

AGING, FANS, AND FANDOM

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What does it mean to be a 40-year-old *Once Upon a Time* (ABC) fan who live-tweets each episode? Or a 60-year-old *Lord of the Rings* enthusiast who curates an online catalog of fan art? Or an 80-year-old who collects Spice Girls dolls, not for their profit potential or nostalgia's sake but out of deep emotional attachment? In short, how are fans and fandoms shaped by age? As scholars have expanded their scope of inquiry to examine how fandom is influenced by multiple aspects of social identity—including not only gender and sexuality but now also race, ethnicity, and national identity—we advocate for the importance of highlighting *age* and *aging* in fan scholarship. Fandom in youth and adolescence has received considerable attention over the years from industries and scholars alike, reflecting both the profit potential of the youth market and long-held associations between fan practices and childhood development. In contrast, fandom in late(r) life remains under-examined, even as a rapidly aging global population and increased consumer spending by older adults signal its growing importance to media landscapes (Tedeschi 2006). For example, in the US context, about 35% of movie-goers are now 45 or older (Nielsen 2013), the most active concert-goers are middle-aged (35 to 54; Mazur 2015), and about 45% of all ad-supported cable television(TV) networks have median audience ages of 50 or older (Sternberg 2015). These trends are expected to continue in the future—how might they impact fan identities and practices?

This chapter builds on an earlier project (Harrington and Bielby 2010a) in which we introduced insights from gerontology—the interdisciplinary study of age and aging—into fan studies. Our project reviewed the prior two decades of fan studies to examine treatment of issues related to fans and aging. We found numerous scholars who wrote about fandom in later life, but their research rarely engaged gerontological knowledge that helps clarify how fan objects and experiences become positioned in life trajectories, transformations of fandom over time, and experiences of fandom in later life. We proposed that fans' identities, practices, and interpretive capacities have more age-related structure than was previously addressed and explored that thesis through four issues: (1) fandom and life milestones; (2) changes in the fan self over time; (3) age norms in fandom; and (4) changes in fan objects over time.

Over the past few years, fan scholars have increasingly examined age-related issues in fandom as well as more generalized processes of change and adaptation. They have also begun to more fully integrate fan studies with gerontological scholarship. This chapter thus has two aims: First, to revisit how fan studies can account for fandom over time and to update our prior thesis through incorporation of recent literature; and second, to highlight emergent areas of research in the field of aging, fans, and fandom. As noted, given rapid processes of global aging currently underway, swiftly changing demographics of media audiences worldwide, and rising industry interest in cultivating fan-consumers, it is important to understand how age and aging modifies the experiences of fans both individually and collectively. We begin with an introduction to media and the life course.

Life course and media

Understanding the life course is about “understanding lives through time” (Fry 2003: 271). Life course scholars are interested in the social and historical changes that impact a particular generation at a particular point in time and shape the ways that “members of that generation make sense of a presently remembered past, experienced present, and anticipated future” (Cohler and Hostetler 2003: 557). Sociologists tend to use the term *life course* whereas psychologists prefer the term *life span*, but both approaches focus on issues of time and timing, intersections of social context and personal biography, interdependent lives, and the importance of human agency (George 2003: 672). The difference in terminology reflects the amount of emphasis placed on internal aspects of development (life span approach) versus social influences on human development (life course approach).

The life course is conceptualized within this framework via general patterns of stability and transition rather than evolutionary or hierarchical stages. Since life journeys can follow unexpected paths, the task for scholars is to “simultaneously do justice to long-term patterns of change and stability and to the heterogeneity of those patterns” (George 2003: 675). Though unscripted, different life phases tend to be marked by distinct opportunities and challenges, and our engagement with them shapes our development from infancy through childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and late life. Each individual life course is also guided by culturally and historically bound ideals of how lives “should” unfold, offering normative pathways against which we evaluate our own personal trajectories. These ideals are undergoing significant transition in the US and elsewhere but continue to influence how we understand our lived experiences.

Popular media such as music, comics, and TV are thoroughly implicated in life course processes, offering representations of normatively appropriate (and inappropriate) identities and activities, producing so-called “rock-and-roll,” “TV,” and “YouTube” generations, altering expectations for how publicly lives can or should be lived, and transforming relatively non-mediated lives in earlier historical eras into thoroughly mediated ones today. Media texts and technologies help unite cohorts, define generations and cross-generational differences, and give structure and meaning to our lives as they unfold. In our earlier article (2010a) we found that fan scholars discussed a wide variety of age-related *issues* but rarely utilized *theories* of age and aging to ground their analyses. In this chapter, we revisit the four age-based issues noted earlier—fandom and life milestones, changes in the fan self over time, age norms within fandom, and changes in the fan object over time—and illustrate how a life course/life span perspective informs these experiences. Next, we discuss emergent areas of research in the study of aging, fans, and fandom.

Issue I: Fandom and life milestones

Life course scholars explore how lives unfold by examining factors that cause our current path to shift direction. Stability in one’s life journey can be interrupted by age-graded life transitions (e.g. graduating college), physiological changes (e.g. andropause), or significant turning points such as transformations in self-awareness or involvement in new social roles. In terms of physiological changes, scholars have been most interested in fandom and puberty, specifically in adolescents’ engagement with fan objects to help them interpret their changing bodies and emergent sense of self. Analytic focus in this literature is on the links between gender, sexuality, and fan identity in adolescence (e.g., Ehrenreich, Hess, and Jacobs 1992), with more recent research examining intersectional identities (age/gender/sexuality) explicitly in the context of adult fans (e.g. Scodari 2014).

Physiological changes associated with later life phases—such as changes in physical stamina, sexual arousal patterns, and physical appearance—are only now being explored in fan studies. For example, older music (punk) fans declare that they “paid their dues” in their youth and can now bypass certain aesthetic or performative aspects of fandom (day-glo Mohawks, mosh pits etc.) they adhered to when younger (Bennett 2006). Relatedly, older soap opera fans debate whether real-world issues associated with aging (erectile dysfunction, receding hairlines, perimenopausal hot flashes) can be entertainingly told in soap storylines (Harrington and Brothers 2010a), and 60-something Patti Smith fans question what it means to retain libidinal desire and sexual agency in late-life fandom (Lavin 2015).

If the impact of bodily aging on fan identities and practices remains underexamined, we know even less about the impact of cognitive aging. Brooker (2002) offers a fascinating discussion of how age shapes the *Star Wars* fandom by positioning fans in radically different interpretive communities. A fan’s experiences of *Star Wars* is shaped by when she or he first encounters the narrative, given that the first episode, produced in 1977, was later positioned as the fourth installment of the franchise; as a result, older fans tend to “read” *Star Wars* differently than younger ones. However, Brooker’s discussion does not capture the aspect of cognitive aging that most interests gerontologists and geriatricians: changes in functional capacity. Research on media engagement and cognition is located outside of media/fan studies (in neurology, epidemiology, biostatistics etc.) and finds that some forms of media consumption may be cognitively damaging. For example, Fogel and Carlson (2006) report cognitive impairment among older adults who watch talk shows and soap operas. While a *contra* body of research suggests that greater engagement in media-related activities actually slows down cognitive decline (e.g. Ghisletta, Bickel, and Lovden 2006), the overall relationship between aging bodies, aging minds, and fan practices is ripe for research.

From both methodological and ethical perspectives, there can be challenges in studying older adults. Most of the nascent research on late(r)-life fandom includes participants who are members of “adult” (18–64 years) or “young-old” (6–74) age groups, to use categorizations typical within gerontology. Fan studies on the “middle-old” (75–84) or “old-old” (85+) seem largely nonexistent, even though humans continue to grow throughout the *entire* life course (George 2003). Older fans may be less likely than younger fans to be active online, posing challenges to scholars who prioritize networked fandom (see Sandvoss and Kearns 2014). Moreover, conducting interviews and/or focus groups with middle-old and old-old fans raises concerns given higher risks of fatigue, stress, and frailty (physical and cognitive) among these populations (Morgan and Kunkel 2016: 44). There has been interesting work in celebrity studies on the meanings of celebrities for nursing home residents (Claessens 2014), but within fan studies research on the oldest groups of fans is ripe for attention.

In addition to physiological changes, age-graded transitions and major life turning points also shape fandom. For example, reaching the legal age to drive opens up new possibilities for attending fan events, becoming a parent re-shapes the time one has to devote to fandom, and retirement from paid labor allows for new investments in personal interests (e.g. Davis 2012). For committed fans, discovering or losing their fan object is a major turning point that rewrites identities, daily activities, and life trajectories. Becoming-a-fan narratives are central to fan studies—attachments to Beyoncé or *Game of Thrones* or PewDiePie so deeply meaningful that fans feel reborn or rebooted. Long-term fandom provides structure to life narratives, as fans use specific cultural texts to segment their lives into different phases—“before” and “after” Harry Potter or Bruce Springsteen entered the picture (e.g. Brunner 2016; Cavicchi 1998). Becoming a fan thus redirects the life course, gives new meaning and structure to specific life stages, and marks periods of one’s past: hallmarks of what gerontologists consider a major life milestone.

Issue II: The aging self

The second life course issue relevant to fandom involves the aging self. While there are continuities in the self from infancy to adulthood, the self changes in reasonably predictable ways due to developmentally related challenges and opportunities associated with each life phase. Long-term identity changes can emerge in the characteristics associated with an identity, a shift in the importance of one identity versus another (e.g. fan vs. employee), or the gain or loss of an identity (Deaux 1991). Fan identities are also influenced by age norms, the larger sociocultural expectations of how we “should” behave (or be) at different life stages. In broader historical context, claiming a fan identity has shifted over time from the “loser” stereotype that marked twentieth-century fandom to the more widespread acceptance, public visibility, and industry cultivation of fandom today. However, the public understanding of fans remains predominantly associated with certain identity characteristics, such as youth, gender, and sexuality, while overlooking others. Rebecca Wanzo (2015) advocates for a new genealogy of fan studies that accounts for both fans and acafans of color, and our own scholarship obviously emphasizes the relevance of age, aging, and life course perspectives for a full understanding of fan experiences. Unlike many identities or group memberships, fan identities are always acquired and elective and thus can be abandoned at any point. As fan objects are picked up and discarded, the nature of fan identity—and thus our broader “overall” identities—shifts in important ways (e.g. Hills 2005).

Participating in fandom also aids adults in navigating disjunctures between chronological age (number of years lived) and subjective (or “felt”) age. In general, younger adolescents feel older than their age, older adolescents feel younger than their age, and this disconnect intensifies across adulthood with adults feeling increasingly younger than what their chronological age signifies (Montepare 2009: 42). How older adults perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others is thus often mismatched. For example, in her study of women over 50 in the *Sherlock* (BBC) fandom, Petersen (2016) finds that subjective aging is negotiated in particular ways through social media and fan practices. Analysis of email interviews reveals that fandom shapes how women negotiate their subjective age specifically in relation to fandom as “youth culture” alongside cultural expectations of adult female passion and creativity. In short, older female fans engage in both self-legitimizing and self-othering practices in regard to different meanings of age in fandom (subjective vs. objective).

The self also changes due to general processes of human development. While many developmental theories only address childhood and/or adolescence, adulthood and later life are strategic sites for self-examination amongst the challenges posed by the very process of getting old (George 1998: 139). Erikson's (1959) classic eight-stage model of maturation, with each stage including a distinct challenge that represents an opportunity for personal growth or failure, is potentially useful to fan scholars (albeit with the reminder that contemporary gerontologists reject rigid stage models of aging). For example, the challenge associated with early adulthood—intimacy vs. isolation—is implicit in numerous fan studies that examine the emotional authenticity and/or social implications of adult fans' attachments to media objects (e.g. Bennett 2006; Cavicchi 1998; Stevenson 2006). See the large literature on parasociality in media psychology or early historical analyses of fandom that assumed fan attachments merely compensated for social isolation (e.g. Giles 2002; Horton and Wohl 1956). Here, the young adult fan “fails” the developmental challenge because emotional intimacy with cultural objects was long perceived by scholars as deluded.

In contrast, evidence of successful negotiation of the mid-adulthood challenge—generativity vs. stagnation—is evidenced in the various mentoring practices of older fans. For example,

see Harrington and Bielby (1995) on intergenerational soap opera viewing, Brooker (2002) on adult fan apprenticeship, and Smith (2012) on the familial transfer of subcultural capital in the British Northern Soul scene. Finally, evidence of the developmental challenge associated with late life—integrity vs. despair—can be seen in the contemplative dimension of older adults’ positioning of fandom in their life course (e.g. Harrington and Bielby 2010b). Here, fans’ reflection of their fandom across time—and their own aging selves within fandom—results in a gradual repositioning of their place in various fan communities. For an example of how Erikson’s model of adult maturation might be applied within fan studies, see our prior study of older soap opera fans (Harrington and Bielby 2010b).

Issue III: Changing age norms

The third relevant life course issue, noted earlier, involves age norms within fandom. Age norms—the benchmark against which we evaluate ourselves and are evaluated by others as behaving age appropriately or inappropriately—change over time and are influenced by the disjuncture between chronological and subjective age discussed above. Age norms change for us as individuals (what is appropriate at 15 is different at 45), they change historically (what is appropriate for a 15-year-old today is different than for a 15-year-old in 1960), and their overall impact changes over time (age norms are more powerful in some life phases than others). Age norms faced by individuals have received the most attention in fan studies. For example, adult pop music fans are regularly accused of being in “arrested development” (Bennett 2006; Vroomen 2004) and older soap opera fans routinely hide their fandom due to age considerations (what is acceptable for adults) as well as the genre (the low social value of soaps; Harrington and Bielby 1995). However, the twenty-first-century mainstreaming of fandom allows once-stigmatized communities to legitimize their practices in light of broader cultural trends. For example, adult toy collectors have developed concrete strategies to justify their interests, such as rhetorically disguising their interest in toys *as* toys (items to be played with) under the more socially acceptable guise of collecting (e.g. Heljakka forthcoming). In general, there continue to be disparities in how adult fans experience and express their fandom in public, due in part to age norms.

Age norms are also relevant in terms of late-life role models provided by aging celebrities and fictional characters (e.g. Lavin 2015), the use of older spokespersons to promote a healthy “senior” lifestyle (e.g. Marshall and Rahman 2015), and the growing interest in alternative and/or radical images of aging (e.g. Loos and Ekstrom 2014). Interestingly, as long-term fans make sense of aging through the models provided by aging celebrities, those celebrities must negotiate their own aging process simultaneously with their construction or embodiment of an aging cultural text (Harrington and Brothers 2010b). As such, media performances that might provide one kind of age-based role modeling for fans might generate very different outcomes for performers.

Issue IV: Changing fan objects

Finally, the fact that fan objects themselves change over time shapes fans’ experiences with aging. Fan texts age as fans do—unpredictably. It is a complicated task, however, to assess the interactions between self-unfolding-across-time and fan-object-unfolding-across-time—and even when fan objects do *not* seem to transform with age (such as the seemingly static nature of movie dialogue or sporting event outcomes), their meaning is always different because the fan has changed. For example, Cavicchi (1998) examines the changing meanings

of Springsteen songs across fans' life journeys and Kuhn (2002) explores how movie fans' selective memory of scenes and characters reflects who they were at earlier life stages. When fan objects *do* change with time, such as the re-imaginings of cult TV series like *Doctor Who* (BBC) or *American Horror Story* (FX), fans are forced to renegotiate their fan identity with each new iteration (Hills 2016).

In his examination of the social psychological basis of fandom, Sandvoss (2005) suggests that fan objects come to form "part of the self, and hence function as its extension" (100). Fans' relationship with cultural objects, in which fans "superimpose attributes of the self, their beliefs and value systems, and, ultimately, their sense of self on the object of fandom" (104), becomes more complicated over time. To borrow from Harrington and Brothers' study of soap opera actors and the aging process (2010b), it seems that fans' *existence* is gradually transformed into *texistence*—the self develops in ongoing dialogue with the media texts that help define and sustain it. This concept is comparable to that of "character" in celebrity studies which refers to the blending of actor and character over time. Our observations here point to a rich potential research trajectory for scholars focusing on how texts age from a life course perspective (life course analysis of a media text) or how aspects of human development might illuminate this duality of self-aging and text-aging.

Emergent research on aging, fans and fandom

Interest in aging and fandom has expanded rapidly since the publication of our original essay (2010a) and in this section, we feature three emergent areas of research. First, scholars are increasingly interested in broad processes of change and adaptation in fan communities (e.g. Williams forthcoming). For example, Whiteman and Metivier (2013) explore zombie fan cultures, or online communities "that have entered into a state of atrophy, decline or impending demise" (270). Situating their analysis in prior work on post-object fandom (Williams 2011; see also Williams 2015), they examine how two fan sites (City of Angel and the Sugar Quill) "reached a state of exhaustion and/or degeneration" (290) and how fan responses to these endings reveal the formation of fan subjectivity online. Whereas Williams (2011) emphasizes how endings can generate efforts to stabilize and reaffirm fan engagement, Whiteman and Metivier (2013) are more interested in the permanent rupturing of fannish involvement.

In another approach to fan adaptation, Deller (2014) studies fans of two different British music acts to explore how they "respond to changes in technology, changes in the careers of the acts and changes in personal circumstances" (237). Revisiting communities she first studied a decade earlier, Deller examines how fan discourse, group norms, and relationship-building transforms over time and with age. Additional research on fan adaptation includes Davis (2012) on how punk fans adapt to the expectations of adulthood, Adams and Harmon (2014) on how aging fans of the Grateful Dead adapt how they participate in the community to allow continuity in their Deadhead identities, and Click (forthcoming) on how Martha Stewart fans modified their identities following her incarceration for securities fraud.

A second promising research trajectory focuses on collective memory, which "defines the relationships between the individual and society and enables the community to preserve its self-image and transfer it over time" (Zandberg 2015: 111). Scholars of collective memory typically address societies at the macro-level but their principles apply equally to fan communities. For example, Kuhn's (2002) study of men and women growing up in the 1930s, reveals the crucial role of memory at both the personal and group level in defining the existence of a film-going fandom. In contrast, Hills (2014) analyzes texts produced by *Doctor Who* fans and introduces the term "fanfac" to refer to "fans' factual writings on their own fan experiences,

memories and communities" (32). Fanfac comes to circulate as an everyday element within the fandom, "acting to bind fans into a collectivity of recognizable experience" (37). Taking a different approach, our own project (Bielby and Harrington forthcoming) explores the production of collective memory within the *Glee* (Fox) fandom following the death of actor Cory Monteith. Situating our analysis in theories of grief, loss, and collective memory, we show how fans' efforts at commemoration played an important role in their adaptation to Monteith's death and to the creative choices made by the show's production team.

The final research trajectory we highlight encompasses new work on the concept of generations, first defined by Mannheim (1928 [1952]) as comprising both the category of persons born within a specific era of history as well as a shared world view (generational consciousness) distinct from that of other generations. Whereas our chronological and subjective ages shift over time, our generational belonging stays with us forever. Casual reference to media generations has been present in fan studies for decades but the concept has come under heightened scrutiny lately. For example, contemporary work on generational objects in fandom (e.g. Harrington and Bielby 2013; Hills 2016) has drawn on the influential writings of Christopher Bollas, and a recent book on millennial fandom (Stein 2015) examines the evolving relationship between fan and millennial. Acknowledging that the term "millennial" has grown to reference more than a generational group—it now also refers to "a vision of the ideal multiplatform cultural participant" (2015: 3)—author Louisa Stein explores millennial "feels culture" in terms of its competing discourses: millennial hope vs. millennial noir.

Generation was also the focus of a recent issue of *Participations* (Volume 11, Number 2, 2014) that featured a special themed section aimed at "illustrating how the cultural concept of generations may help scholars in describing the contemporary audience fragmentation and in exploring the complex interrelations between audiences, technologies and cultural settings" (Siibak, Vittadini, and Nimrod 2014:102). In one of the featured articles, Napoli (2014) explores social media use and generational identity, asking (among other questions) whether social media impacts peer-to-peer and cross-generational relationships. Interested in how culture and media such as fan objects function to bind generations together, she finds that social media strengthens ties both across and within generations. In another featured article and in the context of TV fandom, Urresti (2014) explores the intergenerational status of television in four different age groups: 18–34 ("Youngs"), 35–49 ("Adult 1"), 50–64 ("Adult 2") and 65+ ("Elders"). The project finds intriguing differences in how age groups approach television, with Youngs seeing it as something to "fill the void," the two Adult groups valuing it due to the rarity and value of free time, and Elders relating to TV "with a sense of wonder and amazement that cannot be found in other age groups" (2014: 142). This holds interesting implications for TV-fan relationships at different points in the life course and may refer to the developmental opportunities and challenges unique to each life stage (e.g. Erikson's model).

Conclusion

Our goal in this chapter has been to revisit and extend our earlier article on the value of a life course perspective for fan scholars. Given a rapidly aging global population and thus rapidly aging audiences/consumers across a range of entertainment landscapes, understanding how age and aging shape fandom is of vital importance. Through a particular focus on the age-related structure implicit in fan identities, practices, and interpretive capacities, we aim to highlight the rich developmental issues raised by participating in fandom. Our focus on adult fans reflects the fact that they remain under-theorized and under-studied by media scholars. A key element of the storying of fans' lives is the integration and revisiting of media texts with

fans' own self-constructions over time such that those texts inform their aging process—both who they become as they grow older and how it is that they grow older. Media fans' life narratives might thus be said to comprise complex interactions between their “real” life (biography), their autobiography (storying of their life), and the media texts which help construct, give meaning to, and guide the relationship between the two—and that age along with them (Harrington and Bielby 2010a: 444).

The interplay between these elements may be experienced differently by long-term fans of a singular fan object than by cyclical fans, and differently based on genre of fan object. For example, one of the most compelling themes in research on long-term fans is the extent to which fan objects serve as touchstones or lifelines as fans age. From a life-course perspective, this emotional anchoring is crucial in an era characterized by the rapid dismantling of normative adult life, as has been observed by human development scholars in the suspension of traditional timetables for life transitions, the increasing lack of synchrony among age-related roles, and the growing absence of clear life scripts (Settersten 2007). As normative adult life destabilizes, fan objects increasingly provide a reference point for navigating the trajectory through adulthood and later life. Scholarship on age, aging, and fandom has thus never been more timely and relevant.

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