by allowing fans to glimpse into politicians' personal lives, directly communicate with politicians, and participate in the political process beyond physically attending a rally (Parikh, 2012). Fans interact within their fandoms, discussing political stances and current events with other fans. All of these engaging processes foster feelings of intimacy, emotional investment, and commitment between fans and their fan object that are referred to as *affective identification* (Hunting & Hinck 2017; van Zoonen, 2005).

Research has evidenced social media to facilitate affect between fans and politicians. Parikh's (2012) case study of Barack Obama found that mediated interactions led to emotional attachments in fans, despite never having met him in person. De Kosnik (2008) utilized marginalized and dominant fandom to better interpret how structures inspire affect and motivate fans to organize, finding that the Internet empowered and magnified marginalized voices of Hillary Clinton's fandom, disrupting dominant hegemonic social formations. Davisson (2016) highlighted affective relationships in Clinton fans as a way to understand online participatory culture. She argued that fans are uniquely situated to engage political content proactively, a skill that is "critical for political participation" (Davisson, 2016, p. 16).

These politicians become celebrities and, just like celebrities, invite their fans to engage with their political causes through "emotional connection which is cultivated through intimate relationships" (Hunting & Hinck, 2017, p. 434) and intensified by social media. The emotional connection and affective attachments that fans develop with politicians are strong and can often dominate ideological commitments and party loyalties (De Kosnik, 2008; Parikh, 2012). The inclusion of affect in politics has previously been criticized by scholars as undermining the political process; however, more recent studies have found that emotion facilitates the use of reason and is actually beneficial for citizenship (De Kosnik, 2008; van Zoonen, 2005). A political fan's affective attachment to a candidate influences his or her voting and encourages some to regularly advocate online—activism that differentiates the contemporary political fan from the older political supporter who has a minimal online presence and instead opts to receive election updates from traditional sources of media (Vo, 2019). Affect, then, can function as a commitment to public issues, participatory culture, and stronger citizen engagement (Davisson, 2016; De Kosnik, 2008; Hunting & Hinck, 2017).

Some political campaigns have caught on to this online trend and have integrated social media into daily practice to perform authenticity (Vo, 2019). Candidates such as Obama, Clinton, Palin, and others have achieved an effortless, genuine air of authenticity, whereas others have struggled to effectively permeate the social media landscape (De Kosnik, 2008; Ouellette, 2012; Parikh, 2012; Sandvoss, 2012a).

Authenticity, or a lack thereof, can help a campaign flourish or fail as it has become an increasingly crucial factor in voting decisions (Vo, 2019). The current study does not focus on the authenticity of Ocasio-Cortez's tweets themselves, but on how that authenticity may help foster affective bonds with her fans that, in turn, strengthen her fandom and foster political enthusiasm.

Research Question

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, by the definitions presented earlier, is a celebrity politician. She is an elected official who engages with and on pop culture and mediated platforms to further political goals (Street, 2004), promotes an everyday normality (Wood et al., 2016), and is given celebrity-like treatment by the media (Street, 2019). She is both admired and abominated by fans, politicians, and the media. Ocasio-Cortez has appeared on countless magazine covers and national news shows, and has served as a guest judge on *Ru Paul's Drag Race*. Thus, the affective structures that have led to her fandom warrant study.

As mentioned earlier, the current study is positioned in the third wave of pop culture fandom studies that concentrates on conceptualizing the affective bond between fans and their fan objects (Gray et al., 2017). It also employs political fandom embedded in the third approach, which examines the affective attachment of fans to particular political figures (Ouellette, 2012; Sandvoss, 2012a), particularly looking at the relationship of the affective bond to political enthusiasm and political fandom on social media. Therefore, the following research question is asked:

RQ1: What affective structures motivate and drive Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez fandom on Twitter?

Method

Twitter connects millions of users worldwide, including fandom communities. The platform is used intentionally by minorities to voice public opinion that may not be reflected in mainstream media and exhibits collective agency in subgroups of fans (Rodriguez, 2017). For those reasons, Twitter was selected as the space of study. Tweets containing @AOC, #AOC, and #AlexandriaOcasio-Cortez and mentioning the name Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez between October 9, 2018 (one month before her election win), and January 31, 2019 (one month after her swearing in), were collected using Advanced Twitter Search. A random sample of 1,000 tweets per week for the 16-week period was collected (16,000 total). Because the research question asked for themes that motivated and drove fandom, all negative tweets were discarded. Of the 13,400 tweets remaining, a random sample of 2,010 tweets (15%) was selected as the sample. This number provided a manageable sample size for qualitative analysis, while still allowing for population representation. Each tweet in its entirety (text, image, and/or video) was used as the unit of analysis.

Tweets were placed in the qualitative analysis software NVivo. A textual analysis was then conducted, and data were analyzed for patterns and compared with theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). First, raw data were reduced into smaller units by grouping levels of meaning (data that can stand on their own as an individual theme) together to construct linkages between data. Second, themes within the subsamples were identified and reexamined to determine if they need to be expanded or whether a new theme had been generated. The final themes were compared with theoretical tenets of political fandom to reveal affective structures.

Results

Analysis resulted in seven affective structures employed by supporters of Ocasio-Cortez on Twitter: power and resistance; gendered power dynamics; political ideologies; culture; hope; and encouragement.

Power and Resistance

Resistance and power have been central tenets of fandom since the first wave of fan studies (Gray et al., 2017) and are manifested in the tweets. Ocasio-Cortez was viewed as powerful and unstoppable by supporters. Quotes such as “@AOC is like the #Boriqua Bruce Lee in game of death, she stays beating the bosses and climbs up the stairs to continue kicking ass” (Ayala, 2019) demonstrate the power she exhibits. Further, using Bruce Lee as a reference highlights the overlap between pop culture and politics, evidencing that each of the two influences conversation of the other (Inthorn & Street 2011; Jenkins, 2015; van Zoonen, 2005).

Although rhetoric of resistance in the post-2016 U.S. presidential election was happening before Ocasio-Cortez took office, her supporters saw her as emblematic of the movement. Someone tweeted,

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was elected to represent her constituents, not sit silently and learn, or concern herself with whether or not you're pissed off. Her responsibility to try to follow thru on her promises trumps your feelings and the hierarchy that got us here, initially. (personal communication, November 16, 2018)

The trust Ocasio-Cortez's supporters placed in her to help lead the resistance strengthened their fandom. The absence of trust in the affective attachment between constituents and politicians “constitutes an important step in media audiences as citizens challenging existing, yet lacking forms of political representation” (Sandvoss, 2012a, p. 79).

Power and resistance gave rise to the motif of the savior/hero. Historically, fandoms indicate that an intersection of fans' sense of self with their fan object can often lead to a heroic perception of the fan object (Sandvoss, 2012a). Supporters of Ocasio-Cortez regarded her as a symbol, evidenced by tweets such as, “I don't know what we did to deserve @AOC, but she's my hero #dancingqueen” (personal communication, January 4, 2019) and “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of #NY14 will fight for our values, our health care, and will clean out the culture of corruption in Washington today” (Evans, 2018). The political commentary revealed the faith and confidence that people have in Ocasio-Cortez to rescue them from the discriminatory leadership that many felt dominated Washington, DC at the time. Similar to Obama's 2008 campaign, Ocasio-Cortez supporters' enthusiasm is rooted in the expectation of the future political action that she will take (Sandvoss, 2012a).

Gendered Power Dynamics

Smith (2017) highlighted gender disparity in celebrity politician fandoms when she differentiated between the masculine political supporter and the emotionally driven *fangirl*. This gender power dynamic was a theme in the data. The behavior and emotional reactions that result in the personalization of politics

by fangirls are viewed as a diminishing factor to the so-called real issues (Smith, 2017). One individual noted, "It's AMAZING to me how worked up you can get the deplorables & you haven't even been sworn in yet!! Keep up the good work girlfriend #GirlPower #Boriqua" (Black Heart, 2018). Ocasio-Cortez's supporters, many of them women, celebrated her femininity and praised her in a friendly, intimate manner not typically reserved for politicians. Smith (2017) noted that the fangirl is interested in "memes, feelings, and 'girl power' above all" (p. 39). This movement of girl power and the personalization of politics is most threatening when the candidate's brand, supporters, and identity are all rooted in the embodiment of the "girl" (Smith, 2017), something also found with Hillary Clinton (Davisson, 2016).

Another individual addressed the threat that Ocasio-Cortez poses as a strong female politician in a male-dominated workforce: "#Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is young, smart, pretty and fierce: every insecure male's worst nightmare and favorite target for insult and harassment" (personal communication, November 16, 2018). Campbell (1998) attested to this notion, highlighting the delicate balance Hillary Clinton tried to maintain in her career as she exhibited both exceedingly feminine and masculine traits in traditionally male spaces, causing others to feel unsettled. One tweet compared Ocasio-Cortez to Clinton:

They spent 20 years assassinating Hillary's character for everything from her policy initiatives to her haircut, so when she ran for office everyone could say "I'm fine with a woman, just not THAT woman." Don't be so daft to miss that's what they're doing to @AOC right now. (personal communication, January 4, 2019)

Political Ideologies

Political enthusiasts and their party of choice have been equated to sports fans and their team of choice (Devlin, 2021; Groene & Hettinger, 2016; Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). Both rely on an individual's sense of membership to the fan object and community, which is built on partisan identification as well as fellow fans who are in competition with other groups (Sandvoss, 2013). An affective structure of political ideologies and partisan identification emerged in some of the tweets, echoing support of Ocasio-Cortez's liberal platform, while condemning the conservative far right: "Kudos to the entire conservative establishment for making Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez one of the most likably human politicians in the United States today. Keep up the great work!" (Seitz, 2019). This tweet demonstrates the role of Ocasio-Cortez in the tension that exists between parties.

Additionally, Ocasio-Cortez's victories are not seen as hers alone, but rather a projection of self and essential values (Sandvoss, 2013) of her supporters, creating intense emotional intimacies between her and her fans. Vespe (2019) tweeted "If the alt-right's plan is to make my political crush on **Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez** even bigger by releasing a gotcha video of her doing the Breakfast Clib [sic] dance then I'm afraid to admit they've finally got something right." The emotive manner in which Ocasio-Cortez fans root for her is parallel to sports fans cheering for a professional athlete. For a fan, the joy of watching his or her team win is similar to the emotions felt by the players themselves. Deeply committed fans come to the defense of their fan object and are less able to separate themselves from their teams; thus, when an outcome is undesirable, the pain and negativity felt by fans may be immense (Wakefield & Wann, 2006). Jonny's (2019) tweet, "I feel one aspect of the right wing fascination with #AOC must surely be men

struggling to process a dissonance being extremely attracted to a.) a woman in power b.) with compelling ideas they disagree with," demonstrates this parallel and the high level of identification that political fans experience with political figures (Sandvoss, 2012a).

Another tweet celebrated Ocasio-Cortez's Democratic Socialist agenda, recognizing the new wave of progressives emerging from the Democratic party: "Way to go Boriqua! A lot of these old Democrats are worse than republicans! Make them earn their seat by representing what their constituents actually want! Light a fire under their asses! #AOC" (Cal, 2019). Some fans directly mentioned other Democrats: "Do not listen to them. You did right! You are new there and have a lot to learn. Nancy has a lot [sic] of knowledge for you to learn for YOUR future. Pa'lante boriqua, we are proud!" (Dee Dee, 2019). The division within the Democratic party is indicative of the second wave of fandom, which primarily focused on the reproduction of social and cultural hierarchies within fandom. Ocasio-Cortez's supporters saw her as the saving grace of her party.

Culture (Ethnic and Economic)

Many fans culturally identified with Ocasio-Cortez's ethnicity:

I love that a young Puerto Rican from the Bronx is becoming the face of progressive politics. We are a proud people and I'm inspired to do more because of @AOC. Such an important example of what it means to be our best. Representation matters #boriqua. (Saynt, 2019)

Others directly highlighted her culture against the traditional majority of White, cisgender men in politics:

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is a) young, b) Latina, c) female d) attractive and e) working class. Every one of those, individually, brings out creepy hangups in the mostly old/affluent/white guys who dominate US political commentary. Together, all in one person? Freud help us. (personal communication, November 16, 2018)

These tweets go beyond simply being a fan and emphasized the use of collective strategies by Ocasio-Cortez's fans to form communities among those whose interpretation of Ocasio-Cortez subverted the preferred meanings of the cultural elite (Jenkins, 1992). Their marginalized voices were amplified on Twitter, disrupting dominant hegemonic social formations (De Kosnik, 2008; Rodriguez, 2017).

The most frequent identification found in tweets was that of cultural accessories. Tweets such as,

As a woman of color, I've been told countless times to "tone down" my look; that red lipstick and hoop earrings are not professional. Seeing @AOC rock her hoops & red lips to be sworn into Congress was important to ME and so many other people. (Edwards, 2019)

and "My girl Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez stays rocking those hoops on capital hill. WOW!" (Wanjiko, 2019) exhibit this sentiment. Ocasio-Cortez's red lipstick and hoop earrings have become part of her brand,

encouraging cultural identification, loyalty, and political participation (Ouellette, 2012). In fact, her choices even prompted fans to buy accessories: "I saw Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez wearing red lipstick and gold hoops. So I bought red lipstick and gold hoops" (Abhilasha, 2019).

Fans also affectively identified with Ocasio-Cortez's socioeconomic status as a working-class American, as evidenced in these tweets: "Yeah on FB they are making fun of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez because she can't afford to move to DC until she gets her first paycheck. What they look down on her for, I admire her for" (personal communication, November 12, 2018), and "Millennial congresswomen, they're just like us. No, really, this one is. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez says she can't afford an apartment in Washington, D.C., right now" (Wrecks, 2018). For fans, Ocasio-Cortez is an everyday celebrity politician who doesn't just try to act like "one of us," but actually is one of us (Wood et al., 2016).

Affective structures of ethnic and economic culture reaffirm that political fandom is fueled not only by values and convictions that manifest in the symbolic form of the fan object (Sandvoss, 2013), but also by culture. Ocasio-Cortez's fans see elements of their own identities represented in her, which correlates with Sandvoss's (2005, 2013) assertion that the fan object is an extension of self, rather than a mere sense of possession. Although Sandvoss (2012a) labels this extension "an act of narcissistic self-reflection" (p. 74), the rhetoric employed by Ocasio-Cortez's fans demonstrate that it is also a source of pride, enthusiasm, and hope. These identities are intersectional; fans view Ocasio-Cortez as feminized, Latina, and fashion. They are not mutually exclusive, but rather exist in tandem to create the "culture" of AOC.

Hope

Hope and change are affective orientations cited as being prevalent in political fandoms (Dean, 2017; Parikh, 2012). Political fandoms differentiate from other fandoms as the affective investments become more outwardly oriented in the motifs of hope and change (Dean, 2017). Such motifs emerged in the tweets, "Say what you want. . . . This woman is about to change the world! #AOC #GameChanger" (Porter, 2019) and "I am impressed with your integrity. You are a breath of fresh air in our government. God bless you! #AOC" (Arrgh, 2018).

Supporters placed their hope in Ocasio-Cortez, which consequently makes her engagement in political forums take on a more emotional and profound element (Sandvoss, 2012a). She is the people's champion for change, a Representative who shares many commonalities with the very same people who elected her. Many tweets exemplified this:

We need more Americans in office that represent who we are as a nation. I am grateful to you that points out daily how out of touch many who presume to "govern" over us have gotten. You are keeping it real. You & the other new reps have given me hope again. #AOC #TrumpShutdown. (PharmD, 2018)

Ocasio-Cortez's symbolism of hope for her party is similar to that of Obama (Parikh, 2012; Sandvoss, 2012a), whose 2008 campaign and ultimate win was a "we" moment, rather than a "he" moment. The affective connections formed between Obama and his fans fostered enthusiasm and support and, in-turn,

hope (Parikh, 2012). Ocasio-Cortez also fostered such affective identification and became emblematic of hope for many individuals who felt hopeless when Trump was elected in 2016.

Encouragement

Many of Ocasio-Cortez's supporters used Twitter to encourage her in Congress. Affective identification with Ocasio-Cortez was evident: "Keep up the good scare and don't let up. They're scared of you!!! We support you!!! Shake it up!! Don't let them bully you!!! Dale boriqva!!!" (Villalba, 2019). Another person tweeted,

@AOC what's up, Boriqva!? I love what you're doing, REALLY LOVE IT! You are shining a lot on how the system is rigged against the majority of us. Maintain your courage to do the right thing. The more people that do that, the easier it will be to make significant change. do" the right thing. (GeneralStrike, 2019)

The persuasiveness of celebrities may be mediated by an individual's attitude toward politics (Wood & Herbst, 2007). Ocasio-Cortez's tenacity, courage, and straightforward nature toward politics inspired her fans, who, in turn, encouraged her on Twitter.

Some tweets of encouragement also paralleled enthusiasm found in sports fans. This parallel was exhibited in tweets like "All you do is win #AOC" (August for a #GreenNewDeal, 2018) and "God dammit this woman is making me believe in politicians again. Love it" (personal communication, November 29, 2018). Ocasio-Cortez is not only supported, but cheered for in an emotionally charged and victorious manner, similar to that of sports fans championing their teams and celebrating victories—often using profanity (Sandvoss, 2013).

Discussion and Conclusion

The study uses political discourse on Twitter as political texts to evidence how Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's political fandom is fueled by affective structures of power, resistance, gendered power dynamics, political ideologies, culture, hope, and encouragement. These structures enable Ocasio-Cortez's fans to affectively identify with and support her on Twitter. Such affective bonds constitute a significant overlap between political and pop culture communities (van Zoonen, 2005). The affective structures evidenced in this study point toward affective identification, which instigates greater political enthusiasm and participation that disrupt traditional hegemonic power structures (Davisson, 2106; De Kosnik, 2008; Hunting & Hinck, 2017; Sandvoss, 2012a). Affect, then, should not be regarded as a secondary component of politics, but rather as central and "key to good citizenship" (van Zoonen, 2005, p. 64). The affective structures identified help us to better understand the role of fandom in politics and participatory culture and citizen engagement, evidencing that "emotionality is a step in the desired direction for democracy—away from apathy and toward participation" (De Kosnik, 2008, p. 13).

The study evidences Twitter as a performative space for digital interpretive communities and fan-generated paratexts that function as political participation. The findings are counter to previous research

suggesting that young citizens “normalize the political structures from which they find themselves excluded” (Inthorn & Street, 2011, p. 487), rather than providing counter-discourses. Through affective identification, Ocasio-Cortez’s fans used Twitter to communicate endurance and opposition to the Trump regime. Participation, rather than resistance, has become the core frame of fandom studies (Jenkins, 2014). The sociopolitical ethos of the 2016 U.S. presidential election has triggered a renaissance of resistance, evidencing that resistance, power, and communities are just as important to academic inquiry today in the third wave of fan studies as they were in the first wave.

This renaissance of resistance has further deepened the political divide between Democrats and Republicans in a way that mirrors sports fandoms (Sandvoss, 2012a, 2012b). Ocasio-Cortez’s fans praise her, defend her, and take up her causes as their own willingly and enthusiastically. Political fans are intensely invested in their fan object—the politician (Hunting & Hinck, 2017; van Zoonen, 2005). Identification with their politician becomes so intense that some fans are willing to verbally berate opposing fan bases, as in sports (Wakefield & Wann, 2006). Ocasio-Cortez’s fans are no different. Her fans protect and champion her, and reprimand and scorn anyone who criticizes her—Republican and Democrat alike. Her fans are Team AOC. Furthermore, findings highlight the division within the Democratic party and how fans see Ocasio-Cortez fans as the hope of the party. Although in the minority, social media is amplifying their voices and disrupting the power dynamics of the party (Davisson, 2016; De Kosnik, 2008). This is indicative of the second wave of fandom, which primarily focused on the reproduction of social and cultural hierarchies within fandom. The findings provide insight on how a faction of Democrats are using Twitter to both police and champion their leaders, forming a hierarchy within the party.

Considering that the current study highlighted the affective bond between fans and their respective fan objects (third wave), but also found themes directly related to power and resistance and hierarchies within fandom (first and second wave, respectively), the authors argue that a more modern approach amalgamating all three waves—one that considers a more holistic and nuanced inquiry of fan studies—is warranted. The fandom of Ocasio-Cortez signals a sociopolitical shift of political fandom in which fans’ affective bonds are intrinsically tied to power, resistance, and within-party hierarchies. The focus of fan studies should be contextual and inclusive of all waves of inquiry.

In the process of analyzing tweets about Ocasio-Cortez, the amount of negative rhetoric and ridicule cannot be overlooked. These negative tweets are indicative of online parodies that often embrace “racist, sexist, and xenophobic” humor as a form of resistance (Jenkins, 2006). The study focused on affective bonds of Ocasio-Cortez fandom, and such negative tweets were beyond the scope of the study and can be viewed as a limitation. Future studies should examine ways in which opponents of Ocasio-Cortez use social media as a form of antifandom or fan-tagonism.

Nonetheless, the study provides a foundation for future studies by demonstrating political fandom is partly driven by fans’ affective identification with culture, gender, power, resistance, and hope. It evidences the reproduction of social and cultural hierarchies within fandoms, particularly the Democratic party, helping to better understand sociopolitical dynamics in the United States. The study highlights how Twitter facilitates participatory democracy (De Kosnik, 2008). The relationship between social media, identity construction, and political enthusiasm are evidenced in the tweets supporting Ocasio-Cortez,

demonstrating that political fandom is a viable and important factor in the democratic process. Analyzing engagement in political fandoms like AOC's may also be instrumental in illuminating other communicative behaviors of political supporters, particularly problematic actions such as the intentional spreading of fake news to support their politicians, or giving politicians excessive support without considering the results of said support. Finally, the study lends insight into how practitioners can better understand political fandom, including fans' rhetoric and engagement in fan communities that would assist political practitioners in managing groups of supporters when planning election functions and political campaigns. Practitioners and academics alike should pay attention to the opportunities and obstacles fostered by political fandom on digital media.

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