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Participatory fandom in American culture: A qualitative case study of DragonCon attendees

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Participatory Fandom in American Culture:
A Qualitative Case Study of DragonCon Attendees

by

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ABSTRACT

With the rise of the mass media over the last century, fame and celebrity seem to have evolved into ever-growing phenomena. Likewise, audience members have sought increasing involvement with people or activities related to the focus of their interest. These individuals are not content to simply watch their favorite actors or films from home. Instead, they take a more active approach, engaging in activities related to their fandom as well as seeking interaction with each other in organized groups (in person and on the Internet), attending conventions, and seeking interaction with celebrities.

This study presents a discussion of fame, celebrity, and participatory fandom, to examine what motivates certain individuals to seek active involvement in fandom. Using the theories of Uses and Gratifications and Social Learning, it looks at this unique relationship and possible causes for certain members of an audience to actively participate in fandom and seek interaction with each other and with celebrities. Areas examined include social group identification, personal identification with celebrities, false intimacy with celebrities, parasocial interaction, the possibility of meeting celebrities and a feeling of empowerment as a member of a fan community.

This qualitative research took an ethnographic case study approach, using in-depth interviews and participant observation of attendees and activities at DragonCon, a large

annual media convention in Atlanta, Georgia. This study sought to examine what themes

might emerge to identify motivations for fans' active participation in fandom.

Seventeen participants were chosen using convenience sampling and interviewed

about their experience at the convention. In data analysis, three major concepts emerged in

regard to the participants' motivation for attending the convention: Fans seek out social

interaction, interaction with celebrities, and enjoy being a part of a participation environment.

Chapter One

Introduction

American society contains both celebrities and their fans, members of the media
audience who take specific interest in these celebrities as well as the media with which
they are associated. Some fans go a step further by seeking out participation in fan-
related activities and interaction with celebrities themselves. In order to understand this
relationship, this study examines both fame and fandom; more specifically celebrities and
participatory fans. This qualitative research took an ethnographic case study approach,
using in-depth interviews and participant observation of attendees and activities at
DragonCon, a large annual media convention in Atlanta, Georgia. It seeks to understand
what motivates certain fans to seek out involvement with celebrities and fan-related
activities.

The concepts of "fame" and "renown" have existed since the formation of the
earliest societies. Originally those people who achieved such status were recognized for
being particularly accomplished at some skill or talent, or they were known by the masses
as political, military or spiritual leaders (Braudy, 1997). Of course, such categories of
famous people continue to exist today. However, with the rise of mass media over the
last century, fame seems to have evolved into an ever-growing phenomenon. Today's
society consists of "stars," "superstars," and "celebrities," all of which are churned out at
an increasing rate as new avenues to fame are created. In fact, the growing number of

"reality" programs (particularly those whose objective is to make the contestants famous, such as the Fox network's *American Idol*) have become celebrity factories themselves, creating celebrities out of unknowns as well as vehicles to boost aspiring performers to fame (Wolk, 2002).

Along with these celebrities come their fans – dedicated individuals who not only support the careers of their favorite celebrities, but whose very existence drives the mass media to cover celebrities, encouraging public interest in these stars and therefore creating an enormous star/fan machine (Gamson, 1992). This machine only gets larger as the mass media and technology allow for the creation of more celebrities, easier access to celebrities, and the ability of fans to interact with each other, the media, and sometimes even the celebrities themselves.

While fans seem secondary to the attention celebrities are given, they are the backbone of the celebrity/fan machine. Fans, a more active subset of mass media audiences in general, are important to both the mass media and the general public in a number of ways. Even the average fan helps to keep programs on the air, films at the box office, and celebrities in the news. More avid fans, those who choose to participate in various fan-related activity, contribute more to this process. Some of the more active fans have even had an impact on the outcome of television series and film, because ultimately they have power as a consumer force (Jenkins, 1992).

Participatory Fandom

Some fans do more than just enjoy watching their favorite shows or reading their favorite authors. Instead, they go a step farther, by engaging in activities related to the

object of their affection, as well as seeking interaction with each other in organized group activities. In other words, these people go out of their way to participate in fandom, more so than the average fan. It is this group that will be referred to as "participatory" fans. One could argue then, that if there is a continuum that goes from the most casual fan to the most active, the more active, participatory fans will have a larger impact on the mass media and society (Jenkins, 2006). Additionally, considering the media's focus on celebrities and their lives, it is important to examine the effect the celebrities have on their fans. This thesis focuses on participatory fans and seeks to understand why they have taken an extra step towards becoming involved in various activities related to the objects of their affection.

There are many ways fans participate in fandom, from simple activities such as reading entertainment magazines and watching entertainment news programs in order to keep up with their favorite celebrities, to attending (or even organizing) varying sized conventions ("cons") where fans from numerous genres can get together to participate in an array of activities with each other and sometimes with the celebrities they admire (Harris, 1998). Other fans may run Web sites dedicated to a favorite actor or television program, and others still may enjoy creating costumes, buying and trading collectibles, writing fan literature (called "fan fiction" or "fanfic"), engaging in lengthy discourse of favorite shows or actors, and even creating fan-written songs ("filking"), to name just a few (Jenkins, 1992).

In today's society there are a number of factors that make it easier for fans to participate in a variety of fan-related activities. The Internet allows fans to easily communicate with each other, and also allows celebrities to create a venue where they

can communicate (usually indirectly) with the public. For example, actor Stephen Collins, star of the television series *7th Heaven*, has his own site with news about himself, a place to send him e-mail messages, and links that allow fans to purchase other projects (movies, video games, TV programs) he has worked on (Collins, 2003).

For those fans who wish to gather with each other in person or to get a chance to meet their favorite celebrities, there are a growing number of both media conventions and other fan/star meet-and-greet events. For example, four times a year since 1990, there has been a Hollywood Collectors and Celebrities Show (Nashawatu, 2001). The celebrities featured are primarily actors who have not been in the public eye for some time, from big names like 2001 attendee Charlton Heston to now-obscure 1950s "scream queen" Maila Nurmi. Country stars, particularly those such as Trisha Yearwood who have branched out into acting, can be found at the Annual Nashville Country Music Fan Fair, which has been attracting celebrities and their autograph-seeking fans for 32 years (Wuckovich, 2002). Here, the stars not only perform for the guests, but they also meet with them for pictures and autographs.

Because conventions, particularly the larger ones, are popular places for fans to not only interact with each other, but to meet with celebrities, they make an excellent venue in which to study participatory fandom. This thesis examines participatory fandom by interviewing and observing fans and celebrities at a large, annual media convention called DragonCon.

The Power of Participatory Fans

Generally speaking, fans are first and foremost members of an audience. Without an audience (regardless of the degree of fandom of the audience members), television executives could not sell advertising, authors could not sell books and feature films could not sell tickets. Television in particular does not provide programming for audiences; on the contrary, it delivers audiences to advertisers (Ang, 1991). Therefore, if audiences maintain the existence of the mass media, they are invaluable. It then follows that the more avid the viewer, the more valuable they become. These fans, many participatory, are the people who not only watch *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, but who will also buy Buffy merchandise, pay particular attention to program sponsors, and purchase expensive VHS and DVD boxed sets of the series. The *Star Trek* franchise stands as an excellent example. In its first 25 years, over $500 million in merchandise sold, including over four million novels every year (Jindra, 1994).

Fans have even been known to affect the outcome of a television series, even saving it from cancellation (Jenkins, 1992). Fan access to entertainment information, particularly on the Internet, can have a huge effect on word-of-mouth and thus, box office results. According to Chip Meyers, president of Fandom.com, the site's 1 million monthly users "can make or break a movie" (Gruenwedel, 2000, p. 58). New Line Cinema's vice president of worldwide Internet marketing and development, Gordon Paddison, agrees and recognizes the power of the fan audience, explaining that "[fandom's] audience are the 'early adopters,' and they are avid movie goers" (Gruenwedel, 2000, p. 64). It would seem to follow that the more avid or participatory

the fans, the more valuable they will be to the media and as consumers, and the more power they will have.

In order to understand participatory fandom, this thesis examines both fans and celebrities, as well as their relationship to one another. Additionally, it looks at the role of the news and entertainment media, both as they influence the audience and how the audience in turn can influence the media. It also examines various theories and previous research that helps to understand this relationship, as well as offers some reasons why certain fans choose to become active participants.

Chapter Two is a review of the literature and research relating to celebrities and fandom, leading to three research questions to guide the research process. In Chapter Three, the methods for conducting the research are given, which in this case is a qualitative, ethnographic case study using in-depth interviews and participant observation of fans and celebrities attending a large media convention. Chapter Four details the findings in which three primary motivations for participation emerged: Social interaction, interaction with celebrities, and inclusion in the participation environment. In Chapter Five examines the themes that emerged from the research and places this study in the context of research discussed in the literature review. The conclusion looks at the importance of research into participatory fandom and how it can benefit the understanding of the media audience.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

This chapter looks at the history and emergence of both fandom and celebrities in mass media and society, and follows with literature and research relating to these phenomena. Based on existing studies, a number of motivations for participatory fandom emerge and are explained. This chapter examines fame and fandom, defining each and examining possible reasons for their existence. It specifically defines participatory fandom and examines various theories as to what creates and contributes to it, such as social interaction, personal identification, parasocial interaction, false intimacy and actual interaction. Additionally, it looks at the public perception of the fan community, as well as ways in which fans may feel a sense of empowerment. The chapter concludes with a discussion of related theoretical approaches that aid in the understanding of participatory fandom.

Defining Fandom

The word "fan" is an abbreviated form of the word "fanatic," from the Latin word *fanaticus*, meaning "of or belonging to the temple, a temple servant, a devotee." In its

abbreviated form, the word "fan" first appeared in late 19th century journalistic reports of sporting events, referring to the followers of those events (Jenkins, 1992). Another of the earliest uses of the word "fan" referred to female theater-goers who, male critics claimed, had come to the theater to admire the male actors rather than the plays (Auster, 1989). Later, with the development of both the motion picture industry and the reporting media, more information on celebrities was available to a larger segment of the public, and the idea of fandom grew. Most recently, computer-mediated communication by way of the Internet and e-mail has allowed fans from all over the world to easily connect and create a global community unlike anything before (Giles, 2000).

But what exactly "makes" a fan? Andrew Tudor (1975) suggested that there are four central ideas that draw people to celebrities: (a) Emotional affinity (the individual feels a loose attachment to the celebrity), (b) self-identification (the fan's involvement with the celebrity reaches a point where the fan puts him- or herself in the same place as the celebrity), (c) imitation (usually in reference to younger fans, where the celebrity acts as a role model), and (d) projection (the most extreme fandom, where the person lives his or her life as the star, or completely dedicated to that celebrity) . (P. 97)

John Fiske (2001) defined fandom and its link to the production of celebrities by examining the subject from a cultural economy standpoint:

> Fandom is a common feature of popular culture in industrial societies. It selects from the repertoire of mass-produced and mass-distributed entertainment certain performers, narratives or genres and takes them into the culture of a self-selected fraction of the people. They are then reworked into an intensely pleasurable, intensely signifying popular culture that is both similar to, yet

significantly different from, the culture of more 'normal' popular audiences…All

popular audiences engage in varying degrees of semiotic productivity, producing

meanings and pleasure that pertain to their social situation out of the products and

of the culture industries. But fans often turn this semiotic productivity into some

form of textual production that can circulate among, and thus help to define, the

fan community. (p. 30)

Henry Jenkins (1995), a professor at MIT and a long-time researcher of fans and

fandom, defined fandom as:

A cultural community, one which shares a common mode of reception, a

common set of critical categories and practices, a tradition of aesthetic

production, a set of social norms and expectations. I look upon fans as possessing

certain knowledge and competency in the area of popular culture that is different

from that possessed by academic critics and from that possessed by the "normal"

or average television viewer. (p. 144)

At the very least, fandom points to an active and interested audience. Fandom is

linked with knowledge about characters and plot in a program (or players and games in

sports); active, participatory, viewing; concern about outcomes; and emotional

responsiveness to the action and activity as it unfolds (Gantz, Wang, Paul, & Potter

2006). Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) noted that fans are "those people who become

particularly attached to certain programmes or stars within the context of a relatively

heavy media use" (p. 138).

The term "fan" is often linked with those who follow sports. A full discussion of

sports fandom is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it should be noted that many

findings in the research of sports fandom parallel that of media fandom, particularly in the area of social identity. Fandom offers such social benefits as feelings of camaraderie, community and solidarity, as well as enhanced social prestige and self-esteem (Zillman, Bryant, & Sapolsky, 1989). Additionally, fandom allows people to be a part of the game without requiring special skills (Branscome & Wann, 1991). According to Zillman et al. (1989), "it appears that sports fanship can unite and provide feelings of belongingness that are beneficial to individuals and to the social setting in which they live" (p. 251). Melnick (1993) agrees, noting that participating in sports fandom allows people to enrich their social psychological lives through quasi-intimate relationships and a sense that they truly belong to the group. Thus, the identity of a sports fan, as with any fandom or group identity, is beneficial to the individual in that it may provide a sense of community.

For the purpose of this literature review, all of the preceding definitions will be considered when defining exactly what constitutes a "fan."

Fandom's Reputation and Public Perception

Fans, particularly those of science fiction and fantasy, have been plagued with a bad reputation and negatively stereotyped for decades (Jenkins, 1992). For example, fans of the series *Star Trek* often come to people's minds when they think of fandom. Even the comedy series *Saturday Night Live* (Franken, 1986) spoofed Trek fandom with the help of its star, William Shatner, in the famous "Get a Life" skit, whereby Shatner, playing himself appearing at a *Star Trek* fan convention, gets frustrated with the Spock-eared, t-shirt-wearing fans and tells them to "get a life" and "get out of their parents' basements."

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Eric Hoffer (1951), in his study of mass movements (and fandom can certainly be considered a mass movement), identified one category of followers of such movements as "misfits." These misfits, unable to achieve what they want (stardom, interaction with celebrities, or usually direct involvement with the object of their fandom), eventually lose themselves in the collectivity of a mass movement. Perhaps it is this perception of the misfits of the world and their connection with fandom that might also contribute to its often negative reputation.

Of course, not all fans are societal misfits or resemble those portrayed in the *Trek* skit. Fandom as a subculture consists of a range of people as diverse as the population itself (Jenkins, 1992). Perhaps participating in fandom is not generally seen as so bad in itself, but rather, it is the degree to which the fan participates that may earn fandom a bad reputation. For every fan wearing Spock ears at a convention, there are certainly many more "normal" people dressed in street clothes milling about nearby, who are just as excited at being there. Fandom can perhaps be seen as a continuum, from those casual fans at one end to highly participatory individuals at the other (Harris, 1998).

Unfortunately, those probably most responsible for fandom's bad reputation are crazed fans and stalkers, from John Hinkley shooting Ronald Reagan to get attention from actress Jodie Foster, to the fairly regular reports of fans attempting (and sometimes succeeding) in breaking into celebrities' homes (Jenson, 2001). One might argue that these people are not "fans" but "fanatics." They have crossed the line between socially acceptable behavior and criminal activity. When a person becomes obsessed with another, famous or not, and the obsessed person goes as far as to stalk or hurt the other person, then he or she has become more than a pesky fan who lacks the decency to leave

an actor alone at a restaurant. This type of criminal exists within our society, and when

he or she attacks a celebrity, that person is often labeled a "crazed fan." Yet when this

same criminal behavior is exhibited against an anonymous person, the perpetrator is

simply another stalker (Jensen, 1992). Therefore, for the sake of this thesis, I will not

include celebrity stalkers as members of participatory fandom.

Fame and Celebrity

It would be impossible to discuss fans and fandom without looking at the co-

existing phenomena of fame and celebrity that seem to be constantly growing in

American culture. The idea of everyone getting his or her "fifteen minutes of fame" is

expanding as "reality" television programs turn game show contestants into overnight

celebrities, and computer-generated animation allows for the creation of near life-like

characters. The Internet not only provides a form of quick and relatively inexpensive

communication, but allows anybody to express him- or herself to a worldwide audience.

Celebrity, fans, and the media are everywhere. And the lines dividing them are

beginning to blur.

The concepts of fame and celebrity date back to the beginning of written history.

According to cultural historian Leo Braudy (1997), Alexander the Great could be

considered one of the first famous people. By the time of his death in 323 B.C.,

Alexander ruled most of the world as known to the Greeks. While Alexander was not the

first person to seek honor and glory through military success, he was the first to claim

that honor and glory for himself instead of for his people. Additionally, those who

followed Alexander in later generations could be considered his fans, although he did not

interact with them (Giles, 2000). Perhaps this offers a possible differentiation between what is meant by "fame" and "celebrity." Cultural critic P. David Marshall (1997) conducted a thorough etymology of the term, relating it back to the French *célèbre* (meaning "well-known, public") and the Latin *celere* (meaning "swift"). Perhaps this usage of "swift" could speak to celebrities becoming quickly famous, as opposed to earning fame though years of accomplishments. Today, celebrity can certainly be seen as more of a media phenomenon or social construct (Gamson, 1994).

The History of Celebrities and the Emergence of Fans

While the concept of fame has been around for centuries, it has been only recently that actors have managed to reach such a high level of notoriety. Certainly a major contributing factor was the introduction of motion pictures in the early 1900s. Movie directors, particularly after studios were established, would use the same performers from one film to the next, to create actors with international recognition. The use of the motion picture camera also allowed the viewer to get closer to the actors than ever before. Instead of viewing actors on a stage from a distance, audience members could see them so closely that they could watch a tear develop in the eye, a lip quiver, or the subtle change of expression on a face. This intimacy, along with the repetitive use of actors, soon gave rise to the public's interest in the actors as people outside their roles as storytellers (Schickel, 1986). Encouraging this interest in actors and their private lives was, of course, the press. In addition to reports on celebrities' activities in the usual news sources of the time, the first fan magazine, *Photoplay*, began publication in 1910 (Schickel, 1986).

When actors became an economic asset outside of the film distribution itself, the studios began to exploit their talent to an eager press and public. As the actors realized their own worth, they in turn began demanding higher salaries, which studios were usually willing to pay. Between about 1912 and 1916, salaries for leading players went from around five dollars a week to $2,500. In 1916, Actress Mary Pickford became the first player to receive a $1 million contract (Schickel, 1986). With their riches, the actors began living the lifestyles of the wealthy, drawing even more attention to themselves and their personal activities. And thus, the celebrity system churned into existence.

Defining Celebrity

When, in 1968, Andy Warhol said, "in the future, everybody will be world-famous for 15 minutes" (Gamson, 1994, p. 15), he probably had no idea how true his words would eventually ring. Even those who have quoted him over the years probably did not realize just how fast and easy fame, even if fleeting, could be. So what makes a person a celebrity? Why does our culture escalate certain people, particularly actors, to such a high status? What makes people fall in love with faces on a screen? Certainly a truly great actor is deserving of recognition, as is anyone who excels at his or her profession. But if acting is just another job, why are some actors escalated to near god-like status? Is it simply visual recognition or increasing mass media attention? In any case, the creation of celebrity involves the creation of fans, who then help drive the celebrity-making machine.

Certainly a key ingredient to celebrity is recognition, particularly visual recognition. When a viewer sees a celebrity repeatedly in television and movies, and

then reads or hears about that celebrity's professional and private lives in the media, it is possible for that viewer to feel as if he or she is actually getting to know this stranger, creating a sense of "false intimacy" (Schickel, 1986).

Of course, the media (both the news media and the entertainment media) play an integral role in perpetuating the celebrity/fan relationship. With so much news coverage of celebrities available for consumption by the public, the media create a need and demand, and the cycle of celebrity production and consumption continues. If it were not for the media, we would not get to see our favorite actors and shows or read about them. And if people were not interested in celebrities, they would not consume those celebrity-related products the media offer. The media help to manufacture celebrities and ways to use them, making the star system "pure media manipulation" (Dyer, 1998, p. 97). At the same time, the media can be seen as obsessed with celebrities. As Braudy (1997) stated, "the media are no longer only what their name implies: intermediaries between events and audiences. Now a metamedia has come into being, committed to, imprisoned by, and frequently bored to death by its own preoccupation with fame" (p. 617).

Not only do the media help to bolster the fame of current celebrities, they are partially to blame for the existence of the pseudo-celebrity. Here, a person who has not reached a level of fame through the usual channels (e.g., starring in a popular film or being noted for excellence in a particular art form), can be elevated to a level of celebrity. An early example of this can be traced back to a woman named Angelyne who, in 1987, bought a huge billboard with her portrait on it which stood at the infamous intersection of Hollywood and Vine. She reportedly was often stopped for photographs and autographs, yet she had "never done anything noteworthy beyond the attempt to have note taken of

her" (Gamson, 1994, p. 1). According to her assistant, "a celebrity is famous for being a celebrity" (Gamson, 1994, p. 4). Not unlike the Angelyne phenomenon of the 1980s, the 21st century has ushered in the age of the "reality show," where normal people, who are often no more than contestants on an elaborate game show (such as *Survivor*), and technically only viewers themselves, reach levels of fame rivaling those of traditional stars. Houran (2003) notes that "celebrities are no longer people who have special talents and attributes. Many celebrities are simply marketing products" (p. 26). According to business professor Bernd Schmitt (1999), celebrities arising out of reality programming "reflect a change in this wired economy, a new example of 'people power.'" They are the ultimate dream of any business – an enterprise in which the public makes the product. Adds Schmitt (1999), "this is very modern, I could even say postmodern, because it is about interactions, about creating a reality through conversations, through discourse, and that is the product" (p. 49).

Thus, as we enter the 21st century, audiences are literally deluged with celebrities from various sources but all with the media behind them. And the more celebrities that are created, the more room there is for fandom.

What Makes a Participatory Fan?

The term "participatory fan" is intended to contrast with older ideas of media spectatorship (Jenkins, 2006). In this sense, fans are actively engaged with various forms of the media and with each other. They seek out ways to interact with media figures, primarily celebrities, and with other members of fandom. So who are these "participatory" fans and why do they choose to participate more directly than do other

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members of the audience? There are a number of possible explanations for the

phenomenon, some of which have been previously published, are defined and discussed

here. There may also be yet un-explored explanations that will be identified in this thesis

and suggested for future research. The possibilities suggested by this thesis and

expanded upon in the next section of this chapter are:

- Social group identification with other fans.

- Personal identification with a celebrity, or wanting to be like the celebrity
  (wishful identification).

- False intimacy with celebrities (believing they have a relationship with the
  star, which does not exist).

- Parasocial interaction (one-side, vicarious involvement with celebrities).

- The possibility of meeting celebrities (actual social interaction).

- A feeling of empowerment by being a member of a group.

Social Interaction

For most fans, participating in fandom is not solely a private process, but rather a

social and public one. Fan editor Allyson Dyar (1987) argued that "most accounts of fan

culture wrongly focus on aspects of the primary text rather than on ways the common

references facilitate social interactions among fans" (p. 87).

Group viewing is common in fandom. Popular attractions at many conventions

are the video rooms where fans can watch movies, television episodes, and other visual

media together. Fans can also be seen waiting in long lines to see the first showing of a

greatly anticipated feature film, knowing that the initial audience will consist largely of

fans like themselves who will have a similar experience in viewing the film (Jenkins, 1992). Amesley (1989) studied comments made by *Star Trek* fans while viewing the series in a group. She concluded that "a new discourse emerges from the viewers which exists as a counterpart to the original text, playing off it but providing creative pleasure for its participants" (p. 337). In fact, she argued, "within the realm of popular culture, fans are the true experts; they constitute a competing educational elite, albeit one without official recognition or social power" (Jenkins, 1992, p. 75).

Among the largest gatherings of fans in the United States is an annual convention held in East Lansing Michigan called MediaWest (Mediawestcon, 2007). Unlike most conventions, it consists of only fan attendees and fan guests (who are usually fans with some extensive knowledge about a particular area of fandom). This convention is not about meeting celebrities or some other feeling of closeness with the object of their affection, but instead is a community interaction among people with similar interests (Jenkins 1992).

If social groups have the ability to challenge or "resist" culture and insert their own meanings in place of those offered by others, the reward for that resistance might be personal and social empowerment. Ang (1991) saw "empowerment" as a function and possibility of participation in popular culture. This resistance appeared to provide group members with a sense of empowerment in the face of seemingly hegemonic forces. Or, the feeling of empowerment may simply be found in fans' consumption of popular culture, specifically television programs (Harris, 1998).

Mann (1969) studied people waiting in line, proposing that the waiting line could become a social system. He noticed that when people wait in lines for long periods of

time, particularly when those lines are created on a regular basis with similar people, a number of informal culture "rules" and behaviors develop. Although Mann was looking at Australian football (i.e. American soccer) audiences who regularly waited in lines for the same games, it can be related to fan audiences who wait in lines to see movies, and particularly convention attendees waiting for events, autographs, and pictures. Mann's major findings concluded that: (a) large numbers of fans return annually to share the experience of waiting for tickets overnight; (b) the formation of unofficial "pre-lines" to recognize the priority of people who arrived before the beginning of the official line; (c) the principle of "first come, first served" and alliances made to regulate and allow temporary absences from the line; and (d) social constraints designed to control line jumping and place keeping (p. 184).

Similarly, in his study of spectators at an Academy Awards ceremony, sociologist Joshua Gamson (1994) noted that during the long wait for the arrival of the celebrities, the spectators formed "a camaraderie born of waiting together and focusing on the same event and of being identified together as spectators" (p. 134). One of his subjects reported that in earlier years, before security became more strict, fans would arrive two days early and camp out on the bleachers with hibachis and beer, as if it were a huge tailgate party. Gamson concluded that "people seem to be there as much for the event of waiting as for the event of watching; as much for the spectacle as for the celebrities" (p. 135).

In a study of the members of a fan group called Viewers for Quality Television (VQT), Harris (1998) endeavored to find how fans define themselves and how this self-definition related to the practice of fandom. In her survey of 1,100 VQT members,

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virtually all admitted to being "fans," although their levels of participation in fan activities varied greatly. Harris concluded that several underlying variables affect the level of participation and that "fandom" should be seen as existing on a continuum. She also found, when looking at the group as a whole, that the more active members were more likely to feel they personally exerted influence over the entertainment industry or the object of their fandom than VQT did as a group. Also, the more the fans felt able to influence the television industry (individually or as a group), the more enjoyment they had with television and film.

Fans may desire this social interaction and group membership and find it to be a positive aspect of participatory fandom, whether they feel their group membership is empowering or simply socially rewarding. Group membership also allows them to converse with fellow fans about subjects that they might not discuss with members of other groups (family, co-workers) to which they belong.

Personal Identification and Wishful Identification

Some fans become involved in participatory fandom because they are personally drawn to a celebrity through some kind of identification with that person, either because the fan feels he or she has something in common with the celebrity, or the fan sees something about that celebrity he or she would like to model (Schramm, 1961). Similarly, fans may identify with media characters (fictional characters or on-screen personas). This particular identification may be defined as an imaginative process invoked as a response to characters presented within mediated texts (Cohen, 2001).

The media contribute to the identification issue primarily through constant coverage of celebrity activities and intimate views into their private lives. Audience identification with celebrities is the backbone of advertisers using celebrity endorsement of products. If a person identifies with or wants to be like the celebrity endorsing a product, he or she will be more likely to purchase that product (Agrawal & Kamakura, 1995). In his examination of identification as a mediator of celebrity endorsement effects, Basil (1996) concluded that the stronger the perceived similarity, the greater the likelihood of identification. Additionally, the greater the identification, the greater the likelihood of modeling the celebrity's behavior or attitudes. In this sense, modeling behavior (such as buying an endorsed product) might be seen as a form of participatory fandom, in addition to other avenues of participation that a fan might seek out.

Parasocial Interaction

The concept of parasocial interaction was first researched, and the phrase "para-social" interaction coined, by psychologists Donald Horton and Richard Wohl (1956) who looked at the perceived relationship with media personalities that audiences can create. At the time their research was conducted, radio and television were considered "new media" and the researchers found an interesting phenomenon emerging with audiences:

> One of the striking characteristics of the new mass media – radio, television and the movies – is that they give the illusion of face-to-face relationships with the performers. The conditions of response to the performer are analogous to those in a primary group. The most removed and illustrious men are met as if they were in

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the circle of one's peers; the same is true of a character in a story who comes to life in these media in an especially vivid and arresting way. We propose to call this seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer a parasocial relationship. (p. 215)

The concept of parasocial interaction can be extended to include any type of "media personality," including film and television actors, presenters, game show hosts, announcers, theatrical stars and other celebrities who appeared in the media as themselves, fictional characters, even puppets anthropomorphically transformed into "personalities" (Giles, 2002). Horton and Wohl (1956) called these people who became the object of parasocial relationships "personae." Audiences came to know these personae through the media as if they were actually personal acquaintances.

False Intimacy

False intimacy can be seen as similar to parasocial interaction, except that it refers to a more one-sided, self-oriented type of vicarious involvement with mediated models (Schuh, 2000). While parasocial interaction describes the media user's vicarious involvement with the media figure as "other," "false intimacy" is a more personal vicarious relationship where the fan sees him- or herself as more closely involved and intimate with the media personality.

Film critic Richard Schickel (1985) described a situation in which fans (and audiences in general) are drawn into an "illusion of intimacy" with celebrities, resulting from constant and intimate exposure to them in the mass media. This *false intimacy*, as he called it, leads to vicarious involvement with celebrities in which fans begin to believe

they actually have a relationship with them. This false intimacy could lead fans to greater participation in fandom, particularly where meeting or communicating with the celebrity is concerned.

The Possibility of Meeting Celebrities - Actual Interaction

Some fans become involved in fandom hoping that their activities will somehow bring them into actual contact with their favorite celebrities. This might include starting a fan club or Web site, or simply attending a convention where the celebrity is present. With the preponderance of media conventions today, personal interaction with celebrities has become increasingly possible for many fans.

Sociologist Joshua Gamson (1994) studied the spectators of the red carpet arrival of celebrities at a Golden Globe ceremony in Beverly Hills. He divided them up into two groups, which he called "hobbyists" and "tourists." The "hobbyists" would include the participatory fans, those who have come to the event specifically to see certain celebrities. The "tourists" came out to watch the celebrities on a more casual basis, much like spectators at a parade. Members of both groups would call out to celebrities in hopes of receiving anything from brief eye contact to an autograph or handshake.

The field of research on fandom and celebrities fails to spend a great deal of time on this aspect of the fan/star relationship. Each group has been examined individually, as have the reasons fans feel close to stars, as mentioned earlier. However, there is very little literature devoted to what happens when fans and media personalities actually meet and interact (outside of the subject of celebrity stalkers). Part of what this thesis explores

is that very subject: what happens when fans actually interact with the objects of their affection, the action being among the reasons for participatory fandom.

Empowerment

Of course, there may be other reasons as yet unexplored about why fans seek out ways to actively participate in fandom. As mentioned earlier, fans have power in that they can affect the actions of the media and those who produce and deliver celebrities to the public. But fans also may enjoy a feeling of empowerment themselves, either over a particular celebrity or the media in general (or even both). According to Harris (1998), who researched fan involvement, "it is likely that the more active fans are, the more power and control they feel they have" (p. 48).

Grossberg (1992) also examined empowerment relating to fandom from a cultural studies standpoint, stating:

> Empowerment refers to the reciprocal nature of affective investment: that is, because something matters (as it does when one invests energy in it), other investments are made possible. Empowerment refers to the generation of energy and passion, to the construction of possibility. (p. 64)

Thus, it is understandable that if fans feel they have some influence over the celebrities themselves, the media in relation to celebrities, or both, this could be among the motivations for seeking out participatory activities.

Theoretical Background for Understanding Participatory Fandom

While there is not a large body of scholarly research to be found that specifically covers participatory fandom, or even fandom in general, there are at least two major theories that not only help explore the subject, but also have given rise to research (particularly in the area of audience research) that is closely related to creating a better understanding of fandom. These theories are Uses and Gratifications (Rubin, 1994) and Albert Bandura's (2001) Social Cognitive Theory. Both of these theories relate to the previously proposed reasons for participatory fandom.

Uses and gratifications

Early work in uses and gratifications centered around Laswell's (1948) findings on why people attend to the media. This theory considers the audience to be comprised of active viewers who make use of and obtain satisfaction from the media, as opposed to being passive viewers, completely influenced and controlled by the media. According to this concept, the media are sources of influence amid many other sources, such as people's needs and motives to communicate, functional alternatives to media use, the psychological and social environment, communication behavior and the consequences of such behavior in addition to the mass media.

Early researchers believed the media to be able to deliver messages as a "magic bullet" (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995) to influence the public. But later research led to theories of limited effects, stating the media did not have the power and control to have such influence over the public. Those studies, in turn, led to what we now call uses and gratifications theory, whereby audiences are not used by the media, but instead use and

select media to gratify their needs or wants.

It is this perspective that gives a theoretical background not only to participatory fandom, but fandom in general. Participatory fans in particular not only make use of what they see and read, but even find ways to further involve themselves with it, including modifying some of the texts to fit their own purposes (Jenkins, 1992).

Once researchers began to study mass communication and develop theories, new ideas began to emerge about its effect on audiences. Among the researchers in this area was Harold Lasswell. Lasswell (1948) began his research into media to demonstrate their possible effects, and in particular how propaganda can be used. While he believed in the power of media and propaganda, he rejected the simplistic magic bullet theory. He also stated that by performing certain activities (e.g., surveillance of the environment, correlation of environmental parts, transmission of social heritage and entertainment) media content has common effects on people in society.

Although Lasswell (1948) was studying the effects media had on the public, his research served as a jumping-off point for other audience studies, leading to the shift in thinking to a limited effects paradigm. Some researchers proposed that the media serve many functions for people and society, and early gratifications research sought to learn why people use certain media content (Rubin, 1994). Cantril (1940), for example, studied people's reactions to the 1938 *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast. He noted that people who had been frightened by the radio program had tuned in late, did not look for verification of the program's authenticity, and spread incorrect information. Most people, however, were not taken in by the fake story, instead relying on their own critical ability to check the validity of the broadcast (Baran & Davis, 2000). In similar research,

Cantril's colleague, Paul Lazarsfeld (1940) had been studying why radio had such a wide appeal to the public. Additionally, Herzog (1940) studied the appeals of radio quiz programs, as well as the gratifications obtained by women who listen to radio serial programs.

Subsequently, Horton and Wohl (1956) proposed that television provides viewers with a sense of "parasocial" interaction with media personalities, which is part of what we now call "fandom." It was this type of audience-centered study that led researchers to investigate audience motives rather than the effects of the media (Rubin, 1994). This research then led to investigations of audience subcultures, including fans.

Social learning theory

According to social learning theory, people are both products and producers of their environment (Bandura, 1994). In relation to the media, individuals are influenced by and use what they watch. With observational learning, or modeling, people watch how others act, interact, and suffer the consequences of their actions (Vander Zanden, 1984). Thus, one can argue that by watching celebrities, fans can make assumptions about how the world works and decide whether or not to incorporate that behavior into their own lives. Social Learning Theory asserts that symbolic models, such as the models presented in the mass media, "play an influential role in shaping human thought and action" (p. 187) because they display a greater diversity of behavior and activities than what the average individual witnesses in his or her daily life. Bandura (2001) also asserted that people can learn attitudes as well as behaviors by observing models, particularly those presented by the media. This theoretical perspective applies well to

the idea of both identification and wishful identification. For example, in an ethnographic study of Elvis Presley fans, including Elvis impersonators, researchers Benson Fraser and William Brown (2002) found that Elvis fans and impersonators developed strong identification with him by consciously role modeling his values and by changing their lifestyles to emulate his. Thus, fans may either see traits of celebrities they feel they share, or they see desirable behavior by celebrities and wish to imitate it. Fans who strongly identify with a media personality are more apt to engage in participatory fandom (Basil, 1996).

This chapter has looked at what makes a fan, what makes a celebrity, and possible reasons why some fans extend their interests to actively participate in fandom. This study examines possible motivations for fans to actively participate in fan-related activates. In order to guide the research process, the following research questions were asked:

RQ1: What are the motivations for fans to seek participatory activities?

RQ2: What perceptions about fandom and celebrities do fans take away from their participatory activities?

RQ3: How do fans conceptualize the physical setting when attending a large participatory fandom event?

Chapter Three

Methods

This thesis takes a qualitative research approach. According to Creswell (1998), qualitative research is undertaken "in a natural setting where the researcher is an instrument of data collection who gathers words or pictures, analyzes them inductively, focuses on the meaning of participants, and describes a process that is expressive and persuasive in language" (p. 14). The primary methods used in this qualitative study were an ethnographic case study using participant observation and in-depth interviews. The data was then analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The study was conducted over three days at a large media convention in Atlanta, Georgia, called DragonCon. While the convention took place in a number of venues, most of the observation and selection of interview subjects were carried out in the dealers' room (where fan-related merchandise was sold) and Walk of Fame (where celebrities were available for autographs) because these areas provided the most convenient and effective access for observation of participatory fan activity and selection of interview subjects.

This thesis, as well as some of the literature cited, refers to DragonCon and other fan-related conventions as "media conventions." This is not to imply they are for members of the reporting media, but rather, because they feature guests and exhibits from different forms of entertainment media. Guests include (but are not limited to) film and

television actors, print models, authors, artists and musicians. Representatives from film and television production and distribution companies, comic book publishers and merchandise dealers occupy booth areas to promote and sell their products. Because the convention is not devoted to a single genre or television show (such as a "science fiction convention" or "Star Trek convention"), it is generally referred to as a media convention.

This thesis examines why some fans actively participate in fandom. Attendance at a convention constitutes participatory fandom in itself, so any attendee is considered a proper interview or observation subject. Additionally, because this particular convention offers a variety of activities for fans with different interests, it provides the researcher with subjects who have a wide range of fan-related interests.

DragonCon

For many years, fans did not have much chance of meeting their favorite celebrities, or even meeting with each other outside small local get-togethers. Occasionally, celebrities would attend media, comic, and *Star Trek* conventions, where fans could meet to talk, participate in gaming, watch videos, buy memorabilia, and possibly get an autograph from the celebrity guest. Often, such conventions were held only in large cities. But in the past few years, all that has been changing. Today, literally hundreds of science fiction, fantasy and media conventions are held each year in the United States. Conventions vary in both size and organization. Some are run by fans while others are professionally organized. Smaller conventions often focus on a single genre or subject while larger conventions, such as DragonCon, MediaWest, or WorldCon, focus on multiple subjects and genres. These large media conventions attract

both fans and celebrities of varying degrees of fame. Some celebrities, usually those who are currently enjoying a high degree of popularity, are paid to attend, while others, usually a cadre of has-beens, wannabe's, bit-players, and those who never quite became famous but have some link to fame, also show up but must finance their own way and recoup their money by selling pictures and autographs.

DragonCon, an annual media convention held in Atlanta, is one of the largest such conventions, boasting hundreds of activities for fans as well as dozens of celebrity guests from all genres, media, and levels of fame. Fans come from all over the world to attend. In 2003, the year in which this study was conducted, there were over 20,000 attendees from over twelve countries and several hundred celebrity guests (Kloer, 2002). The convention organizers claim on the Web site (DragonCon, 2003) that they run "the largest annual convention for fans of science fiction, fantasy and horror, comics and art, games and computers, animation, science, music, television and films." According to author and occasional DragonCon guest Ray Bradbury, "this convention *is* science fiction" (DragonCon, 2003).

The 2003 convention occupied two of downtown Atlanta's largest hotels, the Hyatt Regency Atlanta (which hosted most events, panels, fan activity and gaming), and the Atlanta Marriott Marquis (which held the dealers' room, the celebrity meet-and-greet area, exhibitor's halls, additional panels, and the art show). The attendance level reached over 20,000 fan guests, and hosted over 300 celebrity guests (DragonCon, 2003). The programming includes many of the usual activities found in most media conventions, along with some that only large conventions such as this can accommodate. Events include panel discussions (with or without celebrity participants), celebrity interviews,

book readings by authors, video rooms, gaming, comic and card trading, "filking" (fan-written songs about fan-related subjects), a parade through downtown Atlanta by costumed participants, fan club meetings, fan club tables, promotions of upcoming feature and independent films, art shows, costume contests, and a massive dealers' room filled with merchandise and collectibles. Among the main attractions are the autograph-signing sessions. Held in one huge room, called the Walk of Fame, dozens of celebrity guests (including actors, comic artists, writers, filmmakers, animators and models) sit behind large tables where fans come by for pictures and autographs. It is literally a buffet of media personalities. Fans walk around the massive room looking at who is there and deciding on whom they'd like to meet, in a situation not unlike choosing a meal at the cafeteria or deciding which zoo animals are worthy of a snapshot.

Data Collection

I chose to use qualitative research over quantitative methods because I felt this would allow me to gain a deeper understanding of the subculture of fans and their interest in participating in fan-related activities. Kaplan and Maxwell (1994) stated that the goal of understanding a phenomenon from the point of view of the participants and their particular social and institutional context is largely lost when textual data are quantified. Additionally, I am already a member of this subculture myself, allowing me to gain access and acceptance into the community in order to perform my research with little or no distraction to the participants. To complete this research, I used a grounded theory approach consisting of participant observation and in-depth interviews.

Participant observation involves not only watching the members of the group being studied, but joining in with them. This can be done by a researcher who is or is not part of the group prior to his or her research (Angrosino & de Pérez, 2000). Adler and Adler (1987) identified three categories of participant researchers which they called "membership roles" as opposed to roles grounded in pure observation. These were:

1.) Peripheral-member-researchers (those who are not members of the group but who feel they can gain an understanding of its membership through observation).

2.) Active-member-participants (those who become involved with the central activities of the group but are not committed to the group's values and goals).

3.) Complete-member-researchers (composed of those who study settings in which they are already members). (p. 380)

I would fall into the third category of those above. I have attended DragonCon (as well as many other media conventions) several times in the past, so I am familiar with the setting and most of the activities. As a fan participant myself, I have an insider's insight to the convention and its attendees. I am able to easily immerse myself in the convention and communicate freely with the fans, allowing them to feel comfortable interacting with me. Thus, my entrée into this particular "community" was easily established, which allows me to share the emic perspective of that group.

In-depth interviewing involves asking questions, listening to answers, and then posing further questions to expand upon either a previous question or the current discussion. The questions are open-ended and conversational, allowing subjects to speak in a detailed manner and express their own ideas (Fontana and Frey, 2002). The

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interviews were audio taped with the permission of the participants for later transcription and analysis by the researcher. According to Fontana and Frey (2002) "Unstructured interviewing can provide a greater breadth of data than the other types, given its qualitative nature" (p. 652). They argued that the traditional type of unstructured interview, the open-ended ethnographic (in-depth) interview, provides the best data in ethnographic case studies. They observe that "many qualitative researchers differentiate between in-depth (or ethnographic) interview and participant observation. Yet the two go hand in hand, and many of the data gathered in participant observation come from informal interviewing in the field" (p. 652).

Data collection took place primarily in and around the dealers' room (where attendees could purchase fan-related merchandise), and the Walk of Fame (where celebrity guests were set up to meet and greet fans). These are large areas that provide excellent access to fans, celebrities, and memorabilia dealers for both participant observation and locating participants for in-depth interviews. Additionally, I contacted fan acquaintances who I arranged to meet there.

Research Participants

Interview subjects were chosen using a convenience sampling process. In-depth interviews were conducted with 17 people, and all interviews took place in public. The interviews were audio taped with the verbal permission of the participants. Each interview took between 20 and 45 minutes. Those interviewed were both male and female (nine male and eight female) between the ages of 18 and 48 who were attendees of the convention (see Appendix A). Attendees could be recognized by his or her

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admittance badge. The participants were asked open-ended questions relating to why

they had come to the convention, what activities interested them, why they enjoyed

participating in fan-related activities, and their feelings about fandom and celebrities in

general (see Appendix B). Questions also addressed specific experiences the participants

have had regarding the convention and within their personal lives as fans.

As is common in qualitative research, this study relied on responses from a

relatively small number of people, in this case 17. However, each interview is lengthy

and covers a great deal of ground. As Weiss (1995) notes, "because each respondent is

expected to provide a great deal of information, the qualitative interview study is likely to

rely on a sample very much smaller than the samples interviewed by a reasonably

ambitious study" (p. 282) . During my participatory observation research, I identified the

more active fans in the area and watched how they interacted with each other, with

celebrities, and what activities they engaged in. I took both verbal and written notes on

their activities for inclusion in the final data analysis.

It is interesting to note that most attendees of the convention were Caucasian. In

the gaming area there were many fans of Asian descent. However, because these

attendees were primarily there to take part in gaming (which by its nature must be a

participatory act) and not any other of the convention activities, they were not part of the

sample unless they were witnessed also participating in other fan-related activities. Over

a four-day period, there were very few Asian-Americans in convention areas not related

to gaming. African Americans were present, but in a vast minority. There were so few

that none were present during sampling. As far as this particular study is concerned, the

lack of black interview participants echoed the low number of black attendees and was thus representative of the overall population of the convention.

Data Analysis

Grounded theory is a research method that seeks to develop theory derived from data systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The process of data analysis within this method involves open, axial, and selective coding. In open coding, the researcher identifies initial general categories of information about the phenomenon being studied. In axial coding, the researcher uses a paradigm in which a central phenomenon is identified, then assembles the data around the axis of the central category, linking categories at the level of properties and dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Finally, using selective coding, the researcher identifies a "story line" (Creswell, 1998) which integrates the categories found during axial coding. This allows the researcher to write a narrative which gives the reader a good, overall understanding of the study and its findings.

To analyze the data, I transcribed the interviews in their entirety equaling 98 pages. After thoroughly and repeatedly reading the interview transcripts, I began open coding. During my analysis of the data, I attempted to identify whether or not the participants' comments and behavior fell into one or more of the categories I have already described. In accordance with the methodology of grounded theory, there was a continuous interplay between collection of the data and its analysis.

Chapter Four

Findings

This chapter details the findings of the qualitative case study with 17 participants interviewed at DragonCon in Atlanta, Georgia. DragonCon transforms two large downtown hotels into gathering areas for seething masses of fans, some dressed in elaborate costumes representing media characters, others in t-shirts announcing what they like, and some without any specific identification as a fan other than perhaps a camera with which they snap pictures of their surroundings. It is standing room only, and much of the mass moves in unison, surging down the escalator or across the street from one hotel to the other. The atmosphere is almost electric with expectations of meeting celebrities, getting autographs, purchasing memorabilia, and interacting with other attendees. The night brings numerous parties, hotel-room get-togethers, band performances and discussions at bars that can last into the next day.

As a convention attendee, one can easily feel overwhelmed by not only the vast number of fans, but by some of the costumes and the generally raucous atmosphere. Yet at the same time, there is a feeling of being unconditionally accepted as a part of that group. Most attendees are not only friendly but so outgoing they often treat strangers as if they were old friends. Someone in the most frightful costume will happily give up a chair to a tired guest, and a pierced and tattooed Goth rocker will hold a place in line

while others take restroom breaks. In the rare event of unnecessary rowdiness or disrespectful behavior, convention security guards step in to return order.

The primary venues of the convention included large meeting rooms that housed the various activities, such as costuming, gaming and art shows. Another large area held both the enormous dealers' room, where hundreds of merchants sold collectibles, as well as the Walk of Fame, where dozens of celebrities sat ready to sign autographs and pose for pictures. The corridors between the venues remained crowded with attendees heading to and from activities, standing in lines for events, or just meeting up with others to discuss their experiences.

No matter where you ended up within the convention, you were bound to be surrounded by happy, excited and often costumed fans looking forward to the next activity they planned to attend. It was within this atmosphere that the research was conducted.

The purpose of this study is to identify what themes would emerge as reasons that fans participated in the convention, including their perceptions of the overall experience. As discussed in Chapter Three, the sample consisted of 17 convention attendees chosen using convenience sampling. A qualitative, ethnographic case study was performed using in-depth interviews and participant observation.

The interviews and participant observation of fan-related activities provided a wide variety of data. The following sections describe and discuss three main categories that emerged from the data: (1) social aspects: How fans interacted with other fans and what effect this had on their attendance; (2) celebrity interaction: The types of celebrity interaction the fans experienced and what their perceptions of these interactions were;

and (3) the participation environment: What aspects of the overall convention environment was enticing to the fans (see Tables 1, 2 and 3, respectively).

Social aspects include meeting up with previous friends and acquaintances, making new friends at fan-related activities, and simply being around like-minded people. Some fans grew up with relatives who were fans themselves, and others met their significant others through fandom. Meeting celebrities includes getting autographs and photographs, as well as attending panels or question-and-answer sessions with celebrities. There is also the chance of meeting celebrities on the street or around convention venues. And finally, participation in fan-related activities includes gaming, costuming, attending band performances and shopping in the dealers' room. These are the primary activities mentioned by the participants of the study, but not the only activities available to attendees of the convention or to fans in general. Pseudonyms have been used for all of the participants in order to protect their privacy.

None of the participants of this study was in full costume at the time of their interview. However, each of them was wearing something that identified them as both an attendee of the convention and as a fan of some specific person, genre or production. Most of the time this meant wearing a tee-shirt or jacket related to the area of their interest.

Table 1

Concepts, classifications, code types, and descriptions for "Social Aspects"

Concept	Classification	Code Type	Description
Attending the convention with friends	**Open**	**Etic**	**Examples of attendees who participate with their friends**
Travel to the convention with fan friends	Property	Etic	Travel to the convention with a group of friends
Meet up with friends at the convention	Property	Etic	Meet up with existing friends at the convention
Make new friends	Property	Etic	Attend the convention with or without friends but make new friends once there
Interaction with like-minded people	**Open**	**Etic**	**Attendees' desire to be around others who have similar interests**
"Share a hobby"	Property	In-vivo	Interaction with others who share the same hobby within fandom.
Comfort	Property	Etic	Feeling of comfort being around similar people.
Free to be geeks	Property	Etic	Comfort in acting like a geek, which they can't do at home
Family influences	**Open**	**Etic**	**Fans with other fans in their family**
Grew up in fan family	Property	Etic	Parent(s) is also a fan
Created new family	Property	Etic	Met their spouse through fandom
Attendees are like a family	Property	Etic	Fans who feel that they are part of a larger family comprised of all convention attendees

Table 2

Concepts, classifications, code types, and descriptions for "Celebrity Interaction"

Concept	Classification	Code Type	Description
Meeting celebrities	**Open**	**Etic**	**Personal interaction with celebrity guests**
Seeking out specific celebrities to meet	Property	Etic	Fans had a specific celebrity or group of celebrities they planned to meet
Interest in meeting a variety of celebrities	Property	Etic	Fans were interested in meeting celebrities in general
Chance celebrity interaction	Property	Etic	Chance interaction with celebrities outside organized convention activities
Getting autographs and photographs	**Axial**	**Etic**	**Meeting celebrities was part of beginning or adding to a collection of autographs, photos or memorabilia**
Favorite celebrity	Property	Etic	Attendance centers around obtaining the autograph of a specific celebrity
Any celebrity involved in a specific production	Property	Etic	Fans interested in obtaining autographs and pictures of celebrities from a favorite production or project
Fan Perception	**Axial**	**Etic**	**Perceptions and reactions to celebrities**
Enjoyable experience	Property	Etic	Fans were happy after having met or seen a celebrity
"No longer a fan"	Property	In-vivo	Fans were offended or put off by their interaction with a celebrity
Ordinary people	Property	In-vivo	Upon interacting with celebrities, fans saw them as being ordinary people
Intimidating	Property	Etic	Some fans were intimidated by meeting celebrities
"New appreciation"	Property	In-vivo	After meeting a celebrity the fan had a new appreciation of that person
Empowerment	Property	Etic	Some fans felt a sense of power by choosing which celebrities to meet and purchase items from

Table 3

Concepts, classifications, code types, and descriptions for "Participation Environment"

Concept	Classification	Code Type	Description
Costuming/Parade	**Open**	**Etic**	**Dressing up in costume or attending the costume parade as a spectator**
Dressing up as a known character	Property	Etic	Fans create and dress up in costumes to look like specific science fiction or fantasy characters
Dressing up as an original character	Property	Etic	Fans envision original characters and wear costumes to represent them
Participating in or watching the parade	Property	Etic	Fans who dress up in costume to participate in the parade or who attend the parade as a spectator (with or without a costume)
Gaming	**Open**	**Etic**	**Participation in competition or classes related to all forms of gaming**
Role-playing games	Property	Etic	Players participate in games as a specific character using a board or cards
Robot wars	Property	Etic	Fans build or learn to build robots to compete against each other
Panels	**Open**	**In-vivo**	**Venues for discussing topics of interest for both fans and celebrities**
Fans seek specific panels	Property	Etic	Panels involving a specific celebrity or production is of interest
Question and Answer sessions	Property	Etic	Panels where celebrities take questions from fans
Dealers' room	**Open**	**Etic**	**Area where fans can purchase merchandise related to science fiction and fantasy**
Fans seek specific items	Property	Etic	Fans seek items from specific celebrities, programs, areas of fandom or to complete a collection
"More fun"	Property	In-vivo	Purchasing items here is more fun than other places
Items that aren't available elsewhere	Property	Etic	Provides merchandise that might not be available to fans locally or on the Internet
Complete collections	Property	Etic	Provides merchandise that allows fans to add to or start memorabilia collections
Provides items for autographs	Property	Etic	Fans can purchase photographs or other items to have celebrities sign

Social Aspects

Social interaction stood out as a dominant theme when asking participants why they attended DragonCon and participated in fan-related activities (including other conventions) in general. In the context of this study, social interaction can be described as having interpersonal relationships with people at the convention, experiencing camaraderie associated with involvement with attendees, and a feeling of belonging and membership in specific or related groups. The subculture of fandom spans the entire United States as well as many foreign countries. DragonCon is such a large and well-known convention that it attracts attendees from all over the world.

Attending the convention with friends

Some fans travel to the convention with other fan friends, often from distant cities. Cate and her boyfriend, Lee, are two such attendees. They drive from their homes in south Florida all the way to Atlanta. Both are college students in their mid-twenties who are eager to speak intelligently and at length about anything related to the convention. Neither is in costume or even wearing fan tee-shirts. However, both have a subtle "Goth" look about them, as a good portion of the attendees do. They have jet-black hair, several face piercings, and dark makeup to match dark clothes.

Offering an explanation as to why she and Lee make the effort to travel all the way to DragonCon, Cate says:

A lot of it is the social aspect of it. We've made so many friends just going up here. Even if there's no one going to be at DragonCon that I really wanted to see

[referring to celebrity guests], I would still go because I'd have a lot of friends up here.

Kris, a 29-year old from Augusta, Georgia, attends with her fiancé. Apart from her convention badge, Kris wears nothing that overtly identifies her as a fan (although her interview is conducted at the very beginning of the convention, before she may change clothes or purchase clothing items from a dealer). As to why she and her fiancé travel to DragonCon, Kris says:

> We hang out with people at DragonCon that we wouldn't at home. Here I get to meet new people and sometimes it's the same group each year, so that's cool. Yesterday we were listening to a panel, and it got pretty lively and everybody was talking. So after it was over and somebody needed the room, a whole group of us stuck together, still talking. We ended up at the café in the Hyatt just talking and hanging out like we were friends.

Mallory, who is fortunate to live relatively near to the convention in Smyrna, Georgia, is able to attend with a number of friends. "We all like [the television series] Buffy, and with DragonCon right here, we tend to try and come together in a group sort of thing. Then you have somebody to stand in line with!" She proudly dons a tee-shirt with an image of actor James Marsters on the front.

Kurt, from Florida, is a regular attendee who usually drives up alone but sometimes brings a fan friend. His arms are overflowing with items he intends to have autographed by various celebrities. As he says, the people he knows back home "are more fans than not."

Cate and Lee, both from Tampa, always attend DragonCon with each other and sometimes bring fan friends. Lee says, "Most of our friends are fans, and we're fans, so it's natural we travel up here together. You know, like I could even go to a con without [Cate]."

Some fans arrive at the convention alone, but once there they meet up with other fan friends. These fan friends might be people they have met at previous conventions (DragonCon or elsewhere) or friends they know in other parts of the country who share their interest in the convention. Most agree that the general atmosphere is very conducive to meeting new people. Walter, a local Atlanta resident, comments, "It really is just kind of a communal experience." As Carrie, who flies in from Portland, Oregon, says, "You meet people really quickly." Cooper agrees, "People have told me that they meet people here and they make friends with them instantly. And they'll come back and meet them every year. It's a way of meeting people and making friends."

Mike, who enjoys building robots as a hobby, attends DragonCon to meet up with other robot-building friends. "It's not like everybody on my block builds 'bots, so most of my friends who do that come here. It's the only time all year I get to see most of them."

Kris also meets up with out-of-town friends at the convention, in addition to meeting up with friends from home. Although they spend a great deal of time together, Kris and her friends all have slightly different interests:

> My fiancé is into *Trek* and all. And *Star Wars*. He does the costume contest. He's a storm trooper. He likes the sci-fi part more; I like fantasy. And my friend Beth is pretty Goth, and she's into *Buffy*. Back home we wouldn't even know

people like Beth and her friends. Here I get to meet new people, and sometimes it's the same group each year, so that's cool.

Interaction with like-minded People

Another attraction to the social aspect of participatory fandom is the ability to gather with or simply be around like-minded people. DragonCon provides a place for fans to be fans, and for people who have something in common to share that with people that they might not be able to do elsewhere. Kurt describes it as "a happy, charged environment with people who have the same interests." Walter, whose jacket is adorned with dozens of buttons and patches related to all things science fiction, comments, "It's an environment where it's just nothing but people who are as into their hobby as [other people are]." Cooper agrees, "People like to be around other people who do the same things." Wanda, a middle-aged woman, admits, "Nobody back home knows I like this kind of thing. If they knew what I did here, and all I really do is wear a movie tee and hang out, if they knew what I did, they'd think I was nuts."

Stacy, who is wearing a *Battlestar Galactica* tee-shirt and a *Dr. Who* scarf, also fears being considered odd outside of the convention and says:

> I think it's great that everyday people have the same crazy, by society's standards, interests. Here, I get to be myself, act as crazy as I want to, and no one will fault me for it. There is no judgment at DragonCon, everyone is accepted. I love that there are so many different types of people from all walks of life.

Gordon agrees, "You meet so many diverse types from all over the world and they all have a common ground in fandom."

Kris sees DragonCon as a way to be more involved in her fandom than she is at home, explaining:

> We don't hide our fandom at home. I mean, I have a *Buffy* poster in my cubicle. My friend Beth dresses pretty Goth all the time, but she works in a book store where I think they see that as cool. And I have some [fan-related] stuff on my wall in my bedroom. But that's about the extent of it. Here you are more involved. You participate more. I guess because everybody is into the same thing or something similar.

Many fans identify themselves as "geeks" because of their fandom and enjoy using DragonCon as a way to "let their geek out" as Cate says. Walter comments, "Here, I mean, everyone, you know, kind of has that 'geek badge.'" A young man named Doug proudly describes himself and his friend as "sweaty fan boys." Kurt sums it up by saying, "I love the atmosphere of a con; seeing the fans and the celebrities and going to the panels," describing it as "the environment of geek celebration."

Family influences

Some fans grew up in an environment that embraced fandom, with one or both parents being participatory fans themselves. Lee says he feels he feels connected with fandom because:

> My mom and her boyfriend are both huge geeks. My dad was a huge geek. I was named after [an actor known for playing a number of famous fantasy characters]. I was a geek in the womb. I didn't have a choice, I came out geek.

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Lee's girlfriend, Cate, calls her family "painfully normal," but admits, "I don't have any friends who aren't in fandom."

Stacey's mother is also a fan, and while Stacy has always enjoyed fandom herself, she says her mother embarrassed her as a child. She recalls:

She used to wear a sweatshirt with a Starfleet Academy logo on it. I mean, I liked *Star Trek* too, but the sweatshirt still bothered me. And now I come to conventions and wear that kind of thing and hang out with other people who do. But I still wouldn't wear something like that back home. It's just something I do here.

Neither Jay nor his wife Samantha came from families of fans, but after meeting at a science fiction convention ten years earlier, they got married and created a family of their own. Jay recalls:

Samantha was at the convention with some friends, and I was there with some friends. And we all went to the bar a lot between events and got to know each other. So we got to talk a lot. And we had mutual friends and were into similar stuff, so we started dating. And some of our dates were going to conventions. Now, here we are!

Some fans experienced such a feeling of connection with the fan community, particularly at conventions, that they likened the experience to being part of a kind of extended family. Carrie says:

People who don't even know you treat you like family. Some of the people might look scary, especially if you aren't a fan, because they are dressed like a Klingon

or they're Goth or something, but I swear I'd trust these people more than I'd trust

about anybody out on the street. We look out for each other.

Cooper agrees, "It's almost like a family here. You come back and visit them

every year. And you do different things here then you would with your friends back

home."

Celebrity Interaction

The second major finding that emerged from the data was the fans' interest in

seeing and interacting with celebrities. The access to celebrities from a variety of

industries is among the main draws of DragonCon. The simplest and most popular way

to do this is to visit the Walk of Fame. This is the area of the convention where

celebrities give autographs and pose for pictures. Fans might also run across a celebrity

on the street or in nearby restaurants. Celebrities also participate in panels and question

and answer sessions where they discuss various topics with fans and other celebrities.

Several hundred celebrities from many different genres and forms of media attend,

making DragonCon among the best places for fans to meet the most celebrities in a single

setting.

Meeting celebrities

The Walk of Fame is a large conference room filled with approximately 40

celebrities at any given time, mostly actors and actresses from film and television (comic

artists, authors, and other celebrities are often located in a separate area). Some are

currently enjoying the popularity of starring in a television series or a recent film. Most

others are known from past projects, and some are hardly known at all. They sit behind long tables, usually assisted by convention staff or their own aides, where they sign autographs and pose for pictures with fans. They all sell photographs of themselves, but they are also often asked to sign items the fans bring with them. And most of them charge for these experiences (including posing for a photograph). Some celebrities on the Walk of Fame have enormous lines of waiting fans stretching out the door and onto the street. Others can be seen sitting at their tables with no one approaching them for hours.

The atmosphere of the Walk of Fame is among the most energy-charged areas of the entire convention. Fans line up excitedly to get pictures and autographs of celebrities while others watch the celebrities from a distance, taking in the experience and snapping candid photographs. The dealers' room is located adjacent to the Walk of Fame, allowing fans to purchase photographs and other memorabilia to have signed by celebrities. Many fans hurry back and forth between the rooms purchasing items and heading off to have them signed. Convention volunteers and security are seen in abundance as they try to keep control of the fans, manage lines of people intertwined throughout the room, and keep celebrity guests comfortable.

For fans who attend the convention to meet their favorite celebrity or add autographs to their collection, the Walk of Fame is their primary venue of interest.

In one long line, eighteen-year-old Mallory mentioned that among the main draws of the convention for her was to meet actor James Marsters, "probably my favorite actor of all time," along with any other celebrity in attendance who was associated with the television series *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* and its spin-off series *Angel*. She specifically intended to meet everyone attending the Buffy panel. She added, "And, not

to mention, some other major actors, like, the guy who played 'Biff' in *Back to the Future*. He's here! And from [the motion picture] *Neverending Story*, Noah Hathaway."

Kris is also a fan of *Buffy* and James Marsters, crediting her *Buffy* fandom for bringing her to the convention. "I watch *Buffy* and *Angel* and I like to meet any guests from those shows. Especially James Marsters, he's my favorite."

Actor and television presenter Peter Woodward drew a slow but steady stream of fans, including husband and wife Jay and Samantha. Samantha was a fan of the television series *Babylon 5* and was there to meet Woodward, who had a recurring role on the show. Jay was also a fan of that series, but he was more interested in Woodward's current role as host of the History Channel's series *Conquest*. Jay commented that Woodward was "so cocky on that show [*Conquest*], it'll be interesting to see what he's like in real life." Samantha added, "I'm going to get the photograph that also has his father's [actor Edward Woodward] signature." Both were also anxious about their time schedule, since they were also interested in seeing other celebrities while they were there. "We want to catch Marsters' panel," Samantha said. "The line is already so long, I hope we make it. But I don't want to miss meeting Peter either."

Friends Doug and Mike, the self-proclaimed "sweaty fan boys," claim meeting celebrities isn't their primary reason for attending, but both admit to wanting actor David Carradine's autograph. Mike says, "You know who kicks ass? David Carradine. I want to see him. He's the man!" Doug adds, "he's an icon. Oh, and I want [to meet *Buck Rodgers* actress] Erin Gray. She's hot. Or she was hot. I don't care, I just always see her in that jumpsuit."

Like Jay and Samantha, some fans simply wanted a chance to see or meet whatever celebrities they might come across. Gary, attending with his girlfriend Lizabeth, says they particularly enjoy going to the Walk of Fame in order "to see the celebrities. You can see lots of stars in one place, like the red carpet at the Academy Awards. Only you can talk to them; interact with them." Lizabeth adds, "Except they aren't all as famous (laughs), but they might be people you are more interested in meeting."

Wanda, a heavy-set woman in her late 40's, attends DragonCon alone from her home in Macon, Georgia. She has a very large bag of memorabilia with her, which she says is filled with both purchases she made in the dealers' room, and various items she brought from home to have autographed. Her first interaction with a celebrity came as a bit of a surprise:

> I was outside the hotel smoking a cigarette, and this guy was standing next to me, and we started talking. He was dressed up as a character in [the television series] *Babylon 5*. And I remember thinking that he looked really good, just like the actor. Some of these people can do that, like the guy dressed up as Blade? He looks just like him. So I was just kind of impressed. After a few minutes he mentioned his ride was there, and a car pulled up and I recognized a couple of the stars of *Babylon 5* inside. Then I realized the guy was really the actor, not a fan in costume! I guess I didn't expect him to just be hanging out on the curb like us regular people.

Getting autographs and photographs

For many attendees, just meeting celebrities isn't enough. They have come to get autographs and possibly get celebrities to pose for pictures with them. Some purchase publicity photos sold by celebrities while others bring various items like movie posters or DVDs for celebrities to sign. A few inventive fans pose for photographs with their favorite stars, have the photographs developed and printed at a nearby mall, then return to have that celebrity sign the photograph.

Buffy fan Kris is building an autograph collection from the show's actors. "I'm trying to get everybody's autographs [on individual publicity photos], and I also have [group] cast pictures that I'm trying to get signed by everybody." Cate has an extensive list of autographs she wants, including "Anne McCaffrey so she can sign her books. And Marsters, of course. Some people in bands I haven't met yet. Oh, and the *Star Wars* people, especially Ray Park."

Kurt had an armful of collectibles he brought from Florida to have signed by various celebrities. "I want Carradine to sign this *Deathrace* one-sheet. And Tracie Lords to sign this picture I got last year." He was particularly proud of a poster for the original release of *Star Wars* which he had been bringing to dozens of conventions over the last couple of decades saying, "I think I have only one more person to sign this one-sheet."

After visiting the Walk of Fame, Stacy decided she wanted several more autographs and photos than she had originally planned on getting. "Lorenzo Lamas is here. I don't know what he has to do with science fiction and all, but I loved him in [the

television series] *Falcon Crest*. I've got to get his signature. And I really should get David Carradine."

Fan perception

In relation to fans' interest in and ability to meet celebrities, it was interesting to note their reactions after having met the object of their affection for the first time. In many cases, this experience allowed the fans to perceive the celebrity in a new light. Most participants were happy with what they saw, but others came away with a negative perception. In some cases the perception was influenced not only by the celebrity's personality but by the fact that most of them charge for signing autographs and even for posing with fans for photographs.

In Kurt's case, he had wanted to meet actress Traci Lords. He planned to have her sign both a photograph and a movie poster. He also wanted a photograph of the two of them together. He was able to accomplish all this, but at a substantial financial cost, having been charged twenty dollars for each experience. Kurt has attended many large media conventions, including several DragonCons, and he came away with a negative experience, saying:

> I've seen more celebrities at the con exhibit more pure greed, for lack of a better word, than I ever have. Traci Lords has to be my biggest example. I was a huge fan of hers before meeting her, but her dismissive attitude and her charging an excessive amount for every little thing completely turned me around on her. I would no longer consider myself a fan of hers.

In some cases, fans have met industry insiders at conventions and ended up with a working relationship. Cate met her favorite author and they are now friends. "We met here one year and now when I come here we hang out." Cate is now given advance copies of the author's work for her opinion. Lee has a friend who got a job as a game developer by meeting the right people at a convention. He notes, "There's not a lot of other subcultures or even cultures that will take people in like that."

Primarily, fans mentioned that meeting celebrities in person helped them to view the celebrities as ordinary people; they were more human after an actual contact. Kris said:

> I guess mostly you realize they are just regular people. Sometimes it's kinda funny. Like, when I met Darla [actress Julie Benz who portrays a vampire on *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*]. I had to wait in line for a while, and while I was there I was listening to her talk to the other fans. And she was so nice and, so regular. Not that she'd be like her character. She's not going to turn into a vampire. But after being around her and talking to her it was hard to imagine she played Darla, if that makes any sense.

Cate, a regular attendee at a number of conventions, has met many celebrities over the years and says:

> I've noticed that after I meet someone who's either in a band or in a show or on a movie that I really like, um, I find that I can appreciate what they're doing a lot more. And I can understand where they're coming from a little bit more.

Kris remains in awe of her favorite celebrities, becoming nervous when she meets them. Upon meeting James Marsters she said, "God, I was a wreck! My knees were

literally weak. Seriously. In person he's just so, I don't know, like having a crush on some guy in junior high school."

Marsters was offering to sign photographs for twenty dollars, and for fifty dollars fans could have a professional, posed picture taken with him. Only about one in ten fans did this. Even though Mallory considered Marsters her "favorite actor right now," she chose to buy only the twenty-dollar photograph. However, she came away very happy with her experience, saying, "He stood there and talked to me for like, ten minutes, and he was just making jokes, and, you know, having a good time. He encouraged me to come see his band play tonight, stuff like that."

After her first experience meeting celebrities in the Walk of Fame, Stacey commented, "You see the celebrities selling autographs or promoting something, and you realize they are just a product. Or a salesperson of a product. It's a job."

Some fans perceived a sense of empowerment over the celebrities because they could choose who to support by purchasing items from that particular celebrity. When discussing the Walk of Fame, Carrie said:

> Some of the stars, the ones who aren't really famous right now and don't have a
> lot of people at their tables, are kind of like vendors at a flea market. When you
> walk by you kind of feel them looking at you hoping you'll stop by their table and
> get an autograph or buy something from them. It's like they need you, they want
> your attention, and usually it's the other way around.

In Kurt's opinion, the power of fans extends far beyond this, influencing the entertainment industry in general:

When studios pay huge amounts of money to insure that their top directors and actors appear here or at Comic Con in San Diego to push their summer films, that says something about fan power. Over the past few years, I think movies have been made and broken at cons. Immediate negative buzz about [the motion pictures] *The Hulk*, *Elektra* and *Stealth* hit the streets right after their first unveiling at a panel. Within a few hours, fans around the world can generate intense word-of-mouth either positive or negative about a movie or show and it has shown at the box office.

Participation Environment

The third major finding to emerge from the data was that fans were eager to participate in and be a part of the overall environment offered by DragonCon. Because of its large size, DragonCon offers nearly every fan-related activity imaginable, and it is these activities that draw many fans to participate. On any single day of the convention, one can enjoy costuming, gaming, a wide variety of discussion panels, and a visit to the enormous dealers' room to purchase or trade memorabilia.

Costuming

One of the main activities of the convention is costuming. Fans dress up as characters from their favorite book, movie, comic or whatever they like. Others simply dress in a way they would only dress around other fans, such as wearing fan-specific tee-shirts, medieval outfits, Goth ensembles, or any type of clothing that might be considered outside of the "norm" of average American street clothes.

Carrie has enjoyed costuming since she was a child, and now she enjoys not only dressing up but creating her own outfits. She is wearing a DragonCon tee-shirt from a previous year and has a dragon puppet perched on her shoulder. "I usually make my own creations. You know, not an established character." She participates in the annual costume contest and scours the dealers' room for additions to her collection.

Other fans may not enjoy making costumes or even dressing up, but they attend the annual costume contest. Too large to be housed in any hotel facility, this event takes place at a nearby auditorium and attracts over a thousand spectators. Mallory makes a point to go every year, saying, "The contest is amazing. People have costumes that look like they were made for a movie." Gary agrees, "It's not like you're watching fans, it's like you're watching characters right out of the movie or comic book."

Gaming

Another popular activity is gaming. This programming track can include a number of types of activities such as electronic or card-based role playing games, board games such as Dungeons and Dragons, and more recently, robot battling. Doug, a fan of the show *Robot Wars*, is attending to participate in robot building and battling panels and workshops. "I'm building a 'bot with some guys," Doug says. "I'm hoping I can pick up some stuff here about it. Meet some people I can compete with." Gary also enjoys the recently added robotics programming, noting, "It's really the only place you can do this kind of stuff, I mean, outside of your garage."

Walter enjoys viewing the gamers and plans to return with his kids. "They play Pokemon cards with, like, adults. Just about every age group is in there playing."

Panels

Nearly every type of programming includes a panel, where fans and sometimes celebrities discuss a particular topic of interest. There are also celebrity question-and-answer sessions, mini-game shows, and a variety of unique activities. Kris says, "I go to any *Buffy* or *Angel* panel. And the celebrity Q and As. Last year I was in the *Buffy* trivia game, but I'm kind of shy. Like, I'm not usually on panels, but I go to a lot of them. I usually get into the discussion." Carrie notes, "There's a panel on everything here. You can find anything you're interested in. Like, 'What Xena Wore in Episode Three.' Anything." Kurt also enjoys panels, saying, "I try to go to a lot of panels. Some I go to because I'm specifically interested in them, or they have guests I want to see. And others I go to because I don't have anything else going on but I want to be doing something."

The dealers' room

Gary is among the many fans who are packed into the dealers' room where fan-related merchandise is sold. "I always have to go to the dealers' room," he says. "You can buy a lot of this stuff on the Internet now, but there's something more fun about coming here." His girlfriend also enjoys the shopping aspect. "I have to admit I like the dealers' room. I let [Gary] buy all his stuff first. He has more, I don't know, collections (laughs). But if we haven't spent all our money, I buy some things too. Like I always have to get a convention tee-shirt." Gary agrees, "Yeah, gotta get a con tee. Especially here. Then, if we go to another convention, people will see we've been here and think

it's cool." Cate shops in the dealers' room because she can "find things that I can't necessarily find locally [in Tampa]."

Jay collects knives and swords, so for him, the dealers' room offers a place to both buy and trade from his collection as well as a place to attend related activities. He particularly enjoys performances by The Crossed Swords, a group that performs routines and stunts using various swords and knives. He says, "The Crossed Swords perform here, and this is the closest place we can see them. And I almost always pick up a new piece [knife or sword] when I'm here. I like to look at things before I buy them, so this is much better than the Internet."

Among the more popular aspect of the dealers' room is that it provides photographs and memorabilia for fans to have autographed by celebrities. Doug says, "You can get pictures and all in here, and probably cheaper a lot of times then the stars are selling them for." Mike agrees, "You can get more variety of stuff, items, that might be interesting to have autographed besides just a standard glossy."

And finally, Kurt offers his strategy for making the most out of both the dealers' room and the Walk of Fame:

Get all the really important stuff, you know, stuff you came specifically to get like autographs of your favorite actor or whatever, first, so you don't miss it. But get everything else on the last day. Some of the dealers will unload stuff cheap. Or you can make some trades. And even the stars, whoever is still around, might not be busy because people are leaving. I've talked to celebrities for like an hour or whatever because no one else is around and they're just sitting there.

The last day of the convention is, in fact, interesting to observe. As Kurt noted, the Walk of Fame is nearly empty by early afternoon. There are very few fans still walking about and only a handful of celebrities. Of the celebrities that remain, only a few are actively speaking with fans. Most are chatting amongst each other or occupying themselves by reading or working crossword puzzles.

Stacey notes, "You almost feel bad for them. I'd go talk to some of them but then I feel obligated to spend money on an autographed picture. And I can't afford any more."

The atmosphere of the previous days has changed from fans eagerly seeking out their favorite celebrities to the celebrities hoping to meet a final few fans before the convention ends. And in the final hours, as all the convention venues close down, celebrities, fans, and convention employees can be seen wandering wearily out, mingled amongst each other like anonymous members of a crowd.

Chapter Five

Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigated the reasons why some people enjoy participating in fandom, particularly by attending fan-related activities and seeking out celebrities. As discussed in Chapter Four, the participants consisted of 17 adults who attended DragonCon, a large annual media convention in Atlanta, Georgia. This qualitative research took an ethnographic case study approach, using in-depth interviews and participant observation of convention activities.

Discussion

During the interview process, it was interesting to note that without exception, all participants were very happy and excited to speak about their experiences. Even those attendees who were approached but declined to respond appeared enthusiastic and willing to talk, but they were unable to participate due to time restrains or previous engagements. Many of them offered to be interviewed at a later date if necessary. This demonstrated both their overall enthusiasm for their participation in fandom, but also gave a look at their friendliness and openness. A number of fans, both interviewees and those who declined, voiced great interest and happiness that a researcher was interested in taking a

serious look at participatory fandom. This likely led to their eagerness to take part in the interviews.

This chapter explores the answers to the proposed research questions and examines how the results compared to the concepts and theories given in the literature review. Using grounded theory as an analytical tool, general themes emerged from similar answers and descriptions given by participants. The results helped to answer the research questions posed in the beginning of the study. Finally, it looks at the importance of the research, possible limitations, and ideas for further research.

Responding to the research questions

The first question sought to identify the motivations for fans to seek participatory activities. It was clear that social interaction was the primary reason fans attended and enjoyed participating in DragonCon. Whether they traveled to the convention alone or with someone, they enjoyed meeting new people and the camaraderie offered by the convention. Interaction with like-minded people was important because it allowed them to share common interests and to feel free to engage in fan-related activities, often acting like "geeks," without fear of judgment from non-fans. It was also interesting to note that some participants not only had fan friends but family members who shared in the same fandom. In several instances the participants met their significant others at a convention, and one couple even married after meeting at a previous DragonCon. An interaction with celebrities was also an important motivator. Most participants were eager to meet either a specific star or any celebrity they might encounter during their attendance. Many were interested in getting autographs and photos of celebrities or collecting autographs relating

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to a specific movie or television show.

The second research question asked what perceptions about fandom and celebrities that fans might take away from their participatory activities. After meeting celebrities, the fans had varying reactions to their in-person encounters, some of which changed their previous perceptions. Most were happy to have had the chance to meet the celebrity (or celebrities), while some had a negative experience. In many cases, fans' access to celebrities depended upon how much the celebrity was charging for autographs and pictures. Some fans could not afford to pay the cost or chose not to because the celebrity was not worth it to them. The attendees would assess which celebrities were present, how much they were charging, and often what the celebrity's demeanor was, then decide who they would meet. They approached the stars not just as fans, but as wary consumers of the celebrity product.

Some fans also perceived a definite sense of empowerment when interacting with celebrities and participating in the convention. This empowerment was shown most notably by the existence of the convention itself. If it were not for the demand for such activities on the part of the fan community, there would be no DragonCon or conventions in general. It was also up to the fans which celebrities they would pay for autographs or pictures. Additionally, there were not only fans in attendance, but celebrities and representatives from various merchandising companies and movie studios. These vendors and celebrity guests all are there because of the demand of the fans. Fan feedback, whether by purchasing autographs or showing interest in upcoming films, provides marketing information which may be used later to influence some area of the entertainment business. Finally, because of the large number of attendees, guest

celebrities and vendors, the entertainment and news media take interest in the convention and what goes on inside, thus generating further interest about such activities for their viewers.

All the interviewees were interested in participating in one or more of the many activities offered by DragonCon. These included dressing up as a fictional character, taking part in one of the various gaming activities, attending fan or celebrity panels, and shopping for merchandise and collectibles in the dealers' room. Such activities are usually difficult or impossible to come by in the fans' hometowns, so they must seek them out at conventions such as DragonCon.

The third and final research question asked how fans conceptualize the physical setting when attending a large participatory fandom event such as DragonCon. This question is answered by looking at the first two answers together. The overall atmosphere of the convention setting was attractive due to the social aspects involved, whether making new friends or finding comfort provided by being surrounded by similar people. The specific fan-related activities offered also added to the attractive aspects of the convention. From attending panels to getting celebrity autographs, attendees had a variety of engaging and even exciting activities available to them for the duration of the convention.

It should be noted that a number of properties of the primary themes overlap. For instance, social interaction is technically a part of most fan-related activities, even if it is not the primary reason for attendance at a convention or participation in activities. Additionally, enjoyment of the overall convention experience or atmosphere can be considered both an activity and a social aspect of attendance. Celebrity interaction in

itself could be considered a social activity, albeit brief. Obtaining autographs, which

constitutes celebrity interaction, is also an activity. And finally, the "participation

environment" can encompass every experience and activity available at the convention.

Literature review discussion

In Chapter Two, this paper explored a number of aspects of the fan/celebrity

relationship in conjunction with participatory fandom and related theories. One of those

theories was Uses and Gratifications, which states that the audience is comprised of

active viewers who make use of and obtain satisfaction from the media, as opposed to

being passive viewers, completely influenced and controlled by the media (Laswell,

1948). At DragonCon, the fact that fans had to pick and choose which celebrity was

worth their time and money lent itself to this theoretical aspect of participatory fandom.

The fans were encouraged to be consumers of the celebrities and whatever those

celebrities might be promoting. However, the fans generally had an idea of what they

wanted to get out of the celebrities and the convention in general. If a celebrity was

charging more than fans felt they could afford afford, the fans would choose not to

approach that person. The celebrities were the main attraction, but the fans were running

the show in terms of what they chose to take away from the experience.

In regard to social learning theory, in which people (in this case the fans), look at

models available in the mass media to offer role models in shaping their thoughts and

actions (Bandura, 1994), there was not evidence of this in the comments made by the

interview participants. However, because the interview subjects were all adults, they

may be less susceptible to modeling behavior than younger subjects. Also, further

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questioning on this subject might have uncovered modeling behavior and celebrity influence that was not addressed in this study. Observationally, however, one might conclude such an influence might exist where costuming was involved, because motivations behind dressing up as a certain character or actor may be a result of a more in-depth interest in modeling themselves after that person. Additionally, one could argue that the fans are modeling themselves after other fans, particularly those attendees who are new to conventions. In order to fit in with other fans, as well as to make the best of their convention experience, attendees can watch how their fellow con-goers act. In this way they might learn when to start standing in a line, how to conduct themselves during a panel, how to interact with merchandise dealers, and even how to mingle with each other during lunch. If anything, witnessing fans being chastised for some inappropriate action by other fans is a quick way to learn what *not* to do.

The concept of false intimacy, in which fans may feel a relationship with celebrities that does not actually exist, did not appear to be an issue with the subjects of the in-depth interviews. While most of them were interested in meeting or having some type of contact with various celebrity guests, they appeared not to identify with the celebrity. Instead they were looking for the simple opportunity to interact with them and perhaps get an autograph. Regardless of the degree of interest the fan had in any particular celebrity, they all approached the experience of meeting celebrities as more of a business transaction (meet the celebrity, get a photograph, move on). Similarly, the participants did not express that they identified or wished to identify on any level with celebrities. The fans were interested in meeting celebrities but were more interested in interaction with other fans – with whom they did identify.

Parasocial interaction, which might have been a factor in attendees' initial interest in participation, gave way to actual interaction with the celebrities in attendance. Thus, parasocial interaction is better looked at in relation to fans who are not involved in activities that provide access to media personalities.

Limitations

As with any observational research, there is the possibility of bias on the part of the researcher. The researcher must also interpret what he or she sees, and this is done through his or her own preconceptions. The possibility of bias or misinterpretation in this particular study is lessened by the researcher having prior knowledge of the people and situations being observed. Offering direct quotes from the participants also allows for interpretation by the reader in addition to the conclusions drawn by the researcher.

Another possible limitation to this study is that participants were chosen through convenience sampling. Subjects were primarily from the United States and specifically from around the Atlanta, Georgia area. However, those observed comprised a much larger portion of the attendees and may have included fans from all over the world. In any case, all those who were interviewed and observed were participatory fans. A different perspective on fandom might have been interesting to study by interviewing non-fans who witnessed convention activities and fans. A comparison of non-fan observations about participatory fans might lend more insight into the study of the fan community.

It should be noted that most attendees of the convention were Caucasian. In the gaming area there were many fans of Asian descent. However, because these attendees

were primarily there to take part in gaming (which by its nature must be a participatory act) and not any other of the convention activities, they were not part of the sample unless they were witnessed also participating in other fan-related activities. Over a four day period, there were very few Asian-Americans seen in convention areas not related to gaming. African Americans were present, but in a vast minority. There were so few that none were present during sampling. As far as this particular study is concerned, the lack of black interview participants echoed the low number of black attendees and was thus representative of the overall population of the convention. Additionally, because of the large number of attendees, there could be some relationship of ethnic origin and participatory fandom that could be generalized to the larger fan community. Further research might look at the fan culture on a much larger scale to determine ethnic representation.

Researcher effects were minimal due to the researcher also being a member of the group being studied. Members of the group were not aware that I was doing research unless I told them. Interviews were conducted in a relaxed, social manner without being overly formal.

It should be noted how the topic itself was chosen. Being a member of the participatory fan community, the researcher had a prior interest in and knowledge about this topic, as well as having family members and friends who are members of the fan community. Additionally, the researcher has worked as an entertainment business insider. Witnessing the interplay between participatory fans and the celebrity community from different perspectives over many years was the inspiration for this study.

Further research possibilities

The study of fame and fandom is wide open to further research in a number of areas. These phenomena are continuously growing, due to the constant manufacturing of celebrities by the media, and a growth in technology, particularly involving the Internet, which allows dissemination of information to the public, and public interaction regarding this information. The media has a growing access to fans, and fans have an increasing ability to seek information about the objects of their interest as well as communication with each other. Such access also facilitates participation in fandom, allowing fans to discover activities to attend, and of course to interact with each other socially.

To further examine participatory fandom, a larger sample could be used to examine differences in gender, age and race among fans in relation to their motivations for participation in fan-related activities. Additionally, a series of more intensive interviews could give a broader perspective on fandom and its participants.

Similar studies could be conducted at different participatory venues where fans and celebrities are present to determine if similar motivations could be found.

In conclusion, this research shows that fans, not unlike the population in general, are looking for a group with which they can identify and participate. Regardless of how they feel their fandom might or might not set them apart from others, they can feel comfortable and enjoy themselves around a group of like-minded individuals. Even though the fan community in general has a wide variety of interests and participates in many different activities, there is a camaraderie among them as well as a respect for each other's interests. This bonds them all as a community that accepts and encourages their participation in the fan culture.

Conclusion

The study of participatory fandom is important because fans are members of the media audience and consumers. The more actively involved they become in fandom (whether attending fan-related events or communicating amongst each other), the more they drive the celebrity phenomena and help to influence the media. Within the field of audience research, the study and understanding of participatory fandom, made up of more active and dedicated audience members, could lead to vital information that could augment existing data.

This study uncovered a number of motivations for fans' interest in participating in fan-related activities. These motivations can aid in the understanding of how this segment of the media audience behaves, particularly with regard to how they consume certain media "products" such as celebrities and related activities.

The results of this study could aid organizers of large media conventions such as DragonCon to best serve both its guests and vendors. If the participants of this study are generalized out to the overall fan population, then the results could help larger entities attract larger audiences (or consumers), as well as to best serve that audience.

By watching what participatory fans do, the media can get a sense of what this active portion of the audience is interested in and what motivates them. That information can then aid in their production and delivery of content. Observing audience reaction in this way may become more important in the future as traditional methods of audience measurement become more difficult to apply. In turn, the audience can benefit from having larger and more targeted media options available as a result of the media's observation of participatory fandom. Within the emerging atmosphere of convergence,

the audience and media will have an increasingly symbiotic relationship, the center of

which may very well revolve around the activities of participatory fans.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Participant List

Name*	Age	Gender	From	Regular convention attendee?
Gary	28	Male	Marietta, GA	Yes
Lizabeth	27	Female	Marietta, GA	No
Mallory	18	Female	Smyrna, GA	Yes
Cate	26	Female	Tampa, FL	Yes
Lee	27	Male	Tampa, FL	Yes
Walter	28	Male	Atlanta, GA	Yes
Cooper	37	Male	Atlanta, GA	No
Doug	24	Male	Atlanta, GA	Yes
Mike	27	Male	Atlanta, GA	Yes
Carrie	23	Female	Portland, OR	Yes
Kris	29	Female	Augusta, GA	Yes
Kurt	39	Male	W. Palm Beach, FL	Yes
Stacy	26	Female	Dunedin, FL	No
Wanda	40s	Female	Macon, GA	Yes
Roger	48	Male	San Diego, CA	Yes
Jay	30	Male	Valdosta, GA	Yes

Samantha   31   Female   Valdosta, GA   Yes

* All names are pseudonyms.

Appendix B

Interview Guide

Interviews will begin with an explanation of this thesis, permission of the subjects to be audio recorded, basic demographic data will be gathered, and the subjects will have the opportunity to ask me any questions they might have both before and after the interview. The subjects will also be told their information will remain anonymous and confidential.

The following questions will act as a template for guiding the interviews. The participants' interests and answers will help drive the direction of the interview to best discern their motivations for participating in convention activities.

- What specific activities do you plan on participating in while at the convention?

- Where did you travel from to come here?

- What are you primarily a fan of? (specifically, to the point where you participate in the fandom of this person/thing)

- Why do you enjoy attending fan activities?

- Are you attending the convention with friends?

- Are your friends (outside of the convention) primarily fans?

- What do you like most about fandom, where you personally are concerned?

- Are you attending the convention to meet a particular celebrity? Who?

- Do you feel any connection with any of the celebrities, as if you have something in common with them?

- Do you feel you somehow "know" a celebrity you have never met? How would you characterize that relationship (acquaintance, close friend, etc.).

- Do you identify with any celebrity specifically? Why? What makes that person stand out to you?

- What do you think makes a celebrity?

- What do you think makes a fan?

- Do you feel fans ever have any power over celebrities or the media?

- How do you feel about paying celebrities for autographs and pictures? Have you done so? Have you declined? Why?

- Do you talk about your involvement in fandom with people outside of fandom, or with only fan friends?