

Probably the biggest election story of recent times is the transformation of Ed Miliband from Weird Ed to teenage heartthrob. Throughout the election, the Labour leader has been the target of negative campaigning from the Conservative Party and right-leaning newspapers; he has suffered with unfavourable comparisons with his brother and has been ridiculed for his two kitchens. But now, the tune has changed. Step aside, Robot Ed. The time has come for Ed Miliband the sex symbol.

The transformation of Ed has little to do with the Labour Party's attempt at [rebranding him](#), and everything to do with the power of social media. Under the [#Milifandom](#) hashtag, a group of young women has taken to Twitter to gush over the Labour Leader. Though the hashtag was first mentioned in [June 2014](#), it was revived last week by 17-year-old Abby ([@twcuddleston](#)) to start "a movement against the distorted media portrayal of Ed".

In an interview with [The Guardian](#), Abby stated:

Ed Miliband is often presented quite badly in the media ... I think that's really unfair, because no one actually looks at his policies. They just look at a picture of him eating a bacon sandwich and think, 'I don't want that guy'. I want to change that.

By Monday, the hashtag was trending on Twitter, as thousands of people (mostly young women) shared their admiration for the Labour leader, and posted [photo-shopped images](#) of him as James Bond, Harry Potter, Poldark and an underwear model with the body of David Beckham. Suddenly the Twittersphere was alight with the [sexiness](#) of Ed Miliband - and his policies. Abby and other self-proclaimed #Milifandom members have been sharing their support for Labour's policies on home care, LGBT issues, the NHS and tuition fees. As Chris York put it in the [Huffington Post](#), "A simple hashtag has done what every spin doctor has tried and generally failed to do for years - engage young people in politics."

The significance of #Milifandom also appeared to extend beyond the world of social media, as Labour received a boost in the [polls](#), taking the lead once more, and Miliband became an overnight “[selfie sensation](#).”

So, how do we make sense of the phenomenon? First, like other viral events, it appears to have come up from the grassroots, rather than being the result of a concerted branding effort.

Second, it tells us something interesting about the changing nature of political discourse in the era of personalised politics. As politics and popular culture are drawing ever nearer, and politicians increasingly become celebrities in their own right, it makes sense that the opposition leader may attract a fan base just like Benedict Cumberbatch, Justin Bieber and One Direction.

Fan cultures are based on groups aggregating around emotional attachments to particular individuals – often ones associated with cult or niche media texts. For the young people participating in #Milifandom, political engagement may be such a niche activity that it is deserving of cult status. While fandom is often dismissed as [pathological](#), the attachments of fans are central to their identities, as they mark out their tastes, desires and beliefs.

The relationship between fandom and identity may be central to understanding #Milifandom, and may also grant us a rare glimmer of hope about the political engagement of young people.

[Matt Hills](#), who has written widely about fan cultures, suggested that #Milifandom enables the young girls engaging with the trend to show sophistication and confound the expectations of a patriarchal society:

“Why be a fan of what people expect you to be when you can performatively embrace Milifandom instead – displaying your own taste distinction and seriousness?,” he told me in an e-mail interview.

The mainstream media may see it as a soft political story, but “for those participating on social media – some of whom may be ironic in their fandom – it does at least offer a way of standing out from other demographically predictable fandoms, as well as a way of asking for teen girls’ fandoms not to be so quickly dismissed as unimportant or lacking in discernment and significance,” Hills said.

The teenage girls who have appropriated the hashtag have done so as an act of claiming their power – while many of them, including Abby, are too young to vote, they have demonstrated their ability to radically shift the parameters of public debate about the election in a way that nobody would have predicted just a week ago.

[Ross Garner](#), an expert on cult television fandom, says the phenomenon reverses a trend in the actions of fans. In recent years, he suggested in an interview, fan groups have “poached” meaning from texts for political reasons. This includes, for example, Harry Potter fans using the books as a resource for activism on issues around equality, gender and race.

“But this goes the other way,” Garner said. “Rather than using memes to draw attention to inequalities and inconsistencies in cult texts, political figures are being appropriated by cult fan practices.”

Along those lines, the #Milifandom phenomenon shows us that the tools of fan cultures – including the social sharing of your feelings and thoughts about and images of the object of your infatuation – can be a highly effective instrument in political life as well. [Cornel Sandvoss](#), who has written about fans of Obama, said in an interview that it also demonstrates that “political discourse can be easily utilised in the same way as other popular texts.”

Perhaps, then, #Milifandom allows us to imagine new forms of politics. The media scholar Liesbet van Zoonen argued in her book [Entertaining the Citizen](#) :

The behaviour of fans in relation to soaps, popular music, and other entertainment genres is not fundamentally different from what is required of citizens. Fans and citizens ... come about as the result of performance: of artists on the one hand, and of politicians on the other.

On this basis, she suggests that the mechanisms of fandom ought to be used to rethink engagement with politics.

What #Milifandom shows us is that even if fans are assumed to be irrational, emotional and

#Milifandom: how young people reclaimed their political power

Written by The Conversation

overwrought, the attachment to Ed Miliband is both emotional – based on his alleged “hotness” – and rational – based on the group’s conviction about the merits of Labour’s policies.

Milifandom may come and go, but the new phenomenon of a grassroots-based fan culture coalescing around an otherwise maligned politician is of lasting importance, whether or not it ultimately earns Sexy Ed a new home at 10 Downing Street.

Read more <http://theconversation.com/milifandom-how-young-people-reclaimed-their-political-power-40738>