

**“The Nerds Are in Charge Here...:”
The Fan Convention Celebrity Encounter**

by

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Abstract

This paper is an ethnographic examination of the fan-celebrity dynamic at a particular fan convention, Wizard World New Orleans (2018). Although fan motivations for attending a convention may vary, one of the main draws is the potential for face-to-face interactions with celebrities. The celebrity encounter comes with a price, however. Fans are not merely required to pay a fee, but they often must sacrifice a significant amount of their fan convention experience, or “con experience,” waiting in line. Through an insider approach to ethnography, I will argue that fans justify their sacrifice of time and money in two distinct ways. First, fans justify the sacrifice by expressing the extraordinariness and rarity of the celebrity encounter. Secondly, participants rationalize this decision by characterizing the norms of a fan convention as proper fan etiquette, often describing the desire to acquire a celebrity encounter outside the convention setting as inappropriate and disrespectful. In doing this, participants work to distinguish themselves from the stigma of the fan as fanatical. This paper also discusses the potential for fan exploitation.

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Introduction

In my house, there is a room. This room contains the sacred artifacts of my religion. The many portraits that hang from the walls, relics resting on bookshelves, and scattered ancient texts stacked on the floor each provides a connection with its many deities and my cultural congregation. Touched by the gods themselves, each fifteen seconds of the divine is forever enshrined in my most valuable items. Yet, these artifacts did not come without sacrifice. The Mjolnir replica, itself, cost \$100. An extra \$200 was necessary for Chris Hemsworth's consecration. It is currently preserved on a brown desk next to a picture of the *Thor* actor, his grip sharing the resin hammer with my own. The Mark Hamill encounter was just as fleeting. I was only bestowed enough time for him to sign a replica *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi* tunic. I waited in line for three hours for my sacrament with Carrie Fisher; her notorious lateness was mitigated by her convivial nature and her receptiveness to my request to write her autographs in large font. Why do I collect these autographs? They have value in the fan community to be sure, yet the god of thunder's hammer is not currently paying my electric bill. Why do I spend my time, money, and energy acquiring items that are inscribed by celebrities? More precisely, what does the lionization of movie stars, athletes, socialites, and wine-glass-throwing housewives reveal about we Americans who idolize them?

America's infatuation with celebrity has led many scholars to argue that celebrity culture is practically synonymous with American culture (Cashmore, 2006; Dyer 2013). Soukup (2006) states that "almost since the first occurrences of public disseminated moving picture and sounds, viewers and listeners have been fascinated with the performers depicted in mass media" (p.319).

Once limited to television and film, the contemporary obsession with celebrity has expanded into the realm of podcasters, bloggers, reality show contestants, and YouTube stars.

Adoration of celebrities often manifests into the cultural phenomenon known as fandom, either with the program, character, or the associated celebrity. Fandom has been studied extensively in audience research, with early scholars often overtly concerned with the pathological issues of fan obsession (e.g., Basil, 1996; Horton & Wohl, 1956; Levy, 1979). Kington (2015) simply defines fans as “all members, activities, and content surrounding the particular source of fan affinity” (p. 211). Contemporary fan research, pioneered by Henry Jenkins, has steadily moved passed the stigmatization of the fan as fanatic and embraces the cultural benefits of fan behavior. Fandom is now interpreted by many as its own subculture with divergent traditions, values, and norms. Fans often form tight-knit communities, with the disenfranchised battling the misrepresentation of mainstream culture (Booth 2013; Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington, 2017).

Fan conventions, or abbreviated as “cons,” are large gatherings of fans dedicated to celebrating a particular film, television show, comic book, an entire genre, or celebrity. The growing popularity of fan conventions has garnered the attention of cultural researchers who have analyzed the consumption elements of fandom (Kozinets, 2001), transformation of self through cosplay (Rahman, Wing-Sun & Cheung, 2012; Seregina & Weijo, 2017), celebrity identification (Soukup, 2006), celebrity worship (Stever, 2011), and the impact of fandom on society (Jenkins, 1992). The fan convention offers fans a myriad of outlets to celebrate their mutual love of source. These large gatherings may center on a single fandom (i.e., GoPlay Northwest and Gen Con are primary focused on tabletop gaming, whereas the Small Press Expo is on the independent comic books genre). Other fan conventions began as a celebration of a

specific fandom (i.e., comics, fantasy, anime, and science fiction) but evolved into the celebration of fandom itself. DragonCon, one of the largest “science fiction” conventions in the United States, features over 40 different “fan tracks” (“Fan tracks,” 2017). Comic-Con International: San Diego, with over 130,000 yearly attendees, has developed into a fan-Mecca. The entertainment industry has embraced the devotion of Comic Con attendees and assisted in making the con into a media juggernaut (Rowe, 2017).

Arguably one of the more enticing allures for any fan convention is the promise of a celebrity encounter, a face-to-face meeting with a celebrity. Celebrities often make themselves available for photos, autographs, and participate in question and answer (Q&A) panels. Although most of the con experience (such as panels, vendors, gaming areas) is included with the price of the admission ticket, a celebrity encounter is an additional charge. Not only are fans obligated to pay a fee to meet the celebrity, but they often sacrifice a significant portion of their con experience waiting in line. Ethnographic observations and interviews are nothing innovative in fandom studies, yet scholars have neglected to examine the fan-celebrity encounter at fan conventions. I will examine this dynamic, not by generalizing why fans attend fan conventions or the motivations in meeting a celebrity. Motivation would obviously vary dramatically from participant to participant. It would be more enlightening, however, to examine the process of how a fan justifies the sacrifice of their time and money required for the celebrity encounter.

The study will begin with an extensive literature review. The concepts of celebrity, fandom, and the celebrity encounter will first be discussed; this will be followed by a conceptualization of the fan-celebrity dynamic borrowing concepts from Brown (2015)’s pathway model of fan-celebrity personae. These individualistic concepts, each having been thoroughly discussed by previous scholars, include transportation, parasocial interaction,

identification, and worship. I will then diverge from Brown's socio-psychological approach of the fan-celebrity dynamic to incorporate previous research on socialization theory, along with a description of the fan convention's cultural significance. This paper concludes with an ethnographic study exploring the fan-celebrity dynamic at Wizard World New Orleans (2018), a highly-attended fan convention, while addressing the following research questions:

RQ1: How does a fan justify the sacrifice of time and money required for a celebrity encounter at a fan convention?

RQ2: What else does a fan sacrifice during the celebrity encounter at a fan convention?

Literature Review

Celebrity

Why are celebrities so appealing? They are appealing because they exist from day to day in the fabulous beyond, yet they are undoubtedly humans no different from you and I. The celebrity is touched with the qualities of the divine mediator (Stromberg, 1990, p.16).

Fame is ubiquitous and a revered value in American culture, and, since the average American citizen spends an excessive amount of time in front of screens (e.g., film, TV, computer, smart phone, etc), they are constantly reminded of the rewards of being famous. In 2015, Robert Downey Jr. became the world's highest paid actor with a salary of \$80 million (Khatchatourian, 2015). NBA all-star LeBron James takes home \$86.2 million for being the greatest basketball player in the world. Paris Hilton, who is often the standardized example of pseudo-celebrity (a celebrity who is known for being known), has evolved beyond the socialite status and is often credited as an artist, investor, and business woman (Daswani, 2016; Vibes, 2015).

Cultural scholars have extensively analyzed America's infatuation with celebrity. Celebrities are portrayed as reaching a privileged level of existence. As Stromberg (1990) states, celebrities, "live their current lives in our idea of heaven, the world that is depicted in advertisements, where people are happy, beautiful, witty, satisfied, adventurous, friendly, and so on" (p. 17). Stromberg (1990) argues that the viewer perceives the celebrity to exist within a "second world," a fantasy realm inside the screen. Media programs, and the advertisements associated with them, present a utopia constantly out of reach of the viewer. The screen promises consumption as the exclusive path to happiness. The celebrity, living in both the real and the fabrication, is the bridge that connects these two worlds. This ideology perpetuated by the screen's predominance creates a society of fame seekers. Fame not only catapults one to the top of the social hierarchy, but the screen reinforces the belief that celebrity provides a heavenly connection.

Of course, one cannot attempt to define celebrity culture and ignore the influences of consumerism. The celebrity is yet another product to be sold, and stars themselves are highly involved in making themselves into commodities. As Dyer (2013) states, "stars are examples of the way people live their relationship to production in capitalist society" (p. 5). Not only is the Hollywood star used by the entertainment industry to sell a film or television program, the advertainment industry aggressively adopts celebrities to endorse their products.

Milner (2010) compares modern celebrity to ancient status symbols (e.g., monarchs, royalty, Indian caste system). In past societies, an individual's status in the social hierarchy was often merely determined by "gender, your parent's status, ethnicity, and luck" (Milner, p. 380). Today contemporary media provides the mechanism, or at least the promise, for social mobility. Economic status alone may have its advantages, yet it is often more impressive to be

seen on the screen regularly. Arguably one of the main appeals of reality television is the promise that anyone can become famous simply by being seen on television. That, Milner argues, is what separates the modern celebrity from ancient class systems. The celebrity's prominence must be continually reinforced by the screen, making it "much more fluid and unstable than traditional status groups" (p. 387). It is no surprise that fame is a driving force for many Americans because "fame has the potential to offer new and liberating interactions and engagements" (p. 387). Not only is there extensive media attention given to the celebrity, Dyer (2013) argues this fame "energizes and electrifies one's experience of the world" (p. 27).

Celebrity culture has the tendency to divide the population into two distinct categories. When one does not fit into the category of the famous they are by default the admirer. As Holmes and Redmond argue (2006), "if you are not famous then you exist at the periphery of the power networks that circulate in and through the popular media" (p. 2). The un-famous are comprised of the legions of fans who worship those who are. If you are not the celebrity, you are the fan. Although one can simply become a fan of a TV show, series, film, or franchise, it is often the celebrity whom embodies this affection. These fans form a subculture, a community called fandom.

Fandom

At this moment in the development of media studies, there is a great deal we as academics can learn about fan culture and perhaps even more we can learn from fan culture (Jenkins, 1992, p.8)

There are many types of fandom. Although the term has been used to define any community of passionate individuals which develops around a hobby, sport, musical genre, or artist expression, this paper will focus primarily on what Jenkins (1992) calls "media fandom." This is also often affectionately called "nerdness" or geek culture (Oswalt, 2010). These fans love

comic books, anime, science fiction, fantasy, video games, pro-wrestling, and other activities and genres that have traditionally been considered childish and beneath dignity for adults. Fiske (1992) discusses socio-economic mobility in the article “The cultural economy of fandom.” As one of the foundational scholars on fandom, Fiske differentiates between the cultural capital acquired by the privileged and the deprived. Opposed to cultural capital acquired through consumption of “high culture” practices (e.g. museums, concert halls, or art galleries), which imitates many of the social benefits of economic capital, popular culture consumption “will not enhance one’s career, nor will it produce upward class mobility as its investment payoffs. Its dividends lie in the pleasures and esteems of one’s peer in a community of taste rather those of one’s social betters” (Fiske, 1992, p. 34).

Fandom has been studied extensively in audience research with early scholarship arguably contributing to the stigma of fan obsession (Basil, 1996; Horton & Wohl, 1956; Levy, 1979). As Fiske states, “fandom is typically associated with cultural forms that the dominant value systems denigrate” (p. 30). Contemporary cultural scholars sympathetic to the fan experience were instrumental in a paradigm shift in the representation of fans, embracing the cultural significance of fan behavior. Jenkins (1992) describes fandom as an alternative social community for those who feel rejected by mainstream society, a “utopian community” in which membership “offers not so much as an escape from reality as an alternative reality whose values may be more humane and democratic than those held by mundane society” (p. 280). Fan communities can be highly supportive, and their values are often divergent from the monetary goals of mainstream culture.

In other words, fans are not simply mindless devourers of media content who are heavily influenced by the messages being transmitted. Their experiences and behaviors often go beyond

watching a media program. Instead of simply consuming, fans become strongly attached to media programs (Meyer & Tucker, 2007) and create everlasting emotional bonds with the characters and celebrities associated with them (Stever, 2011). As Jenkins (1992) argues, fans become “followers” of their favorite media, looking for them as models on how to live their lives. Online and offline fan groups, fan fiction, fansites, and live-tweeting are a few of the many examples of ways in which the fans heighten their viewing experience.

Not only does fandom research provide evidence that fans are active, but there is also support that fandom is often used as a platform by individuals who feel ostracized in mainstream society to express their identity in a safe and judge-free setting. Fan fiction has garnered a wealth of specialized attention from cultural scholars. Fans are creative and rewrite their favorite characters “so that potentially significant materials can better speak to the audience’s cultural interests and more fully address their desires” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 279). This fan activity provides a platform for individuals to explore untraditional story arcs and romances. Many of the basic premises of “slash” fiction, for example, centers on homoerotic encounters with iconic characters. As Jenkins (1992) argues, “refocalizing” (p.167) these characters can serve as “the exploration of alternative to traditional masculinity, the insertion of sexuality into a larger social context” (p. 186). Slash fiction represents a reaction against traditional depictions of sexuality reinforced by television and film.

In other words, fans are active and continually seek an enhance fan experience through a connection with source and celebrity. This paper will now explore the intersection between the fan and celebrity: the celebrity encounter.

The Celebrity Encounter

Our relationships with celebrities are idiosyncratic— they mirror but are not perfect copies of our other relationships. They are full of complex motivations,

conflicts and rewards, and they are relationships in which some fans may be tempted to go to extremes. Often, what fans wish for most is the opportunity to pursue (Harris & Ferris, 2011, p.11).

Scholars have provided a few terms to describe the celebrity-fan interaction. The unmediated experience (Reijnders et al., 2014), celebrity sighting (Ferris, 2004) and the celebrity encounter (Ferris, 2001; Harris and Ferris, 2011) all have their place in distinct areas of fandom research. Ferris has contributed significantly to the study of the fan-celebrity dynamic including exploring meaning making and the cultural significant of the face-to-face interaction between celebrity and fan. As Harris and Ferris (2011) argue, a fan's unmediated interaction with a celebrity allows a fan to feel they have "gathered some evidence about the real person behind the fictional façade, intensifying his relationship with the star" (p.30). This holds significant value to a fan, driving them to seek this unmediated experience. The fan-celebrity dynamic is very different from ordinary social interactions because one party is usually seeking a trophy from the encounter. This trophy can manifest as a picture, autograph, or an exciting story to share with their peers.

It is important to note that Harris and Ferris make a distinction between an unanticipated celebrity sighting (an unstaged encounter) and the face-to-face interaction a fan might experience at a con (a pre-staged). The unstaged encounter has been adopted to describe a fan spotting and interacting with a celebrity in their "everyday routine." According to Harris and Ferris, this interaction in the public sphere is unanticipated and often unwanted by the celebrity. They argue that this version of the celebrity encounter creates various tensions. The first confliction felt by fans is created when fans recognizes that the celebrity is a stranger, however, feel they are "entitled to knowledge of and contact with celebrities" (p. 643) through the illusionary intimacy reinforced by the mediated relationship. "Ordinary folks who recognize celebrities in public must decide whether to treat the meeting as a stranger encounter or an encounter with a known other

and must then decide how to demonstrate deference to the celebrity's special status" (Ferris, 2004, p. 240). The second tension discussed involves the ordinary versus the extraordinary. Described by Ferris as "unusual, enchanted, storyable, and hyperreal" (p. 240), a celebrity sighting sets a larger than life persona in the "mundane ordeals of real life."

For this paper, the term "celebrity encounter" will be used to define an experience that Harris and Ferris would label a pre-staged encounter. This face-to-face meeting between fan and celebrity possess key divergences from a celebrity sighting. First, the celebrity sighting is unexpected and "can happen anywhere - serendipity and surprise are key features of this type of encounter" (Ferris, 2004, p. 237). This is not the case for a celebrity encounter at a fan convention. Promoters often use celebrities to entice fans to attend their cons. In most cases, fans are aware that a celebrity will be attending a fan convention and are often motivated by the desire to meet them. Secondly, the extraordinary nature of the encounter becomes intensified by the convention setting. The splendor associated with the con not only enhances the fan experience, but the celebrity encounter itself. Thirdly, considering the con celebrity encounter is implemented within, what Harris and Ferris call, "tightly orchestrated limits" (p.435), it has significant differences in the fan-celebrity power dynamic, which will be discussed later in this paper.

Brown (2015)'s Model of Audience Involvement with Media Personae

A famous person's life rarely intersects with the average person's, yet a media consumer's affection for a celebrity from afar often evolves into what many scholars label a mediated-relationship. With the goal of conceptualizing the varying dimensions of audience involvement with a media persona, Brown developed a pathway model distinguishing four concepts of the fan-celebrity relationship. These four categories, each having been extensively

defined by previous scholars, include: transformation, parasocial interaction, identification, and worship. Brown's model seems appropriate in conceptualizing the complex interworks of the fan experience and distinguishing the four specific processes involved; however, I would argue that a fan's relationship does not follow in a predictable and quantifiable manner as Brown suggests. This paper will also attempt to divorce these concepts of fan-relationship away from the pathological connotation used by previous scholars. Lastly, Brown seems to ignore the communal process of fandom. Fandom does not happen in a vacuum; in fact, it is the fan community that intensifies and legitimizes fan behavior.

Transportation

The first concept incorporated in Brown (2015)'s pathway model of audience involvement with media personae is transportation. This describes the fan's means of absorption into a story or a set of characters. Transportation, Brown (2015) argues, occurs when a fan becomes lost in the narrative and experiences the emotions of the characters involved. This heightened connection with the characters provides a more enjoyable experience for the viewer. Previously, Green and Brock (2000) found evidence that not only do highly-transported individuals have more positive evaluations of the characters in their favorite programs, but their beliefs are also more consistent with the narrative's themes. Whether media content is labeled fact or fiction does not affect the transportation process. This provides support to Green and Brock's (2000) argument that "transportation is a mechanism whereby narratives may exert their power to change beliefs" (p. 718). The more a fan becomes immersed in the narrative of a program, the more they begin to internalize a fabricated relationship with the celebrity/character in the narrative. In other words, transportation is the first step of an "imaginary relationship"

with a celebrity. Media scholars call this phenomenon parasocial interaction, the next dimension to be discussed.

Parasocial Interaction

The next stage in Brown's pathway model of audience involvement with celebrity involves the fan's internalization of an illusionary relationship with a celebrity. Parasocial interaction is a phenomenon that describes how audience members develop one-sided relationships with personas, characters, or celebrities. Horton & Wohl (1956) state that this illusion of closeness manifests into the viewer perceiving the celebrity as within "the circle of one's peers," and is evident when the viewer "talks as if he were conversing personally and privately" with the celebrity (p. 215). Research conducted by Grant, Guthrie, and Ball-Rokeach's (1991) suggest that heavy viewing of media content correlates with a more intense parasocial relationship. This creates a cycle that self-intensifies over time. Click, Lee and Holladay (2013) discuss how the advent of social media can intensify the parasocial relationship. Fans "develop feelings of intimacy" with the celebrity, and social media "both facilitate and enrich communication between" (p.375) the celebrity and the fans. Social media platforms like Twitter create the illusion of continuous interaction with the celebrity. Celebrities might even tweet back to fans, reinforcing this perceived closeness. Research conducted by Lim and Kim (2011) explore how advertisements could potentially exploit this parasocial relationship to strengthen consumer loyalty. Their findings suggest that parasocial interactions may drive fans to maintain their illusionary relationship, not just by continually consuming media content, but by consuming products associated with their favorite program.

The stigmatization of fandom and the negative portrayal of fans by the media may have misguided early scholarly work on fandom research. As Jenkins (1992) states, "news reports

frequently characterize fans as psychopaths whose frustrated fantasies of intimate relationships with stars or unsatisfied desires to achieve their own stardom take violent and antisocial forms” (p. 13). Parasocial interaction often inaccurately paints all fans as “unstable, socially maladjusted, and dangerous out of sync with reality” (p. 13).

Brown (2015) argues that transformation may develop simultaneously with parasocial interaction. Together they help mold the next stage in the mediated relationship: identification.

Identification

The third stage in Brown’s (2015) pathway model of audience involvement with media persona is identification. Identification is a ritualistic process where one creates a self-defining image shaped by the perceived attitudes, beliefs, and values of a character or celebrity. One of the first theories to explore the effects of media personality was Kenneth Burke’s dramatism theory. Burke (1950) proposes a link between audience connection with a fictional character and identification. Austin et al. (2008) conducted a study to explore the persuasive power of celebrity-endorsed election campaigns and found that identification plays a key role in the fan wanting to “be like” or adopt the positive characteristics of the celebrity. Celebrity-endorsements are frequently found to influence a fan’s perception of a product because fans often look up to celebrities and consider them trustworthy. Basil (1996) argues that identification is the key component in persuasive power of a mediated message. For example, Basil found that fans that more strongly identified with NBA superstar Magic Johnson were more affected by his public calls for AIDS preventive behaviors.

As with most fan research, celebrity identification has historically been placed in the realm of the pathological, yet contemporary research points to potential social benefits (Click, Lee & Holladay, 2013; Ferris, 2001). Self-identifying with a celebrity may lead to

empowerment. Click, Lee and Holladay (2013) found that individuals suffering from regular bullying find solace in self-identifying with pop singer Lady Gaga. The pop singer's hit "Born This Way" was embraced as a rallying cry for the queer community who struggle with their sexuality (Dodero, 2015).

Identification intensifies when the fan perceives the celebrity embracing beliefs, attitudes, and values that align with their own. As Basil (1996) states, "simply choosing an attractive, well known, or talented spokesperson will not be effective if that person is not seen as similar to the audience members" (p. 490). If identification is continually reinforced, usually through repeat exposure to media content, it will eventually lead to the final dimension of the fan-celebrity persona relationship: worship.

Worship

The final stage of this pathway, and what Brown (2015) describes as the "most intense" form of fan involvement, is celebrity worship. Brown argues that worship "offers an additional dimension of audience involvement with media personae that is not fully explained by transportation" (p.265). McCutcheon, Lange and Houran (2002) suggest that celebrity worship falls into one of two categories; mild or (nonpathological) and extreme (pathological). The mild version of worship, according to their conceptualization, is related to some level of introversion or having fewer social relationships. Cheung and Yue (2003) found evidence that idol worship may be detrimental to a fan's perception of self.

It is not surprising that the term worship has been appropriated by fandom scholars (Maltby et al., 2002), for many fan behaviors and characteristics are analogous to religious movements (Jindra, 1994). Jindra states that hardcore fandom "does not have the thoroughgoing seriousness of established religions, but it is also not mere entertainment" (p. 50). Through an

ethnographic study of Elvis Presley impersonators, Fraser and Brown (2002) contend that fans that develop strong self-defining relationships experience an almost religious transformation. Cashmore (2006) concludes that “the intensity of emotional involvement, the impact on the life of the believer, the pattern of engagement with the rest of the world (from sociability to withdraw) are all features of celebrity worship that have religious counterparts” (p.254). Fans form communities around a common mythology and look up to the actors as the clergy or the gods themselves.

This adoration gives the celebrity immense power over the fan. The more a fan worships a star, the more likely they are to be influenced by that celebrity’s endorsement of products and projects. In a capitalist society, it is not surprising that infatuated consumers are heavily targeted by advertisers.

Although Brown (2015)’s individualistic model could be useful to conceptualize a fan’s affection for celebrity, this paper will now diverge from the socio-psychological approach to fandom research and expand into socio-cultural elements. Fans often seek other like-minded individuals to share their passions, creating a community with its own set of values, norm, and etiquettes.

Socialization

One becomes a “fan” not by being a regular viewer of a particular program but by translating that viewing into some kind of cultural activity, by sharing feelings and thoughts about the program content with friends, by joining a “community” of other fans who share common interests. (Jenkins, 2006, p.41)

Like any organization, culture, or group, active fans of media content build social worlds around their collective fandom. Researchers generally apply socialization theory to examine how individuals are assimilated into specific business organizations; this process is equally applicable for fandom research. As Soukup (2006) writes, “fandom is communal” (p. 322). Through the

socialization process, individuals are taught values, norms, and beliefs shared by that culture. Membership in a particular fandom comes with its own traditions, values, and norms developed through a collective love of the source material. This can shape an individual's behaviors while also cultivating a sense of shared reality.

Although Reysen and Branscombe (2010) maintain that all fandoms share similar characteristics, most research applying socialization theory to fandom focuses primarily on the realm of sports team loyalty. James (2001) found evidence that socialization of fandom begins early in life with children as young as age five beginning to form loyalties to organizations. Fathers tend to be the most influential socializing agent in sports loyalty (James, 2001; Parry, Jones & Wann, 2014). In fact, individuals were found to be less influenced by friends than by parents and family in their identification to a sports team. Although evidence shows support that television may serve as "an important role by reinforcing a child's attachment to a specific team by providing opportunities to watch a team" (James, 2001, p.257-258), James suggests that simply watching television seems to be of little influence on the socialization process of sports fandom. Boyle and Magnusson (2007) found support that the social aspect of going to sporting events plays a key role in the enjoyment of the experience. In fact, the success of the team does not overshadow the enjoyment of participating with a group of like-minded friends.

It is more than possible for an individual to create a relationship with a media persona without the communal influence. For most fans, however, socialization is not only key to introducing an individual to a fandom, but it also legitimizes it by reinforcing the beliefs, values, and norms of a fan community. Media content alone does not sustain fandom, but as Hellekson (2015) argues, "what unites all fan activity is building community" (p. 131). Socialization should be considered a pivotal component of the fan-celebrity dynamic, especially at fan

conventions. The communal elements of the con experience work to establish, develop, and maintain a standard of fan behavior.

Fan conventions provide a Mecca for individuals to collect and express their fervor for their favorite media programs and celebrities. It can be argued that these large gatherings of infatuated individuals are the inevitable byproduct of celebrity culture, fandom, and celebrity seeking behavior.

Fan Conventions

*I've done a couple of fan conventions and [the fans] are legion. We're very glad of the loyal fans - but it's a strange way to spend your life, dressing up like Star Wars. At least we change our costumes - I don't spend 40 years dressed up as Tywin Lannister.
- Charles Dance*

During an interview with *The Telegraph*, Charles Dance, who played Tywin Lannister in the wildly-popular HBO series *Game of Thrones*, is asked if he has ever been to a fan convention. In one sentence, the seasoned actor offers his appreciation for the fans while also simultaneously distinguishing himself from the fanatical admirers. Dance, whose career is predicated on donning costumes and pretending to be other people, sees the fans' behavior of dressing up as a "strange way" to live their lives. He implies that he should not be mistaken for a fan for he is a Hollywood star.

There is some debate as to when the first official fan convention took place. Science fiction lovers have been gathering at trade shows and book fairs since the 1930's. *Star Trek* conventions, however, are often credited as the earliest and largest American gatherings (Coppa, 2006). 3,000 people arrived for the first New York *Star Trek* convention in 1972, 300 were expected to attend (Jindra, 1994). Forty-five years later, approximately 15,000 *Star Trek* fans, or trekkies, attended the 2017 edition of the Las Vegas *Star Trek* Convention (Lupiani, 2017).

Today, cons have flooded the landscape with all types, sizes, and genres. Creation Entertainment, for example, offers dozens of gatherings with themes focused on specific media programs such as *Stranger Things*, *Supernatural*, *Once Upon A Time*, and *Vampire Diaries* (“Upcoming Events,” 2018). Wizard World boasts conventions in thirteen different U.S. cities (“Upcoming Shows,” 2018). New York Comic Con set a record in 2017 with 200,000 tickets sold (MacDonald, 2017).

The extreme popularity of fan conventions seems to contradict the stereotypical representation of the fan. Instead of the antisocial introverts who would rather spend their time consuming their favorite programs in isolation, many con-goers participate in afterparties, speed dating, and interactive role-playing games. The con is an assemblage of like-minded people, providing a sanctuary from the public attackers who see their behaviors as childish or beneath dignity. In these contexts, cosplaying and other expressions of fandom become normalized and even encouraged.

Cons also award fans a rare opportunity to meet their favorite celebrities. However, a sacrifice of time and money is needed to obtain this celebrity encounter. The Dallas Fan Expo 2017, for example, charged \$195 to capture a moment with Luke Skywalker (aka Mark Hamill). Of course, if a fan wants the “Gold Jedi Package,” a VIP-like treatment that includes a photo, an autograph, a separate line, and front row seats to any *Star Wars*-themed panel, that will cost them \$500 (“2017 Mark Hamill packages,” 2017). That may sound like a hefty sum, but fans are awarded a once in a life-time encounter with their idols. For many, the wait in line to acquire photos and autographs is almost a ritualistic ceremony. It becomes a part of the con experience.

Methodology

The new ethnography offers accounts in which participation is often as important as observation, the boundary between ethnographer and community

dissolves, and community members may actively challenge the account offered of their experience (Jenkins, 1992, p. 4).

This study is a cultural exploration with the goal of understanding the cultural value of the celebrity-fan dynamic and its place in the fan convention setting. I will implement an ethnographic approach (observations, field notes, in-depth interviews, audio recordings) to examine fan behaviors and experiences at Wizard World New Orleans (2018), a yearly fan convention. As Jenkins (1992) states, “there is not a privileged position from which to survey a culture” (p. 4). If a researcher is to understand a culture, one must be immersed in its practices.

Insider approach to ethnography

In the past six years, I have attended a total of nine conventions. As a fan who often seeks this celebrity encounter, I possess unique insights into the spectacle that constitutes the experience and how it is integral to the celebrity encounter’s impact. A celebrity encounter at a fan convention is surreal, exciting, timeless; and can be extremely meaningful to a devoted fan.

As a lifelong *Star Trek: The Next Generation* fan, I grew up idolizing Captain Jean Luc Picard. I considered the character to be the perfect representation of an adult. He was brave, stoic, and intelligent. He was a leader who wanted to bring peace to a galaxy full of conflict. Instead of war or conquest, Captain Picard’s weapon of choice was diplomacy. I saw him as a strong counterpoint to the token heroes of the day. My idol respected all cultures, was fluent in many languages, and resolved hostilities with his words rather than his fists. He was a nerd like me, but he was undoubtedly cool. I remember the first time I met Patrick Stewart. Although “met” might be overstating it; I waited in line for over an hour for five minutes with the man who played Captain Picard. It obviously held significant value to me, but I was also inflicted with two contradictions. First, Patrick Stewart was a stranger, yet he also embodied all my

affection for the *Star Trek* program. I had never met the man in person until that day, but his persona was instrumental in shaping my identity. Secondly, I felt the tension between the restricting social norms of adult behavior (standing in silence) and jumping up and down like the 8-year-old kid who idolized him. I purchased two autographs and a photo opportunity that day, and ever since have been a devoted fan convention attendee. Since then, I have pursued autographs from Chris Hemsworth, William Shatner, Stan Lee, Adam West, Carrie Fisher, and many others. A room in my house is dedicated to my collection of relics, a place where I can bask in the divine.

Cons provide this experience for fans: a promise of the extraordinary, a once in a lifetime meeting with their heroes, idols, or deities. However, the composition of the fan convention is more than just an assembly line of fans waiting for their celebrity encounter. Many fans spend their time in line conversing with others; they vent about a celebrity's erratic schedule or brag about the number of autographs they have collected. This waiting experience is ripe for analysis. Considering a fan sacrifices both time and money for the celebrity encounter, it would be beneficial for fandom research to discover how a fan rationalizes this sacrifice.

I will examine the cultural significance of the celebrity encounter through an insider approach to ethnography, a participant observer with inside knowledge of the subculture I am exploring. Simply put, I am a fan studying other fans. Quantitative methods were once considered optimal for data collection due to its presumed objectivity, yet contemporary fandom scholars have embraced the deeper insights generated from a researcher studying their own subculture. This approach has both its advantages and disadvantages. As Chavez (2008) argues, an insider approach can provide a more nuanced insight, "understanding the cognitive, emotional, and/or psychological precepts of participants as well as possess a more profound

knowledge of the historical and practical happenings of the field” (p.481). Inversely, this method has the potential for bias. The researcher may be “overly positive or negligent if the knowledge, culture, and experience she/he shares with participants manifests as a rose-colored observational lens or blindness to the ordinary” (p.475). However, my approach will be more than just self-endorsement. I will also be incorporating perspectives from cultural studies and critical theory. I will be highly participatory in the con experience while also observing the unique behaviors of other fan conventions attendees. As Booth (2013) states, “fandom and academia are not mutually exclusive identities” (p.120). To write as an objective academic and ignore my identity as a fan would be, first, impossible. It would also place myself in a superior position, one that has historically stigmatized this cultural practice. As Larsen (2012) argues, as ethnographers we should “confess the fan side of our identity up front and in detail, instead of in general claims of ‘I’m a fan myself’” (Larsen, 2012, para 4). In-depth interviews, observations, and notes will be analyzed, yet I will also embrace my fandom and experiences as a fan convention attendee.

Of course, with any qualitative approach, the researcher runs the risk of confusing his/her own stance with the subjects being studied. But as Jenkins (1992) argues, the detached observer practice has more egregious deficiencies: “The more distanced perspective did not insure a better understanding of the complexity of the phenomenon so much as it enabled scholars to talk about a group presumed incapable of responding to their representation” (p. 6). The academic distance allowed past researchers to stigmatize fan behaviors and to “judge or to instruct but not to converse with the fan community” (p. 6). Fans are also very skeptical of how they have been previously represented in the media. I, as a fan, am sensitive to the misunderstandings of their behaviors and practices.

The Cultural Site

Wizard World New Orleans (2018), an annual fan convention in the Southeast region of the United States, will be the setting for this study. This particular fan convention includes an impressive line-up of celebrities and provides fans many opportunities for a celebrity encounter. As mentioned previously, fans spend significant amounts of time waiting in line to meet celebrities. This routine function of a fan convention allowed me ample opportunity to interview participants. I was also able to observe the fan's waiting experience, a significant symbolic process of the celebrity encounter.

Participants and Recruitment

Ten semi-structured interviews, ranging from 10 to 30 minutes, were conducted over three days. I prompted participants with semi-structured open-ended questions and encouraged them to elaborate (see Appendix A). Considering the qualitative nature of this study, participants were not chosen at random. Age and gender were not factors; I simply chose individuals that were in the vicinity and appeared willing to converse about their fandom. Considering I wished to be a full participant in the con experience, I purchased both a photo opportunity (photo op) and autograph from one celebrity. My recruitment process would often include getting in line for a celebrity encounter, striking up a conversation with a nearby fan then informing them of my academic endeavor. Pseudonyms were used and chosen by participants. Real names were never recorded or noted. I read off a recruitment script (Appendix B), and those who volunteered were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix C).

Data Analysis

Research data was compiled into themes interpreted by the researcher. A hermeneutic method was conducted to determine what the "text" (interviewees, convention attendees, cultural

site) suggests about the socio-cultural implications of the celebrity encounter. As Arnold and Fischer (1994) contend, “hermeneutic philosophy seeks to understand understanding as an ontological state, not to prescribe a method for interpreting texts in a set fashion. As such, it leaves the way open for methodological innovation” (p.66). Instead of distancing the interpreter from the text, as seen in quantitative methods, hermeneutics engages with the dialogic community, and embraces the researcher's own insights “more consciously, critically, and powerfully on their own [pre-]understanding of the everyday phenomena” (Arnold & Fischer, 1994).

Analysis

The following analysis will begin by first extensively characterizing and illustrating the con experience, incorporating responses from participants paired with my own observations and personal experience as a frequent con attendee. Secondly, participants’ justifications for the sacrifice of time and money will be explored (RQ1). That will be followed by a critique of what else a fan might be asked to surrender during the fan convention celebrity encounter (RQ2).

The Con Experience

Most cons feature similar attractions for fans (e.g., panel, celebrity signings and photo ops, costume contests, etc.), and fan behavior is mostly uniform throughout; however, each con offers a unique experience. Most cons are operated independently, and as such, they tend to be structured differently. The cultural site chosen for this study features unique characteristics that are worth acknowledging. Firstly, Wizard World New Orleans (2018) is part of a larger conglomerate of cons under the Wizard World banner, which offers meetings in multiple cities (including Chicago, Austin, and Philadelphia) (“Home Page,” 2017). Additionally, Wizard World provides the opportunity of an enhanced celebrity experience through the purchase of a

“VIP” pass. This pass allows fans benefits and access to the celebrity that the standard ticket does not provide. Stan Lee’s VIP pass, for example, includes the convention ticket, autograph, photo op, and other Stan Lee-themed merchandise. VIP members are also awarded their own line and a more privileged access to Stan Lee. The price tag of this VIP package is \$439 (“Stan Lee gold vip package,” 2017). To outsiders this may sound unreasonable and excessive. To fans, it is well worth the cost.

The atmosphere of Wizard World New Orleans (2018), like all cons, is one of celebration, community, and unbridled merriment. Fans tend to romanticize this experience. Many describe the con setting as an asylum from the outside world, a protected community of like-minded individuals. Nancy R describes how being around other convention attendees makes the con experience special.

Nancy R: I like the people at cons; they are always really nice. I haven’t met anybody mean or jerky. The atmosphere is really good. I used to take my daughter to Anime Con when she was really little, and just the people; the atmosphere is so good at all these cons.

I asked Nancy R to expand on what she meant by a “really good” atmosphere.

Nancy R: Well, it’s...you know. People are not overtly friendly, it’s just people are cool, people are chill. I’ve never seen an issue with anything.

Nancy R, a frequent con attendee, speaks of an environment much different than outside the convention walls. Her claims that the con is a place where most “people are chill” and that she has never “seen an issue” is a strong divergence from the ridicule and mockery that fans

receive from outside the convention walls. Other participants shared Nancy R's affection of the con atmosphere.

Jon Zoidberg: It's interesting because you get to see a lot of creative things and see other people who are into the same things as you are. Lately, I was telling my mother: nerd culture use to be a closeted culture now it's mainstream. I think before [fan conventions] became mainstream it was kind of an affirmation of your culture and your fandom when you come to these things. You still get that, you get a lot of support from other people around here. You get to see a lot of cool things, and it also exposes you to some ideas you maybe haven't thought of along your fandom, ways you can express it and all this other stuff.

The fan convention community was mentioned frequently in my interviews with participants. Jeremy also mentions that the comradery is an integral component of a con's appeal.

Jeremy: I mean, you get to be there with other people who like the same things you like. You get to see people who are cosplaying as things you like. You get people who are selling things that are sort of built off what you like. So, a painting or an action figure or whatever. It's one more step to immerse yourself in the culture of whatever it is that you enjoy.

Jeremy describes the con as an assemblage of all things associated with a particular culture: nerd culture. This subculture possesses its own beliefs, norms, values, and attitudes. In fact, the term *culture* was mentioned multiple times by participants. I spoke to one participant who described his love of comic books and science fiction and how the con enhances his fandom.

Gunn: I think it's something that helps with your imagination, your creativity. And makes your mind work in a totally different way than the real world. It's a way for you to get out of it and be in your own world and reality and stuff. And I like being able to do that, and I'm here with other people that

think the same way. I mean, you're not going to sit here and find a bunch of football players walking around saying 'nerd, nerd, nerd.' The nerds are in charge here.

To Gunn, the con experience is validation for his love of comic books and science fiction. The con provides a setting to share his appreciation for things he has catalogued as "nerd." Gunn also implies that the convention walls shield fans from ridicule. Many of the participants described Wizard World New Orleans (2018) as a reservation for fans seeking to escape ridicule for their fandom. All participants embrace the term 'nerd,' using it to describe their personality, while also acknowledging that the word has been used to demean in the past. In fact, it seems necessary to address how the term nerd has been re-appropriated by fan convention attendees. Once meant to demean those who preferred fantasy novels over football games or Dungeon and Dragons over high school dances, the word has now been embraced by a growing subculture of individuals, a subculture that is working to form their own identity in mainstream culture.

Lan Hikari offers a conceptualization of this subculture, a proper definition of what it means to be a nerd. When I asked him why he is attending Wizard World New Orleans (2018), he listed his credentials.

Lan Hikari: I'm a big gamer. Obviously, by my cosplay I'm a big Doctor Who fan. I'm dressed up as the 10th Doctor, who is David Tennant, who I'm going to see in the photo op for today. I've been a fan of the series since they kind of rebooted back in '09. Other than that, I'm a big gamer. I'm into anime and videogames and stuff like that. I'm also into Marvel and DC and that kind of stuff. Not to the huge extent of all the comics, unfortunately. I'm not that familiar with all the comics, but I know basic knowledge of it and I love the movies and stuff. I hate that kind of an answer because I wish I knew a little bit more...but for me I live around here, 45 minutes away from New Orleans. So, coming here with me and my friends; it's been a fun time. This is my third year being here.

Lan Hikari categorizes videogames, the *Doctor Who* television program, and comic books all fitting into the realm of the nerd. In fact, he felt the need to apologize that he wasn't an expert in comic books, as if this lack of knowledge hurt his credibility. Other participants offered similar descriptions of "nerdom."

Gunn: I've been collecting comic books and stuff since the 1980s, and that got me started into the sci-fi type stuff, and from there, this is a big step, you know, to come see all you read about and all that.

Gunn and many other participants listed their love of things associated with the nerd as motivation for attending the con. When I ask Gunn what got him into comic books, he mentions his personality as a driving force.

Gunn: I've got the creative type mind, imagination. My siblings were all into sports and stuff, so I consider myself the nerd to their athletic stuff.

Anthony: Did your parents get you into comic books?

Gunn: No. Pretty much just me and my brother. We got into it, but I'm the one who continued. He stopped. [laughs]

Gunn sees himself as a divergent personality from his family. In our conversation, the participant describes two different types of people. The first group includes those who are into "athletic stuff" like his siblings. This group represents the mainstream, those who would ridicule him for his fandom. The other type of people are the fans, the con attendees, the nerds with the "creative type mind." To Gunn, his love of comic books and "sci fi type stuff" ostracizes him from mainstream society. Now he searches for a place where he belongs. Gunn seems aware of the stigma that follows a fan convention attendee, expressing that his brother stopped collecting

comic books. To outsiders, one is supposed to grow out of these nerd obsessions. Gunn laughs off the fact that he chooses to ignore that rule. When I asked Gunn what other events or programs he planned to attend at the convention, he told me that he wanted to try speed dating. I asked him why that interested him.

Gunn: Single, first off. [laughs]. And it would be good to find someone with the same type of interest and stuff. Even though I'm not a diehard type fan type person, you know. It's still; it's something that is big time important to me. Someone who understands why I dress up like I do.

Gunn was one of the many cosplaying con attendees. The *Doctor Who*-themed costume, a bright multi-colored suit, was a projection of his personality. In fact, the two-piece cosplay was what caught my eye and the primary reason I chose to interview him. Gunn sees Wizard World New Orleans (2018) as a place of refuge, a sanctuary where his colorful costume and personality wouldn't be ridiculed. Gunn also sees the con as a dwelling for a future companion, one whom could share his passions.

Other ethnographies of fan conventions have also underlined the extraordinary nature of the con experience. Cons not only provide a diversion from the "real world" but a safe place for fans who often feel ostracized in mainstream culture. Kozinets (2001) describes a Star Trek convention as a "gateway to a realized utopia" where fans can form a sanctuary and acceptance of their differences from the norm" (p.72). Kozinets argues that fan conventions are places "where many of those who do not easily fit into mainstream social roles (i.e., those who are already stigmatized in some sense or another) can find a form of sanctuary and acceptance" (p.72).

Many of the participants considered the terms fan and nerd interchangeable. Attending the convention means that you are a fan of comic books, science fiction, anime, and other things that are stereotypically portrayed as nerdy. There have been multiple terms used to refer to this particular subculture. Some bloggers refer to this collective appreciation for all things nerdy as *nerdom*, a combination of the words nerd and fandom. Salas (2017) describes nerdom as a community of passionate fans whom are spreading into the mainstream. Others simply call it *geek culture*. “Geek subculture is practically synonymous with ‘internet culture,’” argues Robertson (2014), “a phrase that adds the social and creative elements of the weblike forums, blogs, chat, online comics, and mash-ups on YouTube to the geek community” (p.22). I will not attempt to differentiate the types of fans at fan conventions. All subcategories (such as nerds, geeks, gamers, and cosplayers) fall under the umbrella of the fan, and all are welcomed at fan conventions.

Participants also mention that they often identified with the characters of the programs they love. When I asked Jon Zoidberg why the *Doctor Who* television program was so important to him, he mentioned how watching the long-running British television series is a celebration of his heritage.

Jon Ziodberg: I don't know, it's very unique type of sci fi show, because it's historical and it's science fiction. It's very different from other because the hero is more of a pacifist hero. I haven't actually watched much of the older versions before the reboots but; also my mom is British. I have British family, and I'm half British; so it's kind of a cool thing. It's got its own interesting culture.

The convention hall was not merely a place where unbridled enthusiasm is condoned; in many ways, childlike behavior is encouraged. At one point, while waiting in line, I witnessed a

man dressed in *Ghostbusters* attire (proton pack and all) strolling down the line scanning people with his replica P.K.E. meter. In any other setting a man in his late 40s, walking up to complete strangers and scanning them with a toy would have been met with scorn and mockery, yet those waiting in line got a kick out of his performance and began to play along. This was one of the many examples of fans participating in the con experience, ignoring the social norms of the “real world” and embracing the joviality of the fan convention.

Rationalizing the Sacrifice of Time and Money

The celebrity encounter holds significant value for a fan, but those who seek this one-on-one experience with a celebrity must sacrifice both time and money. I will argue that fans justify the sacrifice of time and money for the celebrity encounter in two distinct ways. First, fans justify the sacrifice by expressing the extraordinariness and rarity of the celebrity encounter. Second, participants rationalize this decision by characterizing the norms at a fan convention as proper fan etiquette, often describing the desire to acquire a celebrity encounter outside the convention setting as inappropriate and disrespectful. In doing this, participants work to distinguish themselves from the stigma of the fan as fanatical and adopt the norms reinforced by fan conventions to portray themselves as a moderate fan.

The Extraordinary Encounter. The first strategy fans implement to justify the sacrifice of time and money for an autograph or photo op is by expressing the extraordinariness and rarity of the celebrity encounter. Residents of Los Angeles, New York, and other media capitals might happen upon celebrities during their everyday routine; however, to most fans, a celebrity encounter is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. The only regular exposure a fan has with their idols comes through the mediated relationship. It is important to note that although time and money

are distinct concepts (for example a fan might be more willing to sacrifice time than money) participants rationalize the sacrifice of both in similar ways.

The sacrifice of money. The price tag for an autograph and photo op vary greatly depending on the prestige of the celebrity. Some of the bigger draws at Wizard World New Orleans (2018), including Stan Lee, Jason Momoa, and David Tennant, have a price tag of around \$100. A photo opportunity (or photo op) and autograph are two separate investments. Rates for these trophies may differ, but in most instances the cost of the photo op and autograph are the same. Those who could not afford both are often forced to choose between the two. I asked Lan Hikari about his decision to acquire a photo op over an autograph.

Lan Hikari: I don't know. To me it's proof, you can say 'hey look. I got a photo with one of my favorite actors.' I mean, an autograph is definitely cool. Don't get me wrong. There are definitely things from other people that I would like to have autographed. I just think the photo is really cool.

Previously in the conversation, Lan Hikari stressed that his finances were limited forcing him to choose between a photo op or autograph. Although future research could explore fan motivations for choosing between acquiring a photo op or autograph, the purpose of this paper is to examine the justifications for acquiring them. It was found that participants express the same rationalization for acquiring both the photo op and autograph. Many participants expressed concern with the rising cost of autograph prices, yet all participants felt that requiring a fan to pay for an autograph or photo op was not only reasonable but expected.

Lan Hikari: It is what it is. I think it's alright. Like I said, I've done it before. I think if you can manage it, it's something that you don't mind splurging on and it's something that's [long pause] not going to put you in debt or anything like that. If it's not going to harm you in any way I think it's okay. I guess

it just depends on how well you're doing. And a combination of how important your other obligations. Are there people who are supporting you, are there other people that you are supporting? That can be different from person to person. I mean, [David Tennant]-the one I'm doing-was a little over \$100. I don't consider that to be too bad. When I see some of them that are around \$400, like \$400 or \$500, I personally just don't have-not that I couldn't do it-but a little too high for me.

Lan Hikari considers it appropriate for a fan to pay for an autograph or photo op, with the stipulation that the fan is being responsible with their money. The participant, however, is guarded in his response. He acknowledges that the value of a celebrity encounter is subjective, and that outsiders might consider the prices for a celebrity encounter as profusive. He begins to list prices that are too extreme for him, yet still does not wish to offend anyone who could afford it. The cost of the celebrity encounter came up frequently in my conversations with participants. Wild Maximus, who was attending the convention to acquire a gift for her father, spoke about how she was reluctant to pay the price, but felt the experience was worth it.

Wild Maximus: Um. It hurt. The price tag. But I did it because it wasn't for me. I wanted to guarantee that I could get his done because of [Stan Lee's] age and because-when will I get this chance again? My dad would never do it.

Wild Maximus was able to rationalize the cost of the celebrity encounter as a rare and timeless opportunity, one that she could share with her father. Nancy R expresses a similar attitude.

Nancy R: Uh. I don't like to pay a lot. I think it's reasonable because, you know, it's a service and people, not fans, but other people might buy and try to sell autographs. I don't think it's unreasonable to ask to pay for one.

Nancy R is aware that having memorabilia signed by celebrities increases its monetary value substantially. She mentions that “other people” might acquire an autograph for profit, but she, a fan, is paying for the extraordinary experience. In my conversation with Josh 512, he described his plan to get a 1980’s poster signed by Stan Lee. I asked him why he chose to get that particular item signed. He expressed that the item might gain symbolic value for his family.

Josh 512: Why? Because there are only four in existence in the world. So, what I’m going to do is get it framed and I’m going to pass it down to my daughter so when I pass away she can have it.

To Josh 512, the Stan-Lee-autographed poster has the potential to become a family heirloom, a personalized artifact which could be passed down to his daughter. He even brought his daughter to the con to share in the experience. The signed poster is not merely a memento to pass down from generation to generation; it is a way for the participant to solidify his place in his family’s history. Future generations will always remember him as the one who met Stan Lee.

Stan Lee is a frequent and popular fan convention celebrity. In fact, I interviewed five participants who were waiting to meet the man credited with greenlighting some of the most iconic Marvel comic book characters (e.g. Spider-Man, Iron Man, the Hulk, the X-Men). The lines to acquire a trophy from the man who has developed a cult of personality as the face of Marvel Entertainment were lengthy. Stan Lee’s advanced age also adds a level of rarity to the celebrity encounter. In fact, participants interviewed for this study all listed Stan Lee’s advantaged age as a deciding factor to acquire an autograph or photo op. At 95 years of age, participants expressed concern that their window for this celebrity encounter was dwindling. I asked Worthy of Thor why he decided to pay for an autograph at the con and not purchase one online.

Worthy of Thor: Personal experience. To meet the man. I mean, he's 95. Not trying to be a dick, but not going to have many other opportunities to meet the guy.

The rare opportunity to meet a celebrity was mentioned by almost all participants. All participants interviewed felt the experience of meeting a celebrity outweighed any of the other functions and activities at the convention. In fact, many listed the celebrity encounter as the primary motivation for attending the convention.

The sacrifice of time. Participants not only work to rationalize the price tag, but they also must surrender a sizable portion of their con experience waiting in line. Waits can last hours, but Gunn described why he believes the one-on-one experience with the celebrity is worth the sacrifice of time.

Gunn: Well, you kind of get that face-to-face type experience. Like last year, I met up with Dean Cain and met him up on a Friday and he sat and talked to us for a good five or so minutes and everything. And the next day I was walking by and he saw me because I was [wearing something] colorful and he waved at me and yelled out my name. He remembered me.

Participants consider the wait in line an expected and acceptable drawback of the con experience. This sacrifice is not without its reward, however, for the fan has the potential for an interaction with a celebrity. In Gunn's case, Dean Cain remembering his name was enough to validate the long wait. The celebrity encounter possesses unparalleled value to a fan, and the trophies they take home are cherished. That is made very apparent when I asked participants if they would ever sell their autographs. In my conversation with Jeremy, we discuss his affection for actor William Shatner. He spoke about a previous con experience where he acquired an autograph from the *Star Trek* actor. I asked him if he would ever sell his autograph.

Jeremy: No. I don't look at any of it as an investment. It's not something that I hoped to profit off of. It's really not even about the autograph-it's about the memory of him being there and going to get it from him. It's about the experience of connecting with whatever it is that you enjoy. It's more about the memory more than anything else. It's hard to really feel anything about a memory of something if you're just purchasing it [at a vendor]. Somebody else got to live that. You are just buying their thing.

To Jeremy, the autograph was more than just a memento of the celebrity encounter; it represents the entire weekend at the con. The travel to the host city, all the functions attended, the restaurants he patronized, and even the wait in line itself is all part of the con experience. Jeremy does not distinguish the five-minute encounter with William Shatner from the rest of the convention. It is merely the crowning achievement of that particular pilgrimage. Other participants interviewed shared Jeremy's sentiment. I tried to persuade Jon Zoidberg to sell his beloved TARDIS, a *Doctor Who*-themed item for which he obtained multiple autographs. No hypothetical number was enough to pry the trophy from him.

Jon Zoidberg: No, I wouldn't sell it. It's the sentimental value to me now, something that I physically [got signed]. Now if I found that [autograph] at one of these [vendors] and bought it for 250 bucks and then someone offered me 2k then-because it doesn't have the sentimental value. I've got this [personalized Tardis] and took it to Dragon Con and carried it around the entire weekend, and got it signed and I brought it down [to Wizard World New Orleans (2018)] so I wouldn't sell this.

To Jon Zoidberg and many of the participants, the autograph is an everlasting reminder of a surreal experience. The memory of the celebrity encounter and the con experience becomes embedded in the trophy. In Jon Zoidberg's case, he has traveled to multiple cities to acquire autographs from a variety of *Doctor Who* actors. For each signature acquired, the Tardis value

increases exponentially. This Tardis does not simply increase in monetary value, although he could most certainly sell the Tardis for a hefty price, but the memory of the journey is far more valuable than the potential profits on eBay.

Wild Maximus admitted that she considered purchasing an autograph at one of the vendors but was thankful that she decided to get an autograph in person.

Wild Maximus: I thought about it. I didn't buy those [autographs from vendors], because it eliminates the experience of having *that guy* sign it right there in front of me. I already feel bad that it is not my sister standing there, but the next best thing is to have it say 'to [the Wild Maximus's sister's name] and [David Tennant]'s name. If [the autograph from a vendor] was the same price, I probably would have bought it, and I would have felt really stupid when I walked by and saw that he was there and I could have [got the autograph personalized]. Even if it was an extra 50 buck to have him do it. That's what matters, is it says 'to [Wild Maximus' sister's name]' and his name. Or the experience where I could say 'I got this for you from him!'

Although she was not a fan herself, meeting David Tennant had an important symbolic value for Wild Maximus. The autograph was a means of showing affection toward a family member, one who was not willing or able to attend the con. The autograph does not act alone; the story of the celebrity encounter and the con experience enhances the gift considerably. In fact, Wild Maximus was not merely giving her sister a trophy but gifting the celebrity encounter experience itself. This surreal moment is being shared vicariously through a family member.

Reijnders et al. (2014) discusses how this face-to-face encounter, referred to as an unmediated experience, has acquired a "special and irreplaceable value" (p. 152). A bridge between the celebrity and 'normal people' is temporarily formed during the fan-celebrity encounter. Fans are hungry for unmediated experiences because they temporarily place the fan at the same societal hierarchy as the social elite. Reijnders et al. writes, "these meetings do indeed

constitute a violation of the normal rules of accessibility between celebrities and fans, between extraordinary and the ordinary, between people with and people without remarkable social standing” (p. 152). The celebrity encounter represents more than mere affirmation of one’s fandom. Through the perceived intimacy with the celebrity, the fan is one step closer to Stromberg’s “second world,” the utopia promised by the screen. Considering only the celebrity is permitted to inhabit this perfect world, a fan must settle for the subsidiary. Proximity to the celebrity brings the fan closer to the divine. The sacrifice of time and money act as the sacrament.

Producing, Maintaining, and Reinforcing Fan Etiquette

The second strategy fans implement to justify the sacrifice of time and money is by characterizing the norms at a fan convention as proper fan etiquette, often describing acquiring a celebrity encounter outside the convention setting as inappropriate and disrespectful. A fan convention, like any large social gathering, is comprised of implicit rules and norms which are learned, maintained, and frequently reinforced by the members attending. One of the most prominent is the social agreement between fan and celebrity. Fans accept the price tag and wait as a means of respecting the celebrity’s wishes, and in return, they are awarded the one-on-one experience with a celebrity. The sacrifice of time and money is justified by fans as a means of showing gratitude to the celebrity they admire. Many participants mentioned the celebrity’s busy schedule and were appreciative of their benefaction. As mentioned before, all ten participants interviewed considered it reasonable and appropriate for a celebrity to charge for an autograph or photo op.

Jeremy: I think it’s fine. I don’t know why you would feel like you shouldn’t have to [pay]. I think running up to someone and taking a picture with them is disrespectful on multiple levels.

I asked Jeremy why he believes seeking a celebrity encounter outside the con setting is disrespectful.

Jeremy: Number 1, you are taking part of their time that they have not necessarily agreed to give to you. It's disrespectful because it's treating a human as an object to where it's not about you two connecting over one thing; it's about 'I just want to get this picture with you and run off.'

Jeremy mentions a connection that is formed between celebrity and fan and implies that appropriate fan behavior is one that upholds the social agreement established by the fan convention. Rushing up to a celebrity on the streets of New York City would be an example of treating the celebrity as an "object." Jeremy wasn't the only participant to express their gratitude that a celebrity would take the time to sign autographs.

Josh 512: They are just like everybody else. They don't want to be bothered in their spare time because if they wanted to be jerks they don't have to sign at all. Most time they won't. It's only fair, if you want an autograph you should pay for it, honestly.

The participant suggests that a celebrity's time is not something they offer freely. A celebrity encounter is an experience that a fan should be grateful to acquire, according to Josh 512.

Rejecting the Stigma of the Fan as Fanatical

Fans also attempt to distinguish themselves from the negative perception of the fan. This is often accomplished by characterizing the wait in line and sacrifice of money as proper fan etiquette. As Harris and Ferris (2011) argue, a fan seeking a celebrity interaction is faced with

the dilemma of wanting an interaction with a celebrity without violating the social and cultural norms of interacting with a stranger. “Fans simultaneously recognize and deny the interpretation of their overtures from those who pose a danger to the actors they love” (p.11). The fan etiquette reinforced at cons is a form of implicit instructions on how a fan should behave with a celebrity without being perceived as threatening. All participants were comfortable with the label of fan - many embraced it - yet they also simultaneously worked to portray themselves as a moderate fan, separate from the negative stereotype perpetuated by the media and mainstream culture. In fact, Wild Maximus became defensive when I asked her if she felt attending a fan convention is perceived to be childish.

Wild Maximus: It’s no different than fans going to a football game-who aren’t even going to get an autograph, who spend a ton of money to go to the Super Bowl.

Wild Maximus is the second participant to use the example of football, a widely accepted fandom in American culture, as a way of deflecting the negative perception of the frenzied fan. To her, spending “a ton of money to go the Superbowl” is an extravagant behavior that is tolerated by mainstream culture, while the desire for a celebrity encounter is often misconstrued as infantile. This pattern of facework continued. Participants were quick to describe themselves as a mild form of fan, one that is non-threatening and normal. When asked “what does it mean to be a fan?” Lan Hikari took the opportunity to defend the reputation of the fan convention attendee.

Lan Hikari: As long as you are a fan of something- If you like it, you don’t have to be absolutely crazy and insane about it, but, I mean, a fan is just someone who likes the thing that they are a fan of. Um. Some people go ‘oh a fan is fanatical about it’ I think that’s taking it a little too literal.

Lan Hikari chooses the words “crazy” and “insane” to describe what others might associate with this level of fandom. He also works to describe himself as a subdued fan, an individual who simply “likes the things they are a fan of.”

Although media fandom, including nerdism, is merging into mainstream culture, it is evident that fans are still guarded about their passions. The media has obviously contributed to this stigma of the fan as fanatical. Even programs tailored to this demographic often reinforce the negative representation of the fan. *Con Man*, an internet series featured on Comic-Con HQ’s website, centers around a celebrity who is forced to rely on fan convention appearances for income. Fans are painted as easily angered mobs that continuously break social norms by hugging, stalking, and making crude remarks. The pilot episode showcases the series star, Alan Tudyk, being pestered in an airport bathroom stall by a fan seeking an autograph. This may be for comedic effect and fan behavior is often embellished, but it also works to perpetuate the negative stereotype of the fan. Participants would often describe their level of fandom in a manner that would distinguish themselves from this stereotype. I asked Josh 512 to describe what would be appropriate fan behavior.

Josh 512: Someone who can actually respect [the celebrity]. So they did not want to give an autograph, I can respect that. But a crazy [fan] would be somebody like -don’t want to take no for an answer. Just stalk them. That’s not cool. Respect the celebrities. Because we are all human beings. Don’t just go crazy all over them. Let them enjoy their lives because they earned it. Don’t be jealous. Let them be them .

A “crazy” fan is described by Josh 512 as someone who doesn’t “respect” celebrities. This hypothetical fan doesn’t wait in line, refuses to pay, and doesn’t follow the implicit rules

reinforced at a fan convention. This is consistent with past ethnographic studies of fandom. Ferris (2001) discusses how active fans often feel conflicted by their desire to meet a celebrity. “Fans simultaneously recognize and deny the interpretation of their overtures as threatening and work to differentiate themselves from those who pose a danger to the actors they love” (Ferris, 2001, p. 26). Lan Hikari and other participants are highly motivated to acquire a photo op or autograph from their favorite celebrities but also work to portray themselves as nonthreatening. The fan convention provides fans the opportunity to seek a celebrity encounter in a setting that feels appropriate and secure.

When I asked ‘what does it mean to be a fan?’ Vladium Inhaler admitted the fans themselves might be responsible for perpetuating the stereotypes.

Vladium Inhaler: I don’t like the people that criticize everything. Every time a new *Star Wars* comes out or something, everyone is like ‘oh no, I hate it. I didn’t like this part because it didn’t feel like *Star Wars* or whatever.’ It’s like, I don’t know, I like the changes they try to do. I’m pretty open to people trying new things with the medium instead of doing the same old thing every time.

Later in our conversation Vladium Inhaler mentions that he does not like fans who are overly critical. He and other participants are working to create a separate faction of fans, a community of fan convention attendees. This membership is comprised of fans that are thrifty, respectful, and civil. A fan convention attendee follows the rules because following the rules is normal.

Widdicombe (1998) explores the many strategies speakers implement to accomplish membership or non-membership of a subculture. Through interviews of individuals at rock festivals in the South of England, Widdicombe discovered that respondents would often reject

questions which invited them to characterize themselves as punks or goths. Widdicombe and other ethnographers emphasize that individuals are fully aware of the negative stigmas of their affiliation in a particular category. Because of this, individuals often reject the categorization given to them by others and work to portray themselves as ordinary. This is most certainly true of the participants I interviewed. Similarly to Widdicombe's results, participants do not accept the categorization given to them by the media, rather "invoke an alternative identity, namely their identity as an ordinary person" (p.55). Participants often represented themselves as the antithesis of the nerd stereotype. To them, an authentic fan is a moderate fan, one that is not easily irritated or inflamed. Not only was attending a fan convention represented as normal but seeking a celebrity encounter lacking the convention setting was described as rude and against the celebrity's wishes. In other words, the public sphere is an inappropriate avenue for fans to acquire the one-on-one experiences they desire.

The Sacrifice of Autonomy

Many participants expressed that their primary motivation for attending the con was to meet a celebrity, and therefore any other function or activity was secondary to acquiring the photo op or autograph. Some participants expressed concern over the rising prices, yet all considered the celebrity encounter a valuable experience worth the cost. However, time and money are not the sole resources sacrificed during the celebrity encounter at a fan convention. As mentioned previously, Wizard World New Orleans (2018), similarly to other cons, is highly structured, organized, and controlled. Wizard World New Orleans (2015) reported an attendance of 30,000 people ("Wizard World," 2015). Without direction and organization, the con would descend into chaos. This control, however, comes with a consequence. Fans tend to romanticize the con experience and the celebrity encounter to the extent that they are willing to surrender

their autonomy. Considering there is always a potential for exploitation when individuals subject themselves to regulation freely, this sacrifice of autonomy is concerning. Furthermore, the allegiance to the rules and the perceived appropriate fan etiquette of a fan convention also contribute to placing the fan at the bottom of a troubling hierarchy. This was often seen in the brevity of the celebrity encounter, the unpredictable wait times, and the treatment of fans by con organizers.

The fleeting celebrity encounter. The substantial number of fans seeking a celebrity encounter pressures con organizers and celebrity handlers to get through fan lines quickly and efficiently. Each fan is given an objectively brief period with the celebrity. For example, a con celebrity encounter may simply include a greeting, a signing or photo op, and perhaps a handshake or fist bump. Of course, a celebrity may engage in a rare extended conversation, but the more prestigious the celebrity, the quicker fans are herded through the assortment of lines. Vladium Inhaler describes his celebrity encounter with Stan Lee.

Vladium Inhaler: I got it last minute, so it was kind of rushed. I ran in there, took a photo, and ran out.

Anthony: Does it look good?

Vladium Inhaler: I got a chance to smile! ((laughs)) They did give me a chance to smile. Stan Lee, not looking so hot though. Looking a little old.

Anthony: Yeah. I got a photo with him about four years ago, and they are like, 'don't shake his hand.' You get in there and take your picture and get out.

Vladium Inhaler: Yeah. They didn't even say anything to me. I walked in. [Stan Lee] said 'hey' and that was it. I was like 'hey,' picture was taken, and they were like 'alright, this way.' and I was like 'okay.'

As Vladium Inhaler and I converse on our experiences meeting Stan Lee, it becomes clear that we shared a similar encounter. Vladium Inhaler expresses his good fortune that he was awarded a chance to smile, implying that those who manage the photo ops are more concerned with the quantity of photos taken than the quality. Gunn admits that some celebrity encounters can be more rewarding than others.

Gunn: Yeah. That's the thing, you know, if you get face-to-face, some of them are great. There are some that I have gotten, and they are like "alright here" ((mimics signing and handing autograph)). Sign it and get out of here.

The above response illustrates a tension in the celebrity encounter. We seek this moment, surrendering time and money, but the payoff can be inconsistent. Gunn admits that some celebrities are not as amiable as he would prefer. These celebrity encounters can be so fleeting that fans are not allowed anything more than a generic greeting. Yet, fans still express a level of gratitude for this brief encounter with celebrity.

Unpredictable wait times. Fans are often left in the dark on how long they will be required to wait for a celebrity encounter. In my experience, the sacrifice of time varies dramatically based on the fan convention and the prestige of celebrity. Fan convention organizers rarely guarantee that every fan seeking to obtain a celebrity encounter will be awarded one. This causes fans to arrive especially early to ensure a place in line. Seasoned fans are aware that wait times are unspecified and inconsistent and come in with certain expectations. These expectations, however, are frequently defied, and forces a fan to rationalize the dissonance. My conversation with Nancy R illuminates the fan's constant need to reassess personal limitations.

Anthony: Let's talk a little bit about waiting in line...

Nancy: [laughs]

Anthony: Because that's something that happens all the time at these conventions.

Nancy R: Yeah.

Anthony: How long do you feel would be too long to wait for an autograph?

Nancy R: Over an hour. Yeah. Usually I try to wait under an hour.

Anthony: If you were waiting in line for Jason Momoa, and you were already here for an hour and a half, would you wait any longer or would you leave?

Nancy R: No, I never leave once I get in the line. (laughing). I figure the time sunk anyway. Yeah, I went to a con last year, and the risk you take on Friday is they don't show up on time. So, I went to go see Sean Astin, and, you know, not because his fault, but plane delay, right? So, he was late, but I was like six from the front, so I wasn't going to leave no matter...as long as they say he is still coming. So, I probably waited an extra hour then, because his plane was late. So, yeah. I would wait

Nancy R first establishes a cap on how long she is willing to wait in line. However, when I provide a scenario which encourages her to reassess her 1-hour limit, not only does she rationalize the extension of time, she shares a story of when she broke her own rule. Rather than blaming the celebrity or the convention organizers, she mentions a "plane delay," something that is out of the celebrity's control. She justifies the sacrifice of time as "a risk you take on Friday."

Nancy R wasn't the only participant who admitted to reassessing her personal time limit.

Lan Hikari: I think if I was here for about 4 hours that would be a little pushing it. Especially when I have friends with me. I don't think-I think they would wait but-that would be a long time for me. I would be okay with 3 hours max.

Later in the conversation, Lan Hikari discussed some stipulations to his three-hour rule.

Lan Hikari: If I can guarantee that I know I'm going to be in there [with celebrity] and if I'm already in line, I'm not going to get out of line. Unless something crazy happens. But if I'm just now getting there and I'm told 'hey it's going to be 5 hours before you can get in' then I would be kind of iffy on - I don't know if I would even make it by then.

Knowing that they will have to compete with other celebrity encounter seekers to ensure a place in line, participants mention the necessity to arrive early to ensure an advantageous place in line. I asked Jon Zoidberg how long he was willing to wait; he suggested that arriving earlier than the schedule required did not count toward his personal boundary.

Jon Zoidberg: I'd say, 1 and a half maybe would be a little too long but I would count that starting-like he's starting at 6:55- if I don't have my autograph by 8:30 then that would be too long. I think the fact that I have decided to come earlier, I wouldn't count that as waiting for an autograph. That's just how I choose to spend my time.

Many participants admit that once they are in line and a promise of a celebrity encounter is ensured they are more receptive to any sacrifice of time. It is not unreasonable to envision this level of devotion being exploited. A fan's sacrifice of autonomy is an often-unnoticed blemish of the con experience. The rules and fan etiquette reinforced at fan conventions puts the fan at the bottom of a troubling hierarchy. Although it could be argued that in celebrity culture, fans are inherently situated at the base of the social power structure, fans willingly place themselves in this position at cons. In fact, Ferris (2001) argues that the asymmetry of power in the fan-celebrity relationship outside of the con setting is reversed. When a fan seeks a celebrity encounter in the public domain, the celebrity is caught at a significant disadvantage. The fan knows more about the identity of the celebrity, disturbing the power dynamic that a celebrity

normally enjoys. A famous individual might wish to avoid these types of situations due to the invasion of personal boundaries or the fear of violent celebrity stalkers. Ferris (2001) argues “in the popular imagination, fans who pursue direct contact with media stars are seen as suspect, possibly unbalanced, and threatening in a variety of ways” (p. 28). A fan convention setting is far more agreeable for the celebrity because it restores the natural power dynamic. At the fan convention, fans are at the will of the celebrity, acquiring the celebrity encounter on the celebrity’s terms. Fan convention organizers are not expected to make guarantees on wait times, celebrities can arrive late or cancel appearances at any time, and the fan must accept this as part of the con experience. This is not the only hindrance that a fan tends to disregard.

Fan belittlement. Volunteers, fan convention organizers, and celebrity handlers are noticeable and vocal at fan conventions. I observed many instances when the constant bellowing of rules and directions evolved into beratement. Fans are told where to be and when to be there. “This line is for VIP passes only,” one volunteer screamed at a fan convention attendee who was attempting to sneak into a much shorter line. “Your line is over there,” the volunteer said with contempt as she pointed to a much more intimidating formation of fans. I watched as the fan internalized the volunteer’s credentials. The fan accepted the authority of the volunteer, proceeding to the less prestigious line. The disdain expressed by the volunteer is surprising considering most of the volunteers at Wizard World New Orleans (2018) and other conventions are fans themselves. Many offer their service in exchange for free admission to the convention (“Volunteer,” 2017). Regrettably, this was a fan demeaning another fan. As mentioned previously, fans often attempt to distinguish themselves from the stigma of the fan as fanatical by denouncing the perceived inappropriate behaviors of other fans. Yet even when fans are not breaking the rules they are sometimes treated resentfully. I observed another instance when a

celebrity handler became frustrated with a group of fans who were attempting to retrieve their developed photo ops. She yelled at them on more than one occasion to “move!” The disgust in her face was evident as she questioned why the fans could not follow simple instructions. Instead of examining the situation and realizing that these individuals could not move without losing their place in line, she instead berated them, treated them as mobs of ungovernable buffoons. She was not a fan, rather employed by Jason Momoa. Her job was to ensure the celebrity’s con visit ran smoothly and stress-free. She perceived this formation of fans as a threat to order, and ultimately, to Jason Momoa’s well-being. She felt compelled to use her authority, bestowed by her proximity to the celebrity, to chastise the fans who were not following the celebrity’s wishes.

We, the fan convention attendee, accept and tolerate a small degree of humiliation, for it is an inherent penance of the con experience. We are herded in lines towards the makeshift tents built to shield the celebrities from our offensive gaze. We are ordered by employees and volunteers to move along in an orderly fashion while fighting desperately to secure our place in line through the chaos. It is all worth it, however, for we are awarded a temporary bridge to the divine, one day to sit among kings, a surreal and lifechanging con experience forever embedded in our trophy of choice.

Discussion

Fandom, celebrity, and fan conventions have each been studied extensively by cultural scholars. Little attention, however, has explored its amalgamation: the fan-celebrity dynamic at fan conventions. Through ethnographic field notes, observations, and interviews, this study was designed to explore the process of how a fan justifies the sacrifice of time and money required for the celebrity encounter while also examining what else must be surrendered during the con experience.

The inclusion of Brown (2015) 's Model of Audience Involvement with Media Personae was intended to highlight how other scholars have examined the fan/celebrity dynamic. Although the terms transportation, parasocial interaction, identification, and celebrity worship may be useful to conceptualize a fan's affection for celebrity in socio-psychological terms, the model does not seem to be useful for this study. These concepts, specifically parasocial interaction, possess a negative connotation, loaded with harmful, compulsive, and unhealthy undertones. Instead of creating a pathway to determine the varying levels of audience involvement with celebrity, Brown instead provides pathological categories for which to place fans. The diagnostic nature of Brown's model has the consequence of contributing to the negative stereotype of the fan, which fandom scholars wish to avoid.

Socialization can be a useful framework to examine and analyze meaning-making at fan conventions. Cultural and social norms are not inherent but learned and, as Harris & Ferris (2011) state, "our behavior is shaped by the perspectives we are socialized into" (p.120). Fans who seek the celebrity encounter are often faced with the dilemma of how to appropriately behave around celebrities. Con culture produces, reinforces, and maintains a clear roadmap of fan etiquette. Those wishing to avoid the label of stalker can alleviate the dissonance by following the con's code of conduct, waiting in line and paying for the celebrity encounter. It does not take long for this socialization to occur; a first-time con attendee is introduced to the implicit rules by observing the behaviors of other con attendees while also being bombarded with explicit instructions from con organizers.

With an insider's approach to ethnography, some may question the need to interview participants at all. What additional data did participants disclose that observation could not provide? The participants' shared desire to separate themselves from the stigma of the fan as

fanatical by maintaining fan convention etiquette would have been overlooked with mere observation. Through the communicative process, participants are working to reject the nonfan's classification of the fan. This identity formation would have been impossible to uncover without careful analysis of my conversations with participants.

One area that this paper failed to cover was the potential differing experiences and tensions felt by fans who purchased the VIP packages. These enhanced celebrity experiences could be explored in future ethnographic studies. Fandom scholars could focus on the different rationalizations for acquiring the VIP pass over the standard ticket. Furthermore, researchers could also examine the celebrity's perspective of the celebrity-fan dynamic at fan conventions. It would be of great interest to fandom scholars to determine how celebrities rationalize requiring the fans to sacrifice their time and money to meet them.

Exploitation of Fans

This study provides evidence that a fan's fervor for the con experience makes them susceptible to a degree of manipulation and exploitation. Goldberg (2016) argues that the fan convention provides celebrities with the tools to take advantage of their devoted fans. Cons are becoming increasingly celebrity-driven. A celebrity's con itinerary may simply include signing autographs, posing for pictures, and attending one or two panels, yet some top-level celebrities may leave with \$500,000 for a single weekend. Goldberg stresses that "A-listers can judiciously attend paid fan events without damaging their brand or impacting their ability to command a seven-or eight-figure payday" (Goldberg, 2016, para. 14). Comic-Con International: San Diego, the pinnacle of fan celebration, has been criticized by fans for being tarnished by runaway capitalism. Robinson (2017) states that "for years now, at least since *Twilight* invaded in 2008, the San Diego Comic-Con fandom has been exploited and overrun by the slick, glossy marketing

machines of studios like Marvel, Warner Bros., and 20th Century Fox” (Robinson, 2017, para. 2). As suggested in this paper, fans overlook these hindrances. In fact, participants often rationalize the varying means of manipulation as part of the con experience. We see it as a necessary penance for obtaining what we so clearly desire. Our allegiance to the implicit fan convention rules anoints both the celebrity and fan convention organizers, such as Wizard World New Orleans (2018), with considerable influence. If a fan seeks a celebrity encounter we must pay for it, both through the sacrifice of time and money, and to a certain extent through the sacrifice of our autonomy. The alternative is to forgo the divine experience or attempt to obtain it outside the con setting and be branded with the stigma of the crazed and disrespectful fan. Considering the potential for exploitation, some critics may disagree with Gunn’s declaration that “the nerds are in charge here.” It is important once more to stress, however, that fans are not mindless drones who will sacrifice anything to obtain the celebrity encounter. In fact, the participants I interviewed wished to distinguish themselves from the irrational fan. To imply that fans are completely powerless to resist the temptation of the celebrity encounter, that our allegiance will remain unwavering even if celebrity autograph prices become excessive, waits become boundless, and the celebrity encounter itself truncates to the point of insignificance, would be to perpetuate the very stereotype I wish to discard. However, this study provides evidence that fans are willing to surrender a portion of our autonomy in return for a surreal experience.

Limitations

As mentioned previously, the con is an extremely controlled setting. Certain areas were roped off creating limited access to potential participants. There were many instances where I was forced to interview participants on the edges of roped-off line formations. Conversations

were sometimes cut short due to convention organizers and volunteers guiding fans to the celebrity encounter. Although I was able to obtain enough data to adequately explore the above research questions, conducting an ethnography study in a less restricting setting could generate more in-depth interviews. It could be argued, however, that this limitation is part of the con experience. Conversations between fans are continually interrupted by the bellowing of rules and regulations or, more excitingly, the sudden eruption of applause when a celebrity enters the convention hall.

Furthermore, it became necessary to adapt my interview strategy early in the process. With any ethnographic study, acquiring data is curbed by the skills of the interviewer. I first began recruiting participants by introducing myself as an academic studying fandom. My first few participants seemed guarded, often giving truncated responses. I became increasingly concerned with the seriousness of one conversation. The participant continually referred to me as ‘sir,’ and would pace awkwardly during the interview. At first, I disregarded this as part of his personality until I began disclosing my own fandom during the conversation. His mood began to change, and he became increasingly comfortable when I worked to unmask myself as a fan. For the remaining interviews, I proceeded the recruitment process by first striking up a conversation with individuals in line. After I worked to establish myself as someone who was also partaking in the con experience, I informed them of my academic endeavor. Interviews went smoother and participants were more likely to disclose information about their fandom. Instead of an objective scholar attempting to explore an exotic cultural practice, I was merely a fan interviewing other fans. This is more validation for the insider approach to media ethnography. As Chavez (2008) states, one of the advantages of the insider approach is the “detection of nonverbal gestures of embarrassment and discomfort” (p.479). Yes, many individuals are unashamed of their fandom,

ready to converse on the many programs they enjoy and the celebrities they admire. There are many fans, however, who feel uncomfortable with the stereotypes that follows the fan convention attendee. Responses can often be limited when fans fear they may be misrepresented.

Conclusion

The celebrity encounter, embedded in the con experience, can be a truly rewarding experience. The con provides a place where fans can congregate in mutual love of source, safe from ridicule. The celebrity encounter provides the fan a surreal and timeless experience, one that becomes immortalized by the autograph or photo op. This trophy becomes an important anecdote which we, the fan, relish sharing with friends and family.

I follow in the footsteps of Henry Jenkins by stating: Hello. My name is Anthony. I am a fan. This means “I feel a high degree of responsibility and accountability to the groups being discussed here.” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 7). I am also an academic, with the responsibility of applying cultural theories and to think critically about this particular cultural phenomenon. Due to America’s intensifying infatuation with celebrity, it would not be too bold to state that celebrity culture *is* American culture. Therefore, to study fan conventions and the fan-celebrity dynamic is by default studying American culture. The popularity of fan conventions and the celebrity encounter shows no signs of diminishing. The celebrity encounter at a fan convention has immense symbolic value for a fan, while opening a door of potential exploitation. Are the nerds in charge at fan conventions? That question can not be answered with a simple yes or no. This paper has provided evidence, however, that the fan convention possesses a complex social structure worth exploring further.

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Appendix A

Pseudo-name or gamer tag _____

Semi-structured interview questions:

1. Could you tell me a little bit about yourself and why you choose to attend Wizard World New Orleans (2018)?
2. How much of a fan are you of _____(celebrity), and tell me a little bit about when you first considered yourself a fan ?
 - a. If you had to rate yourself on a scale of 1-10, how would you rate your level of fandom towards _____? And why?
 - b. Do you have any friends or family who are also fans of _____, if so, tell me about those people.
 - c. Do you participate in other types of fandom, for example, online fan groups, blogs, reddit threads, fan fiction?
3. What other functions, activities, or events do you plan to attend at Wizard World New Orleans (2018)?
 - a. What's your favorite and why?
 - b. Is there an event going on right now, that you were interested in attending that you missed because you were waiting in line to meet_____? If so, why did you choose to wait in line for _____(celebrity)?
 - c. How long do you feel would be too long of a wait for an autograph or photo?
 - d. Is there a limit on how much you would pay to get an autograph and why?
4. How do you feel about paying to get an autograph or photo?

- a. How much would you consider too much for an autograph? And why?
 - b. (if participant is waiting in autograph line) Tell me a little bit about what you plan on getting signed? What you plan on doing with the autograph?
 - c. Would you ever sell the autograph?
 - d. Are there any other celebrities that you would like to get an autograph or picture from, if so, who and why?
 - e. (if participant is waiting in line to get a photo with celebrity) Why did you choose to get a photo and not an autograph? If you are getting both, why?
 - f. Could you tell me why you chose to get your item signed by _____(celebrity) here at Wizard World New Orleans (2018) instead of paying for one on eBay or from one of the vendors?
5. What, in your opinion, does it mean to be a fan?
- a. How does attending a fan convention such as Wizard World New Orleans (2018) enhance the fan experience?
 - b. What in your opinion, would be the difference between a healthy relationship between a fan and celebrity, and an unhealthy relationship?
 - c. Do you consider yourself to be in a healthy relationship with _____(celebrity) and why?

Appendix B

Recruitment Script

Hello, my name is Anthony Dannar, a graduate student at Auburn University under the supervision of Dr. George Plasketes. I am writing my thesis on fan conventions and attendees. Part of my thesis includes interviewing enthusiasts like yourself.

As a fan myself and a frequent attender of fan conventions, I have become fascinated with the relationship between fans and celebrities. I wish to learn about this relationship, and what this says about American culture.

If you are interested, I would like to ask you a series of questions. The interview will last between 45-60 minutes. You do not need to get out of line, we can do the interview while you wait. I do plan on recording the interview for accuracy. However, all audio recordings of this session will be confidential. No one will listen to them except for me. Also, in the transcripts of the recordings and any report I write, I will change everyone's name and the names of any other person or place you mention. I am also happy to share with you anything I write up as a result of my research.

If you have any questions before you decide to participate, I will be happy to answer them. Please feel free to contact me by email (dannaan@tigermail.auburn.edu).

Thank you for considering this.

Appendix C

**INFORMED CONSENT
for a Research Study entitled
Studying the Celebrity-Fan Relationship at Fan Conventions**

You are invited to participate in a research study that involves the fan/celebrity relationship at fan conventions. This study is being conducted by me, Anthony Dannar, a graduate student at the School of Communication and Journalism at Auburn University under the direction of Dr. George Plasketes. You were selected as a possible participant because you are partaking in the “con experience,” and more specifically, waiting in line to meet a celebrity.

What will be involved if you participate? If you decided to participate in this research study, I would like to audio-record your answers to a series of questions. Your total time commitment will be approximately 45-60 minutes.

Are there any risk or discomforts? The risk associated with participating in this study are that you may feel discomfort talking about your fan behavior and relationship with celebrity. You may also feel uneasy about being recorded. To reduce these risk, I will make sure that all audio recordings (interview and tutoring sessions) will remain confidential. No one will listen to the recordings except for me. Also, in the transcripts of the recordings, I will change your name to a pseudonym of your choice.

Are there any benefits to yourself or others? I cannot promise you that you will receive any benefits from this study, though your willingness to participate is much appreciated as I am passionate about fandom and hope my research in some way benefits the fan experience.

If you change your mind about participating, you can withdraw at any time during the study. Your participation is completely voluntary. If you choose to withdraw, your data can be withdrawn as long as it is identifiable. Your decision about whether or not to participate or to stop participating will not jeopardize any relationship or future relationship you may have with Auburn University or Auburn University’s School of Communication and Journalism.

Investigator’s initials
Page 1 of 2

Participant’s Initials

Your privacy will be protected. Any information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential. Information obtained through your participation will be used towards my communication research and fandom discourse.

If you have questions about this study, I invite you to ask them now, or you can contact me at dannaan@tigermail.auburn.edu. A copy of this document will be give to you to keep.

For more information regarding your rights as a research participant you may contact the Auburn University Office of Human Subjects Research or the Institutional Review Board by phone (334)-844-5966 or email at hsubject@auburn.edu or IRBChair@auburn.edu.,

HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED, YOU MUST DECIDE WHETHER OR NOT YOU WISH TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY. YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES YOU WILLINGNESS TO PARTICIPATE.

Participant's signature Date
Date

Investigator obtaining consent

Printed Name

Printed Name