

# **X & Why: Mental Health and Masculinity Among Fans of XXXTentacion**

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XXXTentacion is dead. The artist died June 18th, 2018, after being shot in Deerfield Beach, Florida. Also of note: XXXTentacion was abusive. He allegedly beat, tortured, and imprisoned his pregnant ex-girlfriend (MacAdams). Yet when I took a step into his fandom, I forgot all that. Here was a pseudo-utopian paradise, where XXXTentacion (real name Jahseh Dwayne Onfroy) could do no wrong. I was ashamed by my mental lapse, but also curious: Why did I forget? Why did his fans choose to? The answer lies in the texts.

XXXTentacion and his fans have always been surrounded by controversy—it's what initially drew me to study this fandom. However, it's XXXTentacion's fans' position in the world that kept me interested. XXXTentacion fans feel pain in a very real way, pain which they blame not on themselves but on the rest of the world. Outsiders, on the other hand, see these fans not as victims but as perpetrators, inflicting pain through their misogyny and aggression. These contrasting viewpoints lead XXXTentacion fans to interact with each other and the world in unconventional ways. This project is an attempt to navigate the XXXTentacion fandom by studying these interactions through texts they create (e.g., fan art, analysis, memes, comments). Through these texts, I hope to learn more about the how and the why of X's fandom, and the possible ramifications of these findings on the fields of mental health and masculinity.

Fans of XXXTenatacion are dynamic in their ability to be vulnerable, supportive, informal, and agreeable within their community, yet masculine and hostile to those outside it. They avoid the hierarchical structure present in many fandoms, instead encouraging each

other to share their struggles--which are often mental-health related--in an equal and informal environment. Yet they have a masculine outlook on the world, transforming their mental-health battle into a battle with the outside world (and, frequently, women).

There is a purposeful absence of hierarchy in the XXXTentacion fan community, which encourages an equal playing field where fans are confidants, not authority figures. This equality manifests in the texts they choose to create. They differ from many fan communities in that they avoid using the same medium as their object. Fans of XXXTentacion don't make their own music to share in the community because doing so could contribute to hierarchy. If someone were to make music and attempt to promote it in the fandom, they could gain authority. They aren't compelled to do so because their fandom doesn't value showing off or gaining clout. Instead, they value finding equals.

XXXTentacion's fans use memes to communicate both informality and a common belief system. Memes are commonplace in X fan forums and social media. Take the post "When you get up to eat breakfast but someone finished the Cocaine" (/u/HERO1NFATHER). It's a low-res image of XXXTentacion looking confused. The post isn't formal or detailed, but that's the point. It's obscure, lowbrow humor, meant to be enjoyed by "common" people. It works to show that sophistication (which could give someone authority) doesn't belong in the community. But memes aren't only unifying in status. Memes are meant for an ideologically homogeneous audience. In order to "get" certain jokes, you have to hold a specific set of beliefs. In order to fit in, you have to find the jokes funny, and to do that, you must agree with them. Through memes, fans create beliefs and conform to them.

These fans then maintain friendly informality through comments on forums--the vast majority of which are a few sentences or less. A top post in XXXTentacion's subreddit notes

that while X spent so much of his life wanting to die, his life was taken when he was beginning to get better (/u/thisty). While the content of that thought might lend itself to a lengthy discussion, the post is only a sentence long. Most comments, too, are short--such as "rip" or "i wanna cry so bad"--and often include expletives (/u/thotdestroyer1; /u/acisialucsia). This brevity reinforces the community's casual tone. The absence of long, detailed analysis isn't what you'd find in many fandoms. XXXTentacion fandom, however, functions almost like a group chat. Fans express themselves without providing deep analysis because doing so might make them seem like they're trying to place themselves above others. Comments like "i wanna cry so bad" humanize fans. After negotiating this power structure, fans must learn they can trust each other in order to discuss more personal topics.

Avoiding arguments is a key component to building trust in XXXTentacion's fan community. For such a controversial artist, it's surprising to find so few controversial posts. Yet one of those rare posts surfaced on February 7th, 2019, posted by user /u/Bryakevpip. It was a screenshot of a tweet where X talked about slavery (and the "bullshit" conversation around it) and argued people should just be grateful it's no longer around ("Great Message From X"). The title of the post, "Great Message From X," indicates that the user doesn't expect the post to be contentious. That would seem to be a bold assumption given its content, but XXXTentacion fans are so argument-averse that the expectation is fairly reasonable. The post did lead to fairly hostile debate, but no more than one might expect for such a post. Additionally, many commenters attempted to avoid debate. The most upvoted comment is "When did X have a moon profile picture? spotlight uh, moonlight uh," a reference to a popular meme within the fandom (/u/almostyelloww). The comment is meant to de-escalate

and distract from the post. There are also comments where fans apologize for hostility towards each other, a rarity in online communication.

The intolerance of debate and hostility in this community enables fans to make themselves vulnerable. They know that unlike the outside world, fans won't attack them for what they share. Torii MacAdams, a journalist for *The Guardian*, felt that this lack of controversy turned the community into a positive feedback loop: "these relationships have metastasized into feedback loops which provide either positive emotional reinforcement or the negative motivations needed to stalk an abused teenager" (MacAdams). (MacAdams is referring to X's former girlfriend, who accused him of abuse.) This cycle further burrows fans into their fandom, learning that they can only find solace in talking to each other.

By rejecting power and embracing intimacy, fans of XXXTentacion take on the role of both sharer and supporter. Fans are encouraged to disclose their personal struggles, as XXXTentacion did through music. There are entire posts dedicated to this. One asks fellow fans to use the comments of a post as their "journal" to "write down their feelings without being judged" (/u/Dannyjohnston\_17). There were responses to almost every single comment, talking, attempting to help them, and making them feel visible and valid. In doing so, /u/Dannyjohnston\_17 and others give fellow fans a place to share and feel unconditionally supported. The kindness fans show, however, isn't shown to the outside world.

XXXTentacion fans embrace a culture of toxic masculinity, informing and transforming their struggles with mental health. They are like X in this way. Ultra-aggressive themes defined XXXTentacion's music, and fans were drawn to X's ability to make them both want to cry and headbutt a wall (/u/Bryakevpip, "The Best"). They gravitate to X not only

because of their mental health struggles but because they value masculinity, which encourages both aggression and the appearance of strength. These values are apparent in the comments on the journal post. Instead of saying “I’m not good enough” and blaming themselves for their problems, fans blame others (/u/Dannyjohnston\_17). (This is in no way meant to suggest what someone should or shouldn’t do when struggling with their mental health. It’s simply a noteworthy distinction.) By blaming others, they appear both strong and combative, key facets of masculinity--but not necessarily of depression or other mental-health struggles. Fans’ sadness, then, is often transformed into anger and hostility. In both X’s music and his fans’ interactions, there was a common target of this blame and hostility: women (another trait of toxic masculinity). Three out of four top journal entries mention women as a source of their pain (u/Dannyjohnston\_17). Blame of women is rampant throughout the fandom, extending even to memes. Take a meme from /u/ThatTriHardGuy, which blames XXXTentacion’s mother for releasing music against X’s wishes. The post argues that she released music because she wanted money and that she didn’t really care about X. They believe a tenet of toxic masculinity: women exist to tear down men. This masculinity and aggressiveness towards those outside the fandom is then exacerbated by social media.

As a more public forum, social media offers a window into how XXXTentacion fans perform to the outside world. Fans on social media, unlike fans on forums, are frequently argumentative—but not with each other. Instagram and Twitter are more open to outsiders who have less than favorable opinions of XXXTentacion. Because of these opinions, anti-fans invade the comments. They provoke fans, challenging their support of the abusive artist. The community and XXXTentacion make fans’ battles with mental health safe and real. Therefore, attacks on X or the community feel like an invalidating assault on their mental health.

Because of their masculine identity, they choose to challenge these anti-fans in the comments, arguing and attacking them.

XXXTentacion fans stick by their community because it's the only place they feel safe to be vulnerable. In the U.S., there is overwhelming inadequacy in both conversations around and treatment of mental health. For fans of XXXTentacion to protect their safe space, they project a stereotypically masculine image. They then receive validation for being both vulnerable and abusive. X was the same way. Yet fans saw Jahseh Dwayne Onfroy as someone who shouldn't be defined by his past mistakes. I think this is misguided; ignoring his past mistakes ignores deep-seated sexism that allows the continued abuse and subjugation of women. But for the world to ignore the impact he had, and why, perpetuates a societal failure to deal with mental health and give people with mental health problems an outlet to express their feelings. By departing from this all-or-nothing approach, we can give people safety without perpetuating a culture of sexism.

#### Suggestions for future research

- Where does the masculinity of this fandom originate? How does this community change traditional ideas of masculinity?
- Is it possible to get away from this all-or-nothing approach to artists? How do fans depart from this approach, especially with such great devotion to their fan object? (Possibly take a look at sports fandom, where fans can disagree with teams or players. What's the difference?)
- How does XXXTentacion's death affect the community dynamics? Is their support more defensive? Do they bond differently?

- How do they grapple with XXXTentacion being an abuser? How can the cycle be broken and keep this program as sharing without toxicity or blame? Is that even possible with X as the fan object?

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