

“How Can Fandom Be Toxic? It’s About Love!”: A Look at Fandom and the *Scream* Franchise

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ABSTRACT

The *Scream* franchise is known for its ironic metanarrative and satirical treatment of the horror genre. The franchise has maintained immense popularity since its inception in 1996. *Scream 2022*, also referred to as *Scream 5*, continues this tradition while introducing a new layer of intertextuality by incorporating the effects of toxic fandom largely online contexts. This paper explores how the new creative team of the 2022 film, Radio Silence Productions, brought their knowledge of fandom to the film, the inclusion of popular horror YouTube creators “Dead Meat,” and this iteration of “Ghostface” killers. The fandom’s actions mirror the outcry over *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* and *Ghostbusters* (2016), both which are represented in the film through the in-universe franchise “Stab.” My aim is to examine what constitutes a “toxic fan” and how such a role is represented within *Scream* (2022) for a mainstream audience, utilizing studies conducted by Morten Bay, Matt Hills, and William Proctor.

Most everyone is a fan of something: a book, a film franchise, an actor, a sports team. Many seek out others with an equivalent passion, and thus emerges a fandom. In my analysis of *Scream* (2022), which will be referred to as *Scream 5* throughout the essay, I will examine the intertextual connections between the film’s metacommentary on emerging film franchise fandoms, with emphasis on increasingly toxic fan behaviors, and their effect on fan-text-producer interrelationships, as represented in the film, in comparison to real-world incidents occurring in the wake of *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* and *Ghostbusters* (2016). In doing so, I will explore how *Scream 5* calls attention to toxic fan behavior as a whole, and its effects at the level of the entire film industry, well beyond the horror community.

The *Scream* franchise is known within and outside of the horror community as a series of metacommentaries on movie genres as a whole in its emphasis on intertextuality trope subversion. Horror fans, in particular, are “in on” the satirical commentary central to the films because *they* know the tropes, how they function, and how the audience serves the functions. Each installment of *Scream* has taken on a different aspect of “slasher” sequels, thereby addressing the current state of the horror genre. Following the death of the inaugural film’s director Wes Craven in 2015, a new creative team, Radio Silence, became the inheritors of *Scream*’s legacy.

Reviews and interviews with the Radio Silence team well establish that *Scream 5* is about toxic fandom. Directors Tyler Gillett and Matt Bettinelli-Olpin discuss this metacommentary in *Variety* interview (Vary), while newcomers to the franchise, Melissa Barrera and Jack Quaid, discuss metacommentary in separate interviews with *The Wrap* during the press promotion of the film (Taylor). Nevertheless, none articulate *how* and *why* the film focuses on toxic fandom beyond their general acknowledgment. The questions addressed can only be answered by an analysis of the film’s most pertinent scenes. First we consider contextual information on fandom and how it may have inspired the narrative of *Scream 5*.

Fandom: What Is It—and How Does it Become Toxic?

To better understand *Scream 5*’s commentary on fans and fandom, the terminology and context of “fandom” must be considered. While fan is short for “fanatic,” there are several ways scholars have described what a “fan” is. Carrielynn D. Reinhard states a fan as “someone who repeatedly engages with an object of affection” (4). Henry Jenkins takes the notion a step further to include that a fan is someone who participates by “joining a ‘community’ of other fans who share common interests” (41). Such a fandom can exist for quite literally anything—movies, television, books, celebrities, wrestling—interaction with like-minded people supplies reinforcement.¹ There is also the concept of a “hyperfan” and an attached stigma to this super-level of fan used mockingly in media to portray fans as “miscreants, antisocial loners, or just plain crazed consumers” (Booth 76). Paul Booth goes on to say that “hyperfan[s] illustrate the view that there’s always someone crazier than you in fandom” (77).

Ideally, fandom “spaces” are a positive environment for fans to come together and share their affection for the media—a place for relaxation or a respite from life’s hardships through discussions or the creation of “fanworks.” Nonetheless, this is not always the case. “Toxic fandom” can ensue, in which fans behave negatively or harmfully towards the object of their affection, or attack other fans within the fandom. There is not one definitive definition of a toxic fan, as toxic fan behavior can vary in occurrence and severity from fandom to fandom. John Suler notes that online anonymity brings out toxic fan behavior in manners such as “rude language, harsh criticisms, anger, hatred, even threats,” while William Proctor and Bridget Kies argue that the behavior is not inherently toxic “unless it falls into the realm of bullying, racism, misogyny, homophobia, or other types of ad hominem attack based on identity politics and progressive ideologies” (Proctor and Kies 137-8). Both characterizations prove useful in examining the fan behaviors surrounding the *Scream* franchise. Regardless of the definition of toxic behaviors, these elements can be detected in nearly all fandom outlets. Here the focus is on the fan-text-producer, fans reacting to the text and the

1. The scholarship used for them is drawn from an American fandom perspective and does not include a global examination of fan practices.

creators behind it, and toxic behaviors evinced in the type of discourse this film tackles, bracketing other types of interpersonal toxic behaviors expressed within fandoms.²

The State of Fandom

To consider the aims of the team behind *Scream 5*, we begin by examining the films that inspired it, and the fan behavior that inspires its metacommentary. Multiple horror franchise reboots and “requels” have been divisive in their fandoms over the past decade. Fans have rejected many such installments, but studios have continued to produce them. *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (2010), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2013), *Halloween* (2018), and *Candyman* (2021) are just some of the recent reboots, in the case of the first two, and requels, in the case of the latter two. The phenomenon has also been seen in popular culture media such as the Star Trek and Star Wars franchises and countless superhero series. Toxic fandom goes beyond the realm of general horror. Revitalization of the Star Wars franchise, starting with the sequel *The Force Awakens* (2017) and the *Ghostbusters* (2016) reboot. These last two franchises, in particular, drew mass media attention for the backlash and toxic behavior elicited in their respective fandoms. By simply calling this film “Scream,” without the “5,” the creative team intended to invoke this same sense of sequel backlash.

Because of the scale of fan-text-producer backlash for *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017) and *Ghostbusters* (2016), their respective studios changed direction and opted for a safer route in their franchise continuations, seemingly afraid to take such risks again (Keiper; Morrow). Critic Brendan Morrow states, “Toxic fandom has genuinely become a major problem in the entertainment industry, to the point that it actively gets in the way of sequels that might otherwise challenge the audience” (emphasis added). *Scream 5* rose to the challenge to deliver a sequel that would intentionally address this kind of behavior amongst its fans.

Scream Takes a Stab at its Own Fans

Radio Silence intentionally brought toxic fandom to the table in *Scream 5*. The film starts with Tara Carpenter (Jenna Ortega) alone and attacked in her home by Ghostface, recalling Drew Barrymore’s Casey Becker in the original *Scream* (1996). Ghostface’s phone call involves asking her trivia questions about the in-universe movie, *Stab*, which was based on the original Woodsboro murders. Unlike Casey, Tara survives the attack, which draws her older sister Sam (Barrera) back to Woodsboro with her boyfriend, Richie Kirsch (Quaid). Sam reveals to her sister and boyfriend that she is the daughter of Billy Loomis, one of the killers in *Scream* (1996), as she believes this is the motive behind Tara’s attack. This establishes one of many connections back to the original film of the franchise with the supporting cast members. Retired Sheriff Dewey (David Arquette) is pulled into the investigation by Sam for support, as he has been part of this situation many times before. Once it is established the victims and potential victims are all related to characters from the past franchise installments, they are “picked off” one by one, including the legacy character, Dewey.

After the death of Dewey, Sidney Prescott (Neve Campbell), the original target of the previous seven Ghostface killers, makes her return to Woodsboro to help take down Ghostface once again with Gale Weathers (Courtney Cox), who also returns to the city to cover the killings for the news. The final act of the film takes place at Stu Macher’s house, the second Ghostface alongside Billy Loomis, echoing the original *Scream*. Richie and Tara’s close friend Amber are revealed to be the killers, working together. Their goal is for their killings to inspire the next *Stab* movie due to their hatred for *Stab 8* in an effort to return the franchise to its roots. With the help of Sidney and Gale, Sam and Tara take down the killers.

Scream 5 is for the fans, by the fans, and about the fans. The film itself is a sequel banking on nostalgia, especially of the inaugural film, to pull in longtime fans and springboard the franchise into new territory with new lead characters. The narrative is aware of its place in its franchise with the inclusion of legacy characters, the introduction of new characters that will carry

2. Other types of toxic fan behaviors can be seen involving character hate, shipping discourse, attacks on other fans’ interpretations, etc.

the majority of the screen time and references the previous installments. The sequel aspect of the film is intentional and integral as a commentary on the recent influx of such self-referential horror productions. Examples include the latest *Halloween* trilogy in the return of Jamie Lee Curtis, and Harrison Ford in *The Force Awakens*. New characters are introduced to carry the narrative while providing a connecting factor for audiences’ nostalgia for the original films. Dewey’s death is similar in fashion to Han’s death by being a shocking kill of a legacy, fan-favorite character.

The quintessential *Scream* “rules of horror” scene provides an encapsulation of *Scream 5*’s commentary on toxic fandom. Here, Mindy Meeks, the niece of Randy Meeks from the original *Scream*, represent the film’s resident cinephile and explains to the group what a sequel is and how they themselves will function in it as the film progresses. It is during this scene that the audience gets the first acknowledgment of the real-world fan discourse surrounding *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* and director Rian Johnson. It is revealed that Johnson directed the in-universe movie *Stab 8*, which angered the Stab fandom in the *Scream* universe. When Liv, girlfriend of Mindy’s twin brother, comments that she liked the movie by “the *Knives Out* guy,” Mindy regards her as having “terrible taste.” With this dialogue, the vocal fan backlash towards *The Last Jedi*’s poor reception becomes a textual component of the film. The backlash had been heavily covered by journalists and media outlets, resulting in calls to remake the movie and even petitions to have it removed from the *Star Wars* canon (Bay). The bulk of the fan anger was directed at Johnson. While Mindy does call Liv’s taste in liking *Stab 8* “terrible,” she does not constitute a toxic fan in light of Proctor and Kies’ view that rude language and harsh criticism are not toxic behavior. Throughout the remainder of the scene and the film, Mindy is not shown to engage in any toxic behavior demonstrating harm to other characters.

Through Mindy’s continued dialogue in the scene, *Scream 5* shines a direct spotlight on fandoms of franchises, including their own. She says to the group gathered, “*Stab 8* pissed on [their] childhoods,” and “To some people, the original is their favorite thing in the world. The movie made them love horror.” She is repeating the online backlash and toxicity that she has witnessed, which parallels how real fans have reacted to the changes for *The Last Jedi* and *Ghostbusters* (Bay; Proctor 1129). Whether Radio Silence was aware of it or not, Mindy’s dialogue falls under what William Proctor calls the “totemic nostalgia” that he applies to fans and their relationship to a given media. “Totemic nostalgia” is defined by Porter as the “non-toxic, and how this might extend into malicious ‘toxic fan practice’” (1113). Nostalgia is not always considered a toxic emotion for fans to Porter, but in certain circumstances, he notes, it can lead to it. Mindy echoes this when she says, “God help anyone who slightly fucks with that special memory. Who makes a movie they think disrespects it” about how the “hard-core Stab fans” hate the direction the franchise went with *Stab 8*. Proctor covers how the *Ghostbusters* fandom reacted negatively to the all-female cast reboot in 2016 for his article, “‘Bitches Ain’t Gonna Hunt No Ghosts’: Totemic Nostalgia, Toxic Fandom and the Ghostbusters Platonic.” His research into it shows direct similarities to that toxic fan behavior and *Stab 8*’s.

The “rules of horror” scene gives additional nods to fans and their fandom practices by bringing them into the film’s text. Mindy mentions real online fan spaces, and communities that are used by fans in context of the film itself to discuss their disliking of the *Stab* film, alienating real-life fans. In the r/horror subreddit “Dreadit” as well as 4chan, user “Sam” delivers the one-liner, “Are you telling me that I’m caught in the middle of fan-fucking-fiction?” This is, in a sense, true, given the motives of the Ghostface killer in the sequel. Fanfiction and Reddit are common meeting grounds for fans in today’s fandom spaces that can lead to positive experiences for fans, a forum to meet like-minded individuals to share their affection for content. At the same time the forums allow users to engage in toxic discourse.

Once the rules of this film are established, *Scream 5* takes the fan meta-commentary a step further. Two additional fans appear as minor characters in one scene. While they are not present for long, real-life horror YouTubers and podcasters Dead Meat are brought into the film in fan roles. Past *Scream* films have made similar casting choices by bringing in actors to subvert audiences’ expectations based on prior familiarity with known actors. Valeria Wee notes the casting of Sarah Michelle Gellar for *Scream 2* to play a defenseless character while well-known for her role

as Buffy Summers in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. She writes, “Most of the teenagers watching *Scream* 2 would be familiar with Gellar’s television alter ego and thus would enjoy an additional level of amusement in watching her play against type, as a helpless female victim” (50). Dead Meat’s casting is in a similar vein to Geller’s in that James and Chelsea are playing against their known, friendly and supportive personalities in portraying toxic fans. Such intertextuality adds complexity to the film’s established narrative in juxtaposing real-life personae with fictional personae.

Dead Meat has had a wide impact on today’s horror fandom. Their YouTube channel,³ created in January 2017 by James A. Janisse, began with his series “The Kill Count,” breaking down the number of “kills” in a given film while providing production and behind-the-scenes information. The Dead Meat Podcast was subsequently created by Chelsea Rebecca, who researches and provides an in-depth look at various horror topics, such as movie reviews, retrospectives on the genre, and interviews with directors and casts of upcoming horror films. The podcast is co-hosted by Rebecca and Janisse. Together, the ensemble works to create an open community for horror fans that eschews bullying or toxic behaviors.

In the film, the pair play the cohosts of a YouTube channel called “Film Fails” and, while not stated in the movie, the script lists their names as “James” and “Chelsea” (Dead Meat). The scene was filmed on their own set, and their dialogue improvised by them, as a directorial choice. A review of *Stab 8* states, “don’t even get me started on Ghostface’s new signature weapon,” adding, “And can we talk about the title? *Stab*? What, just like the original? Just call it *Stab 8*.... You’re not fooling anyone.” *Scream 5* viewers who know of the Dead Meat channel fully get the intertextual reference Radio Silence intends to make with their inclusion. Viewers who are not familiar with the channel, but are within the online film or horror fandoms, would be aware of the film’s parodic element. Countless channels on YouTube focus on film critiques, and not uncommonly rant videos disparaging directorial choices. Titles for negative videos on *The Last Jedi* include “The Last Jedi: A Complete Cinematic Failure,” by Vito, with nearly 10 million views; “Stupidest Things Said Defending Star Wars: The Last Jedi” by Robot Head, with over 4 million views; and “The Last Jedi, and the Assassination of Luke Skywalker” by The Critical Drinker, with over 1 million views. These videos pull in massive amounts of viewers, leading to a wider impact on established fandom circles.

A particular scene depicting Richie watching the Film Fails video serves two purposes. On first viewing, it merely seems as if he is researching the *Stab* films, claiming not to have seen them earlier. He claims to be researching what Mindy has previously brought up, providing audience with a sampling of typical YouTube commentaries. Suggested videos also tend to include additional in-universe videos dealing with the backlash. An interview with Rian Johnson about *Stab 8* points out that until Richie is revealed to one of the killers, the scene is recontextualized to display toxic fan practices. He is watching not just to learn about the fans’ backlash to *Stab 8*; he is one of the fans upset by it. When speaking to Sam about what he’s supposedly learned about the film, he says, “*Stab 8* is not like the other movies. I mean, no connection to the other movies. No legacy characters at all. If you ask me, this franchise goes off the rails with number five.” Even within this tongue-in-cheek statement that brings awareness to the nature of this film’s placement in the *Scream* franchise, viewers are given further insight into Richie’s views on *Stab 8*—and on why he resists its narrative contribution to unveiling his motive for killing.

The thematic continues into the third act following the revelation of the killers as Richie and Amber. Richie’s monologue unveils his motive for the killings through incorporation of common phrases seen on Reddit and other online spaces express displeasure with the movie’s narrative arc. Some potent lines: “Someone has to save the franchise. You see, no one has made a great *Stab* movie since the first one,” and “It sucked balls because nobody takes the true fans seriously” (emphasis added). Richie then drives home *Scream 5*’s toxic fan meta-commentary: “How can fandom be toxic? It’s about love! They don’t fucking understand that these movies are important to people.” This satirically ties back to Proctor’s totemic nostalgia turning toxic, and

3. As of April 2024, their channel, which hosted both “The Kill Count” and podcast, has 6.38 million subscribers, and 2.6 billion combined views across 527 videos, showing their significant reach within the horror community.

fans taking their purported “love” for their media too far. It also aligns with Matt Hills’ statement that “toxic fan practices can be seen as ‘good’ by those carrying them out” (114). Richie, and by extension Amber, believe to be doing this for the good of the Stab franchise. They are trying to “save” it. While it is an extreme reaction, exaggerating the rhetoric of real-life fans, the absurdity of their killings showcases the destructive actions of toxic fans, revealing how their toxic practices affect the community as well as the film’s creators.

Conclusion: *Scream*’s Reflection on Fans

We return to a key scene, when Mindy is shown to engage with the original *Stab* movie during the third act of the film, watching and talking to the screen as uncle Randy did, even saying “No, Randy, look behind you. ... These are your rules!” The lines call back the original *Scream* (1996), recreating the scene when Randy watches Halloween in Stu’s house, talking to the screen as Ghostface stalks up behind him. The scene is played for laughs and works as an intertextual reference for the fans. Yet it also shows Mindy exhibiting positive fan behavior. She remains engaged with the media that she loves and is attached to. Her fandom stands in contrast to Richie, who embodies the negative, toxic side of fandom.

With these characterizations, *Scream 5* depicts a diverse fandom. Not all fans are toxic—a necessary contrast to the installment’s Ghostface killers. As Daniel Viglietti states in his review, Mindy is “a reasonable fan who dislikes [*Stab 8*] for legitimate reasons, so when Amber Freeman and Richie Kirsch are unmasked as the Killers, they represent the fans who are violently possessive over the franchise and take their obsession too far.” While Mindy shares in minor name calling in the “rules of horror” scene, as no fan is perfect, she does not dwell in the negativity and focuses on the part of the franchise she enjoys. Richie and Amber, on the other hand, feel entitled to Stab and do not care how many people are hurt along the way to get what they want for the franchise. By making the toxic fans the killers, the filmmakers made the decision to cast this type of behavior into a villainous role and have the audience root against them. Having this type of fan behavior represented on screen will hopefully serve as a mirror to members of the fandom that engage in this type of behavior and lessen its continuation.

Scream 5 is a novel contemporary representation of the current fan and fandom landscape by fusing the real and the fictional, providing a narrative metacommentary its own mythology. It challenges and breaks down Booth’s conception of the hyperfan by including hyperfans in its own narrative. While Mindy, Richie, and Amber fall outside of the antisocial loner stereotype, Richie and Amber certainly exude “crazed fandom” through their killings, allowing the film to depict two different versions of fans and providing the audience with diverse fan representations. Each representation breaks Booth’s “antisocial loner” depiction of hyperfans, updating the popular view of typical fandom in today’s culture. Mindy and Amber remain attached to their friend group, while Amber and Richie are both active in online fandom spaces, which leads to their meeting and eventual relationship by virtue of the Stab subreddit. Each serves as a representation of the hyperfan in their simultaneous engagement with the media and the fandom surrounding the film series’ mythology.

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