

**#YOUWILLBEFOUND: PARTICIPATORY FANDOM, SOCIAL MEDIA
MARKETING, AND DEAR EVAN HANSEN**

ABSTRACT:

Drawing on studies of fan participation, labour, and parasociality, this article explores the continuing diversification of musical theatre fandom via social media and the interactive ways in which productions harness fan engagement. The analysis focuses on *Dear Evan Hansen* (2016) as a musical that depicts emotionally vulnerable teenagers and exploitative online communication, notions that are also often reflected in how fans interact with the show. Fan-generated content is regularly recycled as marketing material, and even as merchandise, that is used to sell the production. Similarly, the musical's producers and marketing team frequently invite interaction around the musical's core mantra, 'You Will Be Found'. These interactions can benefit fans by potentially eliciting feelings of social inclusion that may be experienced as empowering. However, this practice can also be interpreted as ethically dubious as some of the musical's narrative content, given that fans are ultimately providing free advertising for a commercial musical.

KEYWORDS:

fandom; *Dear Evan Hansen*; social media; marketing; social inclusion; intertextuality.

MAIN BODY:

The Internet has altered how musicals are created, produced, marketed, and consumed. With musical theatre increasingly cultivating younger audiences, social media users are helping reimagine a live art form in a digital world. Kelly Kessler notes that musical theatre 'fans are

active and productive twenty-first-century prosumers' who can discuss performances, share fan art, sell unofficial merchandise, record their own (re)performances, and more, from any location with Wi-Fi access (2020: 200). Most commercial production teams have embraced this proactivity by providing opportunities for online fan engagement and creativity. Fan-generated content, especially fan art, is regularly shared on the official social media pages of commercial productions including *Hamilton* (2015) and *Six* (2017). Fans are thus increasingly recognized by a production's marketing team as participatory 'ambassadors' for their favourite musicals (MacDonald 2017: 36). Marketing teams frequently thank fans for their creativity, even if only by retweeting or otherwise acknowledging their work, which in turn helps to advertise and hence generate profit.

At the start of the 2020s, most West End and Broadway musicals utilize social media platforms and campaigns to encourage fan engagement. Bethany Doherty identifies *Dear Evan Hansen* (2016), however, as evidence of a 'new phase of engagement between audiences and production'. Although musical theatre fans have interacted with stage productions on social media for nearly two decades, Doherty argues that *Hansen* 'has seen an influx of engagement from audiences across social media, possibly more notably than other current shows popular amongst fandoms' (2020: 1). The fan interactions detailed in this article therefore identify *Hansen* as having pushed theatre fandom further into the digital age through multiple highly inventive initiatives.

Alongside musicals like *Heathers: The Musical* (2014) and *Be More Chill* (2018), *Dear Evan Hansen* taps into the cultural zeitgeist by depicting adolescent trauma in the age of social media.¹ Indeed, 'digital technology can simultaneously unite and distance, help and harm, comfort and disrupt' the lives of its users (Wollman 2017: 356). In *Hansen*, the titular protagonist constructs various lies, both online and in person, to feel included, ease his social

anxiety, and overcome his outsider status. The musical is thus an overt example of a production speaking to its cultural context: in recent years, studies suggest that teens are either experiencing more depression than previously, or are finding themselves more able to voice their experiences, and teen depression and other issues of mental health are regular media topics (see Howard 2019 and Twenge et al. 2019). In this respect, *Hansen* is as an emblematic example of the increasing representation of teenage mental illness in musical theatre, and the concurrent development of interactive online fandom. With tech-savvy teenagers embodying a large percentage of online fan communities, the interactions between fans and a musical's production team are potentially ethically dubious in new and complicated ways.

This article considers how such fan agency and interactive marketing operates in an era in which teenage mental health (as it relates specifically to digital media) is a widespread socio-cultural concern. It argues that the marketing and production teams behind *Dear Evan Hansen* have devised innovative word-of-mouth strategies that can be interpreted as equally as vague, cynical, and morally questionable as the show itself. However, such interactions seem to benefit fans by eliciting feelings of social inclusion that are as empowering as the depictions presented on stage. This is complex territory, given that fans provide free labour and advertising, which largely culminates with fans celebrating their engagement with a mainstream musical, and even describing newfound feelings of social inclusion as a result of such engagement.

DEAR EVAN HANSEN AND GENERATION Z

First performed in Washington, D.C. in July 2015, followed by an Off-Broadway run the subsequent spring, *Dear Evan Hansen* opened on Broadway in December 2016. Written by the songwriting duo Benj Pasek and Justin Paul, with a book by Steven Levenson, *Hansen's*

titular character is a lonely and anxious high-school senior, who fabricates a friendship with Connor, a bully whose suicide impels the action of the show. A series of fake email exchanges between Evan and Connor work to boost Evan's popularity, as they simultaneously soothe the pain of Connor's family. At a pivotal moment in Act 1, Evan creates 'The Connor Project' (a reference to the LGBTQ youth charity 'The Trevor Project'), which demonstrates that 'everybody should matter, everybody is important' (Levenson et al. 2017: 118). Evan is filmed speaking at the project's launch, the video soon goes viral, and the project raises \$50,000 in Connor's memory. Meanwhile, Evan develops newfound confidence and a romance with Zoe, a long-time crush who happens to be Connor's sister. However, Evan's increasingly complex web of lies soon starts to unravel around him, meaning Evan must face the consequences of his actions. *Hansen* thus depicts a teenager gaining acceptance, inclusion, and self-validation through a series of lies he spreads both in person and via email and on social media.

Critic Charles Isherwood suggests that *Dear Evan Hansen* will appeal to 'anyone who has ever felt, at some point in life, that he or she was trapped "on the outside looking in", as one lyric has it. Which is just about everybody with a beating heart' (2016). It is perhaps no surprise, then, that the musical's message of acceptance is popular among Generation Z – those born between the mid-1990s and 2011 (Lavelle, 2019). This is the first generation to have access to the Internet and social media from an early age, which, in turn, has affected the behaviour, communication strategies, and social outlook of many teenagers and young adults. Social media has helped to transform many teens' understanding of their self-worth, value, and mental health as they negotiate puberty. Digital communication has, in turn, enabled, equipped, and provided more opportunity for, a generation of young adults to voice their feelings, more so than most previous generations. Journalists Bethany Ao and Ellie Silverman, for example, describe how Generation Z teens are using the social media app

TikTok to share experiences of social anxiety and mental illness to help others in similar situations. The authors cite teenager David Geipel's experience of having benefitted from videos of likeminded teenagers speaking candidly about their mental health online, a trend that subsequently led to Geipel posting his own videos to remind teenagers that 'there is a future worth living for, no matter how tough their world seems' (Ao and Silverman, 2019).

The musical's trajectory, however, has also been critiqued by fans, critics, and scholars. Although bloggers like Mia Kobrin argue that *Hansen* encourages teens to talk more frankly with their parents (2020), Tyler Bey, another teenage blogger, suggests instead that the musical's message is much more 'muddled'. He claims that the show teaches teenagers to be reactive, rather than proactive, and that it fails to 'incite conversation and circumspection about how we can better our role as members of this society' (2019). Elsewhere, columnist Jason Zinoman describes the musical as 'testament to the power of skillfully crafted art to obscure moral concerns'. He argues that the musical's climax may pack an 'emotional wallop', yet 'there's something myopic about the biggest hit of the Broadway season celebrating a massive online fraud that helps a kid learn to be true to himself' (2019). Consequently, while many have embraced the show for helping to generate inclusion and personal truth in an increasingly digital world, many have read the musical much more pessimistically.

Throughout this research process, I have been persuaded by both perspectives. In the most part, I find much of the musical's content too saccharine, even utopian, given that the complexity of Evan's situation is conveniently resolved in the final scene. The Murphy family overlook the way their son or brother's death has been exploited by Evan for personal gain. The idea of overlooking exploitation, however, might also be interpreted in relation to the musical's marketing practices. The following discussion therefore responds to such

divided reception by analyzing how various fan-led marketing practices are considered to benefit the fans involved. Although such interactions might seem ethically dubious at first glance, and thus a parallel of the musical's content, there is an overwhelming amount of evidence that fans are benefitting from their role in marketing *Dear Evan Hansen*.

GENERATING 'FANSENS' THROUGH ONLINE PARTICIPATION

Since its world premiere, the musical's lead producer, Stacey Mindich, has fostered an active relationship with the show's fans, both online and in person. As fans departed the auditorium in Washington D.C., where the production originated, several approached Mindich to express their enjoyment of the show and to acknowledge their identification with certain characters (exclaiming 'I'm Zoe' or 'I'm Heidi'). It was here that Mindich first envisaged *Dear Evan Hansen* as an 'incredibly personal experience' that would soon be embraced by a proactive group of self-described 'Fansens'. Mindich and her team generated interactive fan events that encouraged what Mindich (and the entire theatre industry) considers the most 'valuable and priceless' form of advertising: fan word-of-mouth (2018).

Kelly Myslinski, for example, then a teenager about to attend college, immediately followed the show on social media after attending a preview performance in Washington D.C.. Myslinski has since seen the musical several times in New York (where she now lives and works) and describes her first attendance as having 'finally being seen and understood' (Levenson et al. 2017: 208). She has also helped to generate a global *Dear Evan Hansen* fan community through direct participation. For instance, Myslinski submitted a photo of herself for the musical's poster and souvenir brochure as part of a mosaic of faces that would be located behind the main logo art (a teenage boy in a striped polo shirt with his left arm in a cast). Likewise, she was one of the first to respond to the production's plea for fan content that could be used within the show.

At the end of Act 1, during the song ‘You Will Be Found’, the words and images of the thousands of individuals who respond to ‘The Connor Project’ online are projected onto the stage as if engulfing Evan. The screens that frame the stage illuminate with flashing photos and videos of various teenagers who, it is implied, have seen Evan’s speech online and donated accordingly. Instead of using professional actors, however, a video was posted on the official *Hansen* social media accounts in March 2016 requesting fan interaction. Actor Will Roland, who originated the role of Jared, invited fans to make five second videos of themselves holding handmade signs that read #YouWillBeFound, before posting them on social media using the same hashtag. Selected videos were then used in the original Off-Broadway production at Second Stage Theater, followed by similar pleas being posted for future productions with increasing limitations on how the video should look. In selecting videos to be included, the production and marketing team ‘found’ fans and made them a part of the production. Their fandom was recognized through interaction and a direct correlation between the musical’s content and its fans (something that is relatively new to theatre marketing).

In response to this production-led opportunity, fans quickly generated their own framing texts to celebrate and ‘speak back to the performance’ (Doherty 2020: 2). As Jonathan Gray describes, fan-created texts often enable viewers to ‘add their own voice, interests, and concerns to the textual world’ (2010: 165). Myslinski, for example, photographed one of her paintings for Instagram that surrounded a lyric from the musical (‘keep going until you see the sun’) with flowers. Even in the absence of live production, fans from around the world continue to post videos, photos, artwork, and more, which allow them to interact with the musical, and one another, through creative content and associated hashtags. This abundance of creativity, of which there are thousands of examples of on social media, is frequently shared or spread via the musical’s official social media pages.

Myslinski's artwork was also printed in the show's official companion book as an example of fan engagement (Levenson et al. 2017: 209). Fans like Myslinski have therefore received international recognition for their fan content. Their creativity is not only *recognized* by the production, through online 'likes' and comments, but is continually recycled and reposted to a global audience of several hundred thousand users.

FROM FAN CONTENT TO OFFICIAL MERCHANDISE

Mindich and her team quickly took their appeal to fans a step further by conceiving of fan co-created merchandise that could be sold, cyclically, back to fans to raise money for the show's partners (initially five New York-based non-profit mental health organisations). The official 2018 *Dear Evan Hansen* calendar, for instance, was constructed from 'original artwork created by our amazing fans', as stated on the cover, rather than official production photos (as with other theatre calendars). Equally, the musical's official zip pouch and tote bag, both of which are sold at the theatre and online, feature fan art as their main design.

Ethan McKenna is one such fan to have their work included.² A Live and Technical Events student in his early twenties, McKenna reached out to the then-forthcoming London production via email in early 2019. He had seen images of the musical's digitally reliant scenic design online and enquired about observing technical rehearsals to support his degree (which he attended that Autumn). McKenna saw the production in December 2019 and posted a piece of fan art on Instagram in response: a watercolour representation of the musical's final scene where Evan and Zoe reconcile, painted in many shades of blue (the musical's signature colour). In response, the official Instagram account for *Dear Evan Hansen* in London (@ dehwstend) privately messaged McKenna to express interest in his work.

When I interviewed McKenna in August 2020, he suggested that these private messages were unrelated to his shadow of the technical rehearsal; he felt that the team involved simply contacted him because they were interested in his artwork. McKenna assumed that similar messages had gone to hundreds of fans, yet the initial communication quickly transformed into a longer series of email exchanges. McKenna eventually signed a contract and, months later, was sent an official charity tote bag upon which his work had been printed. He is named as the work's artist on the musical's online store (a recent addition for such fan works), and subsequently received a tote bag signed by the original London cast.³

In contributing his artwork, McKenna relinquished all ownership of his unpaid work. He sent multiple copies and scans of his artwork to aid the creation of the tote bag, agreeing in the process to surrender any official right to his contribution, which now belongs to the production. McKenna confirmed that his contract included similar terms to those in the production's lengthy 'photo release' statement (Dear Evan Hansen 2019). When fans submit images of themselves for the musical's poster artwork, for example, they bestow 'the non-exclusive, irrevocable license to use, modify, publish, publicly display, exhibit, alter, edit, copy and otherwise exploit and sublicense the photo' they submit. McKenna had to physically sign a contract; it is thus assumed that he had time to read and process the transaction. However, the multitude of fans that offer photos simply submit an agreement with a document they do not have to engage with or prove that they have read. It is possible, therefore, that some teenage fans will unknowingly surrender 'any right to receive any credit, acknowledgement, royalties, compensation or other benefit' for their work given such a simple submission process. Such fans, McKenna included, also do not receive any formal payment for their submission. McKenna's Instagram followers have even joked that he should at least receive complimentary tickets.

The exchange between the marketing team of *Dear Evan Hansen* and the show's fans reflects what fandom scholars have termed 'fan labour': fans produce content, which, as the following section argues, adds value to (and later generates profit for) the production and its commercial producers. The marketing of *Hansen* is designed to encourage fans to feel connected and active, even if it ultimately only encourages them to engage in ways in which fan content is repeatedly sold back to fans.

FAN LABOUR

Building on the influential work of fandom scholars Henry Jenkins and Matt Hills, Abigail De Kosnik contends that fandoms have traditionally resisted consumerism and operated on their own non-financial terms (2012: 105). As Karen Hellekson adds, fandoms tend to rely on a 'gift culture', in which fans exchange creative outputs, say bootleg recordings of live performances, rather than money. Gifts are 'not given freely', therefore, but provided 'within a "currency" understood by and valid only in a particular fandom' (2018: 71). De Kosnik suggests that unpaid fan labour could be considered exploitation, then, when used by commercial producers as free advertising (2012: 101). For Mel Stanfill, the 'financial benefits of fan work [flow] disproportionately to industry', hence rendering gift culture inapplicable to many more formalized fan interactions (like those outlined above) (2019: 133). For example, *Dear Evan Hansen* fans may walk the streets donning fan co-created merchandise, post images of it on social media, and embrace such items as part of their everyday identity.

Whether consciously or not, fans embrace the labour of other fans, thereby collectively contributing to the ongoing cultural dialogue, and thus the success of and word-of-mouth buzz, surrounding the musical. Their labour adds 'value' to the production, which in turn benefits its producers. Even if some of the resultant profits are donated to charity, a musical's box office still benefits from the merchandise used to promote a culturally relevant

show. Fan labour is hence exchanged for ‘market value’ when fans provide voluntary contributions that help construct the musical’s brand identity (Stanfill 2019: 133). Although both De Kosnik (2012: 110) and Stanfill (2019: 161) note that some fans pursue creative careers due to their fandom being circulated or sold, there is currently no evidence to suggest that this will materialize for *Hansen* fans (particularly given the multitude of fans selected). Instead, the traditional ‘by fans-for fans’ model of fandom, inspired by their love of a hit musical, inevitably works to sell that musical to more potential fans.

What, then, is the benefit for fans who freely allow their artwork to be used as marketing material for a commercial musical? What is there to be gained from this seemingly unfair exchange? Much fandom scholarship proposes the answer is self-validation or fulfilment (De Kosnik 2012: 103). This applies to McKenna, who suggests that the selection of his artwork helped him build confidence: having not painted in many years, he had been gifted a set of watercolour paints that he decided to use in response to the production. The subsequent process encouraged McKenna to engage more actively with the musical’s social media presence, and also prompted him to produce further artwork. McKenna’s Instagram following has increased, most of whom are *Hansen* fans, and he is proud that his work has helped to raise money for charity (2020).

McKenna therefore accepts the power imbalances embedded in this exchange, given that his reward has been provided socially. This illustrates De Kosnik’s argument that fan labour is not necessarily exploited labour, then, since fans share, trade, and even submit their work for others to profit from, to receive ‘the pleasures of communication and exchange’ in return (2012: 106). Fans obtain personal benefits, like boosts in confidence or a wider platform for their artworks, while also receiving recognition from the production, other fans, and, as in this case, even academics, in a manner that may be considered satisfactory

‘payment’. McKenna has not been exploited because the entire exchange was conceived on non-financial terms; his work has reaped social rewards, like social media attention, which may translate into financial profit in the future.

Yet what of *emotional* labour? This term was popularized in the 1980s following sociologist Arlie Hochschild’s discussion of how female reproduction and domestic work are typically considered acts of love, rather than forms of labour. Hochschild argued that certain jobs require the presentation of certain emotions, like a nurse smiling at their patients, and that these emotive features are central to understanding how labour, of any kind, operates (1983). Stanfill applies this term to fandom as ‘lovebor’, thereby describing how fans demonstrate their love for a musical, for example, through interaction and labour. She suggests that these expressions of love, whether creating fan art or writing fan fiction, have value worthy of compensation (2019: 153). That said, this relationship is not straightforward. Although many fandom scholars reference the idea of fans being compensated or paid, they do so in rather vague ways that suggest no all-encompassing rules or fixed procedures. By calling for financial compensation, scholars like Stanfill privilege financial rewards over social ones (or at least suggest that fans deserve both). It is clear from my conversation with McKenna, however, that his newfound confidence and place in a fan community is something that money cannot buy; finance is not the currency at stake here.

Across the musical’s online discourse and social media presence, the producers and marketing team imply that what *Dear Evan Hansen* fans most crave is what the musical’s titular character does: inclusion. Fans use specific hashtags on social media posts, or participate in various online initiatives, that will, in keeping with the show, allow them to be recognized by the production and its fan community. Myslinski has hence been ‘paid’ because she appears on the musical’s poster and has her video projected during ‘You Will Be

Found'. Nonetheless, these interactions are rare. Fans are not coerced to participate, they understand the rules and regulations of (often) a license agreement, and so contribute to be a part of the musical's online fan community. On one hand, then, the musical is fostering a new generation of actively engaged theatre fans through direct and reciprocal interactions; few productions that take up a social cause or form charitable partnerships are as built on fan empowerment as *Hansen* so clearly is. On the other hand, these interactions are unequally balanced and designed to market the production. Irrespective of the social benefits for some fans, the producers and production team always benefit from this amalgam of online creativity. Such advertising strategies are therefore further complicating the musical's ethically dubious narrative, which suggests that *all voices will* be 'seen' and 'heard'.

'YOU WILL BE FOUND' AND INTERTEXTUAL FANDOM

Through its frequent use of popular music idioms and highly emotive lyrics, the score of *Dear Evan Hansen* is often 'aching [with] sincerity and loneliness' (Knapp and Knapp 2017: 243). In a pivotal moment at the end of Act 1, for example, Evan is thrust into the limelight at a school assembly. He nervously reads his planned speech, but then drops his cue cards and collects them from the ground. After an uncomfortably long silence, Evan stands and starts to sing 'You Will Be Found'. Returning to dialogue, Evan claims Connor told him that everybody matters, a message Evan describes as a 'gift'. The song then intensifies as cast members pace the stage, never physically interacting, and the action depicts the spread and impact of Evan's speech on social media. The screens framing the stage suddenly erupt with videos of strangers (well, fans) holding signs printed with Evan's words, fashioned into a viral hashtag (#YouWillBeFound). The song's chorus echoes over the action, as supplemented by off-stage voices, wherein the cast repeatedly claim that 'you are not alone'. The song intensifies further, and the action again shifts. The onstage characters now

physically interact with Evan, crossing his path with a hug or brief touch, and he is symbolically ‘found’ by his immediate community. Zoe is shown thanking Evan for giving her her ‘brother back’ and the pair passionately kiss as the act closes.

This sequence brings Evan into the world he longed to join at the start of the musical. His fictional interactions with Connor develop into a mantra that resonates with his fellow students and, before long, the rest of the world. Despite the complexity of this moment, with Evan stressfully lying and continually manipulating his situation, the entire company, multiple offstage voices, and those in the projected video sequences join to offer a single utopian message. Evan’s journey from isolation to inclusion is represented as a layered barrage of videos and voices that emotionally overwhelm many of the characters, along with many audience members at a typical performance. It is significant, therefore, that this highly complex and emotional sequence includes the song that is most referenced by fans.

‘You Will Be Found’ is widely sung by community choirs, is the basis of numerous online cover videos, and was performed for an officially curated ‘Virtual Choir’ fan video in 2017. The YouTube video included hundreds of fans, from over thirty different countries, proving that ‘every voice matters’ (Dear Evan Hansen 2017). Furthermore, an illustrated copy of the song’s lyrics was published in March 2020, within which it is suggested that ‘something happened in the world outside the show: Fans loved the song. It connected. It went viral. People who had never even seen *Dear Evan Hansen* found the song, and found comfort in its message of hope’ (NOVL 2020). Online, this ‘comfort’ is demonstrated intertextually by copious responses to and representations of the song. On Instagram and Tumblr, for instance, fans post artwork depicting the song’s lyrics, staging, or simply their own reactions to its poignant message. In turn, fans use the song’s title as a key hashtag to connect their responses on social media. This is encouraged by the hashtag being printed on

the musical's official companion book, programme, advertising, and more, thereby inviting fans to form an online community around a key song and message. Elsewhere, on Twitter for example, fans use #YouWillBeFound in posts that describe how the musical 'saved them' and how it helped them to be 'seen'. Some fans disclose mental illness and experiences of trauma, while others claim that before seeing the show they wanted to 'disappear', or commit suicide, in reference to Connor. 'You Will Be Found' is thus a musical theatre song that resonates cross-culturally away from the show's narrative context. Similar to 'You'll Never Walk Alone' from *Carousel* (1945) or 'This is Me' from Pasek and Paul's film musical, *The Greatest Showman* (2017), along with several further examples, the song acts as an anthem of hope that loses its contextual meaning when popularized outside of the musical. Fans have gravitated towards the song, but not necessarily the song in the context of the musical or even the whole musical.

Dear Evan Hansen is hardly the first musical to have fans proclaim that it 'saved them', or similar, yet it is notable that fans reference words like 'matter', 'care', 'found', and 'disappear' to do so. Through references to 'You Will Be Found', plus earlier songs like 'Waving Through A Window' and 'Disappear', fans ignore later – and more complex – moments in the show in which Evan's deception starts to unravel. Fans extract the musical's more encouraging messages, presumably to comfort themselves or offer support to others, and largely ignore the show's complex second act. Fans ignore the tension and double meaning presented in 'You Will Be Found', for instance, instead embracing the song as a straightforward message of inclusion (and thus for its first layer of meaning). This, in turn, helps to generate a rather skewed and one-sided perception of the musical and its message. Evan's lies seem to resonate with and help fans, despite not being acknowledged as such by fans, just as they help Connor's family and peers in *Hansen*. The musical's depiction of

social exclusion and the need to be ‘found’ is thus generating a kind of performative circularity in which the musical’s fans potentially resemble the fictional characters.

Although many fans will appreciate that Evan lies to feel included, and how he is later isolated when these lies are revealed, this context is largely absent in the (at the time of writing) 111K Instagram posts that tag #YouWillBeFound. The musical’s complex narrative is reduced to a series of comforting phrases that are simultaneously used as marketing and potentially soothing messages for some fans. This intertextual layering is complicated even further, then, when the producers and marketing team start to communicate like Evan, equally promising acceptance and inclusion. The following analysis considers how the musical’s lead producer provides presumed intimacy with fans and thereby extends the opportunity to engage even further.

FORMING PARASOCIAL ‘FRIENDSHIPS’

When *Dear Evan Hansen* won six Tony Awards in June 2017, producer Stacey Mindich accepted the award for Best Musical by stating, ‘[f]rom Martha and Julie in California to Kaho in Japan, you have been seen and heard and found. You matter’ (Levenson et al. 2017: 208). In thanking specific fans, rather than broadly acknowledging the show’s audiences, Mindich illustrated the individuality of fandom in a way that individual fans could relate to. She did not acknowledge the musical’s ‘Fansens’, and thus use a collective group name, but endorsed *Hansen* as a show about individuals who ‘matter’. Fans like Julie Stroud and Kaho Kidoguchi have therefore been ‘found’ when their fan content is circulated online and through targeted public interactions with those who represent the musical professionally. They belong to a noteworthy set of fans, whose names are known to the production and among other fans, that illustrate who Mindich describes as the production’s ‘very deep and engaged friends’ (Krause 2016).

Through such personalized engagement, Mindich develops a ‘parasocial interaction’ wherein she describes the musical’s fan base much in the same way that some fans describe loose connections with celebrities as friendships (see Rojek 2015 and Clark 2017). For example, media studies scholar Tilo Hartmann explains how audiences often form ‘illusionary feeling[s] of being in a mutual social interaction’ with fictional characters, celebrities, television hosts, and more (2017: 131). Greeting a performer at the stage door, for instance, is likely to be a one-sided interaction that may mean more to the specific fan than it will to the performer. Fans may then develop a false sense of intimacy with said performer, having briefly interacted with them, now feeling ‘seen’ and ‘heard’ by the famous individual.

By acknowledging fans as friends, Mindich reverses the typical parasocial hierarchy both for the benefit of such fans and the production’s longevity. She references the musical’s narrative – by replicating how Evan describes Connor as a friend – to ensure that fans feel ‘seen’ by as many aspects of the production as possible. Mindich understands the potential social responsibility of the musical and aims to benefit fans through social interaction and inclusion. It is inescapable, however, that these interactions also have a financial benefit for Mindich and the longevity of *Dear Evan Hansen* as a commercial stage production. Her interactions may boost the morale, confidence, and more, of several global fans, yet they simultaneously ensure that the production is recognized for its fan engagement (something that will inevitably translate into ticket sales). Mindich’s recognition of fans is ultimately a marketing ploy.

Mindich’s interactions, in turn, often result in further fan labour. Indeed, recognized fans typically respond and engage to retain their ‘friend’ status. Julie Stroud, for example, who Mindich acknowledged at the Tony Awards, has frequently celebrated the show’s ‘transformative power’ since she first saw the musical Off-Broadway. In April 2018, Stroud

gave a TED talk explaining how much the musical resonated with her and the isolation she felt as a child. She claimed that the show ‘helped me see myself and understand myself in a new way. I felt compassion for that lost little girl who always felt on the outside looking in [...] The show is deeply personal to me’. As an adult, Stroud is a professional life coach, as well as an unpaid advocate and self-described ‘agent’ for *Hansen* (Stroud 2020). She is not duped into her role and remains aware of how her fandom celebrates and publicizes the musical. Nevertheless, the extent to which Stroud promotes the musical because she is continually recognized by the production and other fans remains unclear. After all, it is certainly likely that these frequent interactions, which include being a part of the musical’s poster, choir video, and companion book, sustain her active engagement. Mindich’s acknowledgment of Stroud – their ‘friendship’ – fuels further interaction and free marketing of *Hansen*.

It should be acknowledged that parasocial interactions are a widely accepted part of celebrity/fan relationships. Just as politicians may entice crowds through real-world examples that individuals presumably relate to, Mindich is overly intimate with fans to sell her product. It is not rare or uncommon, simply a standard marketing strategy. These interactions only become problematic, therefore, when considered in relation to the musical’s content. Producers are labelling themselves and the musical’s fans as ‘friends’, making all the same mistakes that the show’s characters do, to advertise the production. This article has identified the multiple social benefits of these exchanges for fans, yet it is somewhat problematic that these interactions are formed to mirror the musical’s ethically complex narrative.

Despite most popular narratives depicting social inclusion and acceptance in some form, certainly in musical theatre, Mindich actively extends this into the marketing of the production in a rather unprecedented way. *Dear Evan Hansen* is about social inclusion,

acceptance, mental health, and suicide. Mindich is therefore assuming intimacy with fans who may suffer from mental illness, as illustrated by the multiple accounts of such on social media, and is thus acknowledging a selection of fans who may be emotionally dependent on being ‘found’ (however they might interpret this phrase). It is impossible to speak for all fans, or even the experience of the fans who have been ‘found’, yet this final example only further illustrates the increasingly complex ways in which the musical’s production team are manipulating fan interaction on social media for marketing purposes. Mindich’s choice of language is certainly powerful and financially savvy, and thereby complicated by the fact that the musical’s narrative is ethically unclear and a direct reflection of contemporary culture. The public nature of the show’s content and marketing make it even more vital that Mindich and her team are responsible for the well-being of the fans involved.

There is no doubt that *Dear Evan Hansen* has generated significant cultural impact, particularly among Generation Z, and that much of this impact stems from the fan interactions analyzed above. Despite each of the issues raised, the production should be commended for its association with several mental health organisations: an undeniable example of the producers taking social responsibility for the show’s content. For instance, one fan thanked the production on Twitter for helping them find support after the fan discovered that the Crisis Text Line number was printed in their *Dear Evan Hansen* hoodie. In addition to promoting or raising money for these organisations through merchandise, the musical worked with The JED Foundation to aid interactions with fans who illustrated a troubling ‘deeper connection’ with the show (Mindich 2018). For example, the original Broadway cast, which included Ben Platt as Evan, was coached in how to deal with distressed fans at the stage door. JED’s advisors also replied to fans who expressed mental illness in their fan mail, sometimes even instigating further support. Similarly, the musical worked with Microsoft to run a free educational workshop for teenagers, titled ‘Creating

Connections with *Dear Evan Hansen*'. The session taught students 'how to use technology to create meaningful connections in our hyper-connected world' at over eighty US Microsoft stores (in line with the show's national tour dates) (Piepenburg 2018). Despite Evan not receiving formal support or therapy within the narrative, the musical's producers are attentively capitalising on the parallels between the musical and its fans to generate an official support network.

CONCLUSION

Dear Evan Hansen belongs to a growing set of recent musicals, including *Heathers: The Musical* and *Be More Chill*, that portray the manipulation and exploitation of others. This article has explored how these behaviours are, at times, often re-enacted within certain fan practices and interactions. Consequently, *Hansen* sits at an interesting crossroad in which the show's content and surrounding fan activity are, at times, disconcertingly similar. Despite the social benefit of these interactions for fans, as evidenced on multiple social media platforms, it is difficult to ignore that fans are somewhat being exploited for the profit of others. Fans, producers, scholars, and more, should thus continue to celebrate what social media has done for the creativity, confidence, and emotional intelligence of fans. They should also be wary, however, of how these interactions operate when related to texts that dramatize emotional exploitation, and thus instigate the performative circularity outlined throughout this article.

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¹ This trend is not exclusive to musical theatre. *13 Reasons Why* (2017-), for example, was one of Netflix's most-watched shows in 2017, despite the series centring on the events and circumstances that led to a high school student committing suicide. Similarly, films such as *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011), *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (2012), and *Eighth Grade* (2018) portray teenagers dealing with social anxiety and/or depression, often with fatal consequences.

² The article incorporates an interview I conducted with Ethan McKenna, a British student and fan, about his experience of contributing artwork to the musical's official merchandise range. Several details of Kelly Myslinski's fandom have also been confirmed with her via personal communication on Instagram. Elsewhere, the article references social media posts from teenagers with claimed histories of mental illness. These fans have been selected via their inclusion of certain hashtags (mainly #YouWillBeFound) and I have no prior relationship with the individual subject. These posts are not directly cited, however, given the sensitive topics addressed (including attempted suicide) and the occasional reference to protected characteristics. The article therefore 'completely disguises' these individuals, instead describing their posts, in line with Amy Bruckman's article, 'Ethical Guidelines for Online Research' (2002). Thanks to Kirsty Sedgman for her useful advice on this methodological approach.

³ Until late 2019/early 2020, all fan co-created merchandise was not attributed to specific fans online. Although no specific date is available, fan details (name, social media handle, and location) were later added to all online descriptions of such merchandise.