

9 Processes of Audience Involvement

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Glossary

Homophily: The tendency for people to choose connections with people who are similar to themselves in socially prominent ways.

Identification: Actively imagining becoming the character in a book or program and experiencing the events happening to that character from the inside out.

Parasocial: A connection between media persona and viewer that is nonreciprocal.

Transportation: A metaphor for transporting into the fictional world of the narrative, losing track of your actual surroundings, and being immersed in that world.

Introduction

Consider the word *audience*. It might suggest a level of passivity on the part of the viewer that is only occasionally true. As society has moved into the information age, the age of digital media, viewers have more and more become participants in the creation of media rather than passive recipients. However, it is still true that media consumers have a choice as to how involved they get with the media they consume. In fact, consumption is one dimension of media studies that is interesting to look at. If it is conceived of as a continuum on which the couch potato viewer–only person is on one end and the creative producer or co-producer is on the other end (e.g., the citizen journalist), then is it possible for each individual to figure out where they belong on that continuum? For that individual, does it vary from day to day?



Figure 9.1 Audiences are diverse groups of people.

Source: www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/diverse-group-friends-watches-tv-sportbar-1031029942

Over the course of media and psychology research, the concept of audience has shifted substantially. In what is considered to be the first theoretical communication model, Laswell’s (1948) linear model, read “who said what to

whom, using what channel, and with what effect” (p. 216). This model implied a linear relationship between the message and its audience. The presumption in these early days of models of communication was that message recipients could only respond to a message by being affected by it. Audience members were passive receivers. Later theories and models understood this as a much more interactive process with audiences taking an increasingly more active role from merely providing feedback, to being co-creators of the meaning of the message. This shift in thinking about audiences happened even before media became interactive. This is a shift from “media effects” (what media do to people) to “active audience” research (what people do with media). The active audience paradigm shift included both the media use theories we saw in [Chapter 2](#) (e.g., uses and gratifications) and interpretive and reception theories that focus on active meaning-making, such as Radway’s (1983) theory for the way readers interact with the text of romance novels.

This shift in the conceptualization of audiences was further exacerbated by the increasingly interactive nature of media (Press & Livingstone, 2006). Those who used to be simply watchers are now participators and creators in many cases. This chapter explores the nature of audience participation in media creation and how that has changed the dynamics of what we study. It is important to recognize that information is no longer curated by a few and distributed to the many. Social technologies have introduced peer-to-peer connectivity, forever changing the control of traditional media producers. In this context, people are as likely to search, create, and distribute as to consume.

In addition to this behavioral domain, audience studies look at the emotional and cognitive effects of involvement with media personae. A number of terms are used in these discussions, including *engagement*, *absorption*, and *presence* (also discussed in [Chapter 11](#) on gaming). These culminate in four theoretical approaches to involvement: transportation, parasocial, identification, and persona worship (Brown, 2021).

This chapter summarizes and examines these approaches. In the area of narrative psychology, the concept of transportation is explored, a process whereby a person is so engaged in the media being experienced that they are removed from present physical circumstances and fully engaged in the media world observed. This is the occasion when someone not only attends to information but goes beyond that to also being absorbed into the narrative flow of a story in a way that

is pleasurable and active (Jonathan Cohen, Tal-Or, & Mazor-Tregerman, 2015; Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004).

Parasocial theory looks at the inner workings of a specific type of interaction with media, that being the occasion when audience members interact with a specific media persona in spite of that interaction being unreciprocated. We interact with media figures using our imaginations, and eventually, after prolonged interaction of this type, a parasocial relationship can be forged.

Many theorists beginning with Sigmund Freud (1989/1940) and Erik Erikson (1982) have talked about identification as a process of developing one's sense of identity (i.e., "Who am I?"). Jonathan Cohen (2001, 2014) has done a great deal of groundbreaking research in this area, making a clear distinction between identification with a media figure in contrast to having a parasocial relationship with a media figure.

There is a broad area of research referred to as "fan studies" that looks at the connections that audience members forge with various people and programs experienced through media. Fan studies is a part of a number of disciplines, most notably sociology, communication, cultural studies, and anthropology in addition to psychology. While being a fan and persona worship, also called celebrity worship, are very different constructs, it is in the context of fan studies that this concept is explored.

Transportation

Transportation theory explains the experience of being completely involved in a narrative through cognitive and emotional immersion as well as being involved in imagery, although in the cases of written narratives, the imagery is internal and imagined. The term *transportation* is a metaphor for transporting into the fictional world of the narrative, losing track of your actual surroundings, and being immersed in that world. Transportation results in feeling connected with fictional characters and involves a certain amount of self-transformation as you temporarily adopt the identity of a fictional persona (Green et al., 2004). Transportation can be a means to escape, exploration, learning, or the development of empathy (Brown, 2021).

There is a debate about the relationship between identification and transportation. In one scenario, identification can be the vehicle that transports you into the narrative. But it can also happen that you transport into the story like a fly on the wall and observe as yourself without identification (Oatley, 1999; Tal-Or & Jonathan Cohen, 2010). One meta-analysis showed that identification and transportation were the strongest predictors of media effects (including persuasion and social learning) when compared to a parasocial relationship (PSR) and homophily (Tukachinsky & Tokunaga, 2013).

Research by Green and her colleagues supported the idea that narrative transportation is a key factor in persuasion. Powerful narratives have the ability to change beliefs, and this effect is an important one when considering the effects that stories have on viewers (Green, 2021). By being transported into a story, that story has the power to affect beliefs and attitudes held by the viewer after they are no longer immersed in the story (Green & Brock, 2000). Think of a story you have watched or read and how it might have affected your beliefs.

Parasocial Theory

Parasocial theory (Brown, 2021; Stever, 2017) is very much related to fan studies, but the research literature has developed mostly among different scholars and even the definition of parasocial has been controversial. It is agreed that parasocial interaction (PSI) involves the imaginary interaction an audience member has with media as it is being consumed. A key point is that it is not reciprocated. That dialogue can lead to a PSR that is an outgrowth of PSI but is conducted apart from media consumption. In a very real sense, it is a fantasy or imagined relationship that is an outgrowth of the connection one feels with a media persona one relates to just as if that persona were a part of everyday life. Parasocial attachment (PSA) is when a persona becomes a source of comfort, felt security, and safe haven, much as a face-to-face attachment is a source for those things. In attachment, proximity seeking is a key aspect of the connection. For PSA, the proximity seeking is most often virtual, although occasionally audience members seek out real contact with media personalities through live audience experiences, autograph opportunities, or meet-and-greets held at conventions or concerts.

While some controversy arises from the disagreement as to whether PSI, PSR, and PSA are indicative of some kind of abnormality, most who work in parasocial theory agree that it is not. It has been better conceptualized as a developmental process that begins with acquaintanceship and progresses in some cases to parasocial attachment, looking to a favorite media figure (fictional or real) for felt security and safe haven (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019).

Part of the origin of this disagreement comes from a divide between psychologists and other social scientists as to whether the fan experience or parasocial experience has been pathologized by psychology. This is discussed in some detail later in the Fan Studies section, so I will not rehash that discussion here. Suffice it to say that among those who conduct research in the various aspects of parasocial theory, it is considered to be a normal activity, indeed one in which most media consumers engage. That it can transition into something unhealthy is addressed in a later section.

Another discussion that has been conducted within the parasocial theory research community is whether social media and direct contact with various celebrities might have changed the parasocial into something that looks more social. This is a difficult question to address. Is the relationship still not reciprocated if one has an interaction on social media? I would propose that the question be resolved by conceptualizing the contrast between social and parasocial as a continuum rather than a dichotomy. On one end is the everyday social relationship with a real person with whom we have interaction and complete access. On the other end is the completely parasocial relationship in which we have no access whatsoever to get any kind of feedback from the person. By definition then, all PSRs with fictional characters have to be completely parasocial. But a PSR with a real and living person has the potential, at some point, of becoming interactive and therefore, social. But this is not an either/or, all-or-nothing situation.

Take the fan who tweets her favorite celebrity once and gets either a reply, a retweet, or a “favorite”/like from the person. They have been recognized and acknowledged. However, this is a case in which the relationship is still clearly parasocial. The fan still has no access to the celebrity. If she tweets again, she has no assurance of another response (Stever & Lawson, 2013).

On the more “social” side of parasocial, there is the parishioner who attends a huge church with a congregation of 5,000 and hears a sermon from the same pastor every Sunday. They know that pastor quite well and are not known back. But if that parishioner is a member of the church, theoretically they could go to the church and try to meet with the pastor in person for some reason. There is a social potential. That might be a situation whereby the relationship is in the middle of the continuum . . . PSR but with a real potential for becoming social.

Any number of variations on these situations make it clear that the idea that all relationships are either social or parasocial (completely) is one that does not hold up under scrutiny. A theory of social and parasocial relationships and how they relate to one another would resolve this question and should be further developed.

Also related to the concept of PSR is the idea of social surrogacy. Simply stated, when our desire to interact with others is not satisfied, we look for other ways to satisfy this need. During the “lockdown” phase of COVID-19 in 2020–2021, if people did not have someone with whom to interact, they would seek social connection through television programs or online social outlets. This notion of

social surrogates has not had much research to date but should be considered in future studies (Paravati, Naidu, Gabriel, & Wiedemann, 2019).

Another recent addition within the study of parasocial phenomena is retrospective imaginal involvement (RII). This refers to tendencies to remain involved with media well after it has actually been consumed. We often revisit books, movies, or other programming in our imaginations when thinking about decisions or pondering social situations (Jonathan Cohen, Appel, & Slater, 2020; Slater, Ewoldsen, & Woods, 2018). RII is a reason that length of time actually consuming media is not a good predictor of PSR.

Identification

Jonathan Cohen (2001) distinguished between PSR and identification: In PSR, the media consumer interacts with the character as a separate entity while in identification, the media user mentally becomes the character. For Cohen, identification involved actively imagining becoming the character in a book or program and experiencing the events happening to that character from the inside out.

Identification in this context involves empathy. It includes merging self with the character—temporarily becoming the character. It is a multifaceted construct that includes sharing the character’s cognitive perspective (understanding the events as the character does), sharing the character’s emotions, and sharing the character’s goals and motivations (Jonathan Cohen, 2001).

Central to identification is vicarious experience, a key aspect of Bandura’s theories. In experiencing the world through the observation of role models, media audiences are able to expand the breadth of their own desires for various types of activities and experiences (Jonathan Cohen, 2014).

Identification does not have to rely on similarity. Contrary to the intuitive belief that being similar fosters identification, the power of a good story is that people can merge with characters that are very different from themselves. This relates to the notion that media can be used for self-expansion, for play, or for trying on alternative selves (Jonathan Cohen, Weimann-Saks, & Mazor-Tregerman, 2018).

It has been proposed that the relationship among these processes might be developmental, with initial transportation growing into a PSR that eventually sparks identification and, at its most intense levels, could even lead to persona worship (Brown, 2021). Jonathan Cohen and Christopher Klimmt (2021) have concurred with this idea saying, “We elaborate an improved conceptualization of identification as dynamic over time and as a mode of reception that can shift into other modes (and vice versa)” (p. 249).

Fan Studies

Recognizing this tendency to be absorbed in and relate to media in a deeper way, a trend toward audience participation media has resulted in various types of programming that seek to have the viewer engaged in a real rather than only an imaginative way, thereby increasing audience investment in the program. In the early days of *Star Trek*, fans of the show engaged in writing their own fiction about the characters, and rather than the producers being threatened by that, fan fiction was embraced by the *Star Trek* community as a way to increase commitment to the program.

A number of observations have been made about the general field of fan studies. The most important may be that in studying “fans,” one is studying a very small slice of the potential media audience. “Fandom should not be confused with everyday media use in general. Nor does it, at first sight, provide much help in theorizing more mundane forms of media use” (Hermes, 2009, p. 114). Some research has defined fandom in behavioral terms, for example,



Figure 9.2 *Star Trek* fandom is one of the places where fans explore their identification with characters through costuming, referred to as cosplay.

Source: www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/san-diego-july-23-fans-dress-34186402

188 “behaviorally identified fans” (Stever, 2009). The criteria observed included things like collecting memorabilia, writing letters to favorite celebrities, attending events that honored the fandom or where one was likely to meet favorite celebrities, and joining groups (most often called fan clubs) of like-minded viewers. My own work identified levels of fandom ranging from a commitment to simply watch a program regularly and enjoy it, all the way up to the person whose life was immersed in such a program or the work of a celebrity (Stever, 1994).

With that observation in place, fan studies have a history in psychology that begins much later than it does in other disciplines. In my own research, I began a literature review for my master’s thesis in 1989 and realized that very little had been done in the field of psychology to understand fan behavior. With that realization, most of the literature review for that thesis came from social science research in fields other than psychology. The most prominently represented fields were sociology, communication, anthropology, and cultural studies (Stever, 1990).

Subsequent to my thesis, Lisa Lewis (1992) edited a volume called *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, a collection of essays that took on important questions in fan psychology. In keeping with the literature up to that time, most of the contributors were from communication or cultural studies in spite of the fact that the issues in the book included fandom as pathology, and essays on Beatlemania, and Elvis mania, questions for which I had an interest based in psychology, but I was finding these discussions in other than psychology journals. It was an interest in Beatlemania that caused me to begin my journey into fan studies in 1989, and clearly, I was not the only person who wanted to explore the psychology of various kinds of superstar mania. My own initial study delved into the fandom surrounding Michael Jackson, arguably the superstar of that decade.

Jenson and others in *The Adoring Audience* do what psychologists were not yet doing at that point in the study of fans; they were trying to explain in a psychological way, the meaning of fan behavior. Elvis fandom, in particular, was analyzed through the lens of psychoanalysis (Hinerman, 1992). That this was being done by academics who were not psychologists is significant in itself. I was told as a graduate student in psychology that to look at things such as popular culture and

fandom was a pursuit of the “trivial” and that I ought to stick to more “serious” topics. Before Lewis’s book was written, Division 46 of the American Psychological Association (APA) was formed in 1986, and notable scholars such as Lilli Friedland, Bernard Luskin, and Stuart Fischeff decided that psychologists pursuing a study of these topics was not trivial, indeed it warranted the forming of this new division in the APA (www.apadivisions.org).

Two factors were pointed to as an explanation for why fandom to that point had been pathologized. Those were elitism and a generally disrespectful attitude toward the common life of the average person in our society (Jenson, 1992). In academic studies up to and including the 1990s, popular culture was contrasted with classical culture and deemed of lesser worth. Thus, while those who would passionately pursue opera and classical music were deemed “patrons,” those who passionately pursued popular music forms were labeled as “fans” and discounted as crazed and obsessive. Jenson pointed out that academics show a similar passion for their fields of study but that this was deemed “normal.”

Another influence that caused the slanted perspective on fan characteristics of the late 20th century was the analysis of crowd behavior that attributed tragic circumstances at concerts and sporting events to the “crazed” nature of crowds. In an analysis of some of these events, for example, The Who concert of 1979 during which 11 audience members were killed in a stampede, the event was initially attributed to “selfish, drug-crazed fans” (Jenson, 1992, p. 12). This proved to be untrue as it was mismanagement of the crowd situation (too few doors opened during a surge of fans trying to get in) that caused the tragedy, not the fan behavior in and of itself.

Thinking of this event, I was reminded of times on the Michael Jackson tours while observing fan behavior, that I witnessed the same behavior being exhibited. Television coverage of the tour depicted fans as weeping, passing out, and frenzied over Jackson. I have written a number of times (e.g., Stever, 2019) about how fans would “perform” for television cameras,



Figure 9.3 Beatlemania is one of the many manifestations of fandom that have been studied and occasionally pathologized.

Source: www.shutterstock.com/image-vector/beatlemania-word-cloud-type-mania-made-1430367629



Figure 9.4 Fans often are willing to wait in long lines for hours at a time for a variety of reasons related to their commitment to something media-related.

Source: www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/september-18-2014-berlin-fans-apple-218398894



Figure 9.5 People packed into crowded venues can be a recipe for disaster if crowds are not managed thoughtfully.

Source: www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/silhouettes-concert-crowd-front-bright-stage-550489705

and as soon as the cameras passed, they would go back to their normal conversations, waiting for the concert to start. An expectation about how fans were supposed to behave elicited the exact behavior these fans had seen portrayed in media. On one occasion, at Irvine Meadows in October 1988, I was waiting for admission to a general admission seating area when the gates were opened and suddenly it was run or be trampled. As with The Who concert described earlier, there was one entrance for several thousand fans, and those who desired the best seating on the front of the lawn pushed through and started a stampede. No one was injured on this occasion, but after that experience, I had a healthy new respect for the power of the crowd and the dangers inherent in crowd mismanagement.

Likewise, at Wembley Stadium in London, 1992 at another Michael Jackson concert, it was unusually hot on the day of the show. Fans were allowed onto the field at about 2 p.m. and stood in close quarters for hours in the heat. By the time Jackson came on stage, many of the fans were passing out, and in the subsequent media depictions, the inference was that they were swooning over the presence of Jackson instead of from heat exhaustion. I am not suggesting that there were no fans who were emotional for being so close to Jackson, but the exaggeration of the

circumstances sent a very different message to what was really happening that afternoon and evening.

Henry Jenkins (1992) was a scholar who engaged in important questions with respect to fandom and prominent fan activity, and he was one of the first to question the tendency to pathologize normal fan behavior as something bizarre and dysfunctional. With his pivotal work, *Textual Poachers*, he recognized that at the heart of fan activity was the essence of the attraction of being a fan which provided an opportunity to be a co-creator with those whose work was so admired. Jenkins explored the work of fan-fiction writers, those who used the original texts to inspire their own creative works. *Star Trek* fans were members of one of the most active of audiences. Joan Marie Verba (2003), in her book *Boldly Writing: A Trek Fan and Fanfiction History*, reinforces that point by laying out a history of fan fiction writing that gives detail to the extent to which those who write fan fiction are committed to both the text and the craft.

In my dissertation and further work, I analyzed the narratives of fans who explained to me what participating in fan activity meant to them. Having those narratives coded by five independent trained coders, there were a number of categorizations that emerged from that analysis. The first was that there was a myriad of motivations for being a dedicated fan. The second was that fandom existed in a continuum of intensities ranging from the most casual of consumers of a text and going up to the highest level of commitment possible. The end of that continuum was an intensity that potentially led to dysfunction and illness, and while that was fairly rare among fans interviewed and observed, it did happen. A third observation was that fans can exist in isolation or they can be fans in groups. The fan who pursues fan activities in isolation looks very different from the one who is a member of a fan group (Stever, 2009). The impact of being a fan is also very different. Fans in isolation have no one to temper their intense beliefs. A fan who is a member of a network of likeminded fans has other fans with whom to compare and discuss the nature of being a fan. In the one case of fandom, it is a private journey, and in the other, it is a social activity. Both are potentially important and formative.

A study of Bruce Springsteen fans (Yates, 2015) found that those who interacted on Springsteen-centered websites were much more interested in networking with other fans than with Springsteen himself. These websites provided a central focus for shared interests, but the parasocial connection fans felt with him was minimal.

This suggestion that a social motivation can be more powerful than a parasocial one in single-artist fan clubs mirrors some of my own findings in similar fandoms (Stever, 2009).

Moving to fandoms that are centered on films and television, one aspect of shared fandom that has been facilitated by the internet is the practice of watching episodes of television together and doing things like live tweeting with other fans during the program. Fans who are geographically dispersed are able to participate in a social practice that was not possible before the advent of the various forms of social media and advances in technology. Using these platforms, fandoms provide a way to publicly share things that used to be mostly private and internal, for example, reactions to new episodes and character development. This is a new manifestation of fans in groups whereby previously they might have been fans mostly in isolation. The opportunity to share narratives with other fans while they were being viewed was far more difficult in times past (Hills, 2017).

See [Box 9.1](#) for another perspective on fandom.

Box 9.1 Fandom and Psychoanalytic Theories

In trying to explain how psychological theories explain fandom and/or parasocial relationships, there are a number of relevant theories to draw upon. The attachment theory of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth (1992) proposed that proximity-seeking for the sake of felt security and safe haven is fundamental to the survival of the infant in the first years of life. Ainsworth (1969) talked about secure and insecure attachments, depending on the consistency of caregiving by the primary caregivers, but even insecure attachment usually provides for the survival of the infant. Human infants, without care, will not survive. Thus, even if the care is inconsistent, the infant grows up and transitions into progressively more independent stages of life. It is in these transitions to independence that Winnicott (2018) wrote about “transitional objects,” objects to which the infant transfers their dependency for a sense of felt security. These are things like a blanket or a favorite teddy bear. Many fan scholars (e.g., Harrington & Bielby, 1995; Hills, 2002; Silverstone, 1994) seem to agree that, irrespective of which particular specialized view of psychoanalysis one ascribes to, many media objects become transitional objects for the viewer. This is the idea that a media world or

persona can become the source of safe haven and felt security. In my own writings, I have referred to this as parasocial attachment (Stever, 2013). Matt Hills (2005) has referred to the “aleatory object,” meaning that the source of felt security is a random and moving target, much as the choice of favorite blanket is most likely a random selection for the very young child, subject to comfortableness, availability, and transportability. Likewise, that of which one becomes a fan might be a function of what the available potential targets are at the moment of need.

Psychoanalysis from Winnicott’s (2018) point of view has “offered a way of taking seriously the emotional intensities of fandom without pathologizing them or explaining them away as if they were the side effects of something else” (Hills, 2017, p. 19). Psychoanalysis has to do with unconscious influences on our emotions and development. From this perspective, psychoanalysis is about connecting us with the deep emotions that are elicited by the object of our fandom and allowing those emotions a free rein to express themselves.

Giles (2020) applied Winnicott to his discussion of the parasocial relationship as a transitional object, stating,

The psychological function of lifelong fandom has been interpreted through the psychoanalytic theory of Donald Winnicott (1971), who devised the concept of the ‘transitional object’, typically a favourite teddy or blanket, that symbolises the mother for the child and creates a reassuring sense of permanence. Silverstone (1994) applies this idea to the role that television and other media play in adult life, and Hills (2002) suggests that fan objects play a similar role for specific individuals, with such attachments often taking on a ‘cyclic’ role as people pass from one object to another, or return to the same object at critical moments.

(p. 312)

Silverstone (1994) likewise stated,

Our media, television perhaps pre-eminently, occupy the potential space released by blankets, teddy bears, and breasts.

(pp. 12–13)

Johanssen (2018) summarized it as follows:

Television can be similar to a transitional object of the young infant (e.g. a teddy bear or blanket). It can be an emotional comforter by creating a safe space, the ‘potential space’

(Winnicott, 1971) between the viewer and the television in which the viewer can feel comforted and held. It is unconsciously used to work through feelings of loss or anxiety.

(p. 6)

From the point of connection to the primary caregiver and forward, the fan is constantly looking for an aesthetic connection to rival that first emotional connection to the primary caregiver (Bollas, 1993). By turning hunger into fullness, that caregiver created a unique aesthetic with the infant. Before thought, there is feeling and experience, and those are intertwined in experiences with those primary caregivers. It is not until the child develops language that thought becomes an ingredient in this experience. It has been argued that the objects of dedicated fandom are transformation objects in addition to being transitional objects (Hills, 2005).

Is Being a Fan Stigmatized?

A number of scholars have addressed the question as to whether or not being a fan is stigmatized. The earliest and best-known discussion, referenced earlier, is Jenson's (1992) essay on fandom as pathology. The result of potentially being stigmatized by being a fan is that fans are often covert about their fan activities. This was something I have encountered frequently in my more than 30 years of fan research. Additional sources of stigma might include the "geek" or "nerd" stereotype experienced by science-fiction and fantasy fans, or the previously discussed media portrayal of various kinds of fans as overly intense, "crazy," or out of control.

At International Communication Association in 2020, noted researcher in parasocial theory Bradley Bond led a workshop where he talked about the incentive for stigmatized populations to participate in research. When a person is a member of a marginalized group, they might potentially see their participation in a research study as an opportunity to represent that group in a way that expresses the frustration at being marginalized or stigmatized. While the point was originally made about LGBTQ youth in research studies, it could potentially be generalized to members of other groups who have been stigmatized in various ways, including ethnic or other social groups.

In the early days of my own fan studies, before the internet was widespread beginning in 1988, I used the postal service to distribute and collect data questionnaires. I networked in a number of fan groups that included Madonna, Bruce Springsteen, Prince, Paul McCartney, and George Michael. At one point in my study, I obtained lists of members of fan clubs or fan "pen pal" networks. I mailed out over 300 sets of questionnaires to all the people listed on membership lists that were shared with me by key informants. In an unusual and frankly stunning example of research participation, every single one of those completed questionnaire batteries was returned to me. A number of the respondents indicated to me that they saw their participation as a way to push back against the stigma associated with being a fan. Included in that set of questionnaires was the Celebrity Appeal Questionnaire (Stever, 1991), as well as two copies of the Myers-

Briggs Type Indicator (Myers & McCaulley, 1986), one for the fan to complete for themselves and one to fill out the way the celebrity might answer as perceived by the fan. Fans were also asked to submit a narrative indicating why their fan participation was important or meaningful to them. Those narratives became the data for a qualitative analysis that resulted in my doctoral dissertation (Stever, 1994).

In a study of the relationships among variables such as identification with a fan group, stigmatization of fan groups, and psychological needs, the finding was that “felt stigma predicted fan group identification, and the relationship was mediated by a psychological need for belonging” (Tague, Reysen, & Plante, 2020, p. 324). This study improved on previous studies where the stigma of being a fan had been explored by using a general population sample and asking those participants to identify a fan group of which they were a member and then asking about felt stigma for membership in that group. While previous studies had corroborated the phenomenon of stigmatization of fan groups, this more generalizable approach supports the conclusion that this is a more widespread phenomenon.

Social identity theory (Tajfel, Turner, Austin, & Worchel, 1979) suggests that people seek to construct positive self-identity by belonging to various social groups and contrasting those groups with a variety of out-groups. While it might be expected that identification with a stigmatized group would have a negative effect on psychological well-being, numerous researchers found just the opposite, that well-being is enhanced by increased identification with the in-group, and self-esteem is just as high for members of those groups as it is among members of non-stigmatized groups (for examples, see Crocker & Major, 1989, or Giamo, Schmitt, & Outten, 2012).

This is explained by the rejection-identification model (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999). Their conclusion was that “[p]erceiving prejudice as pervasive produces effects on well-being that are fundamentally different from those that may arise from an unstable attribution to prejudice for a single negative outcome” (p. 135). To put it more simply, if I am being discriminated against as an individual, that can have negative consequences for my own self-esteem, but if I identify with an entire group that is being discriminated against, my identification with that group helps me not to take that discrimination personally, and thus, it does not have the negative effect on my self-esteem that it might if the negative experience was mine alone.

Thus, if my group is perceived negatively and I see my membership in that group as fundamental to my identity, then Tajfel's social identity theory becomes relevant. In that model, members of the out-group are seen as homogeneous while members of my own in-group are seen as unique individuals. The in-group/out-group mentality reinforces an "us against them" dynamic that favors positive perceptions of members of the in-group. Thus, more positive self-esteem and a sense of belongingness enhance the person's experience with the fan group (or another stigmatized group). This has also been described as in-group solidarity, whereby fitting into a group provides a collective identity that supports well-being (Giamo et al., 2012).

Audiences as Partners and Co-Creators of Media

Many aca-fans (academics who are also fans) have argued that we have moved into an era in which fans are increasingly co-creators with those who produce television content. Already referenced earlier is Jenkins's (1992) *Textual Poachers* and Verba's (2003) *Boldly Writing*.

The writing of fan fiction, or the fan's co-opting of characters from an established franchise has yielded some standard formats that have undergone close scrutiny. Two examples are Mary Sue fan fiction and slash fan fiction. In a Mary Sue story, the author is inserted into the story as an infallible character who takes over the narrative and either saves the day or ends up in a relationship with the protagonist (Busse, 2016). Slash fan fiction is a genre wherein same-sex characters are written into a sexual relationship where none was present in the original text (Lee, 2003; Penley, 1992). Both of these have been the object of intense textual and psychological analysis with a number of varying conclusions drawn. Busse engaged a discussion of the Mary Sue fan fiction in all its positive and negative incarnations. Fundamentally, Mary Sue fan fiction is a manifestation of the identification fan-fiction writers feel with characters from the source text and is the ultimate opportunity to "become" those characters.

The appeal of slash fan fiction writing is summarized nicely by Lee (2003):

But the pleasure is more than my delight in watching the canon source and spotting slashy subtext. There's the pleasure of watching a television program with a cast of incredibly attractive, buff men. There's the real pleasure of creating the slash text itself. There's the literal physical pleasure of arousal as one writes or reads. Then there's the giddy pleasure of getting e-mails from people saying they really liked your work—emails that make me laugh out loud in delight.

(p. 80)

An interesting counterargument to fans as producers (or influencers of producers) is made by Click and Brock (2016), who argue that producers have the power to

portray fans within their programs in exactly the way they want fans to be seen. Examples used are Dr. Who and Sherlock, where the portrayal of the “acceptable” type of fan is limited to those within the vision of the producers of the shows. They conclude that “[c]onvergence culture may offer possibilities for building more equitable and interconnected relationships, but if producers and audiences choose not to build them, we should endeavor to understand how both groups are served by the marked lines that separate them” (p. 126). The tension comes from fans’ attempts to influence producers to alter story lines to desirable outcomes for fans and the producers’ persistent resistance to allowing them to do so. The authors point out that this dynamic could be different in shows that do not have as much of a long-standing fan/producer relationship. They encourage future researchers to look more closely at such programs.

Media studies have undergone a transformation during the time when the line between producers and consumers has become blurred, some calling this distinction a shift from media studies 1.0 to media studies 2.0. In the same way we have audience studies 1.0 transitioning to audience studies 2.0 (Hermes, 2009). As media grow and change in the 21st century, the distinction between producer and consumer becomes more and more difficult to distinguish. Hermes argues that audience studies are produced for the creators of media rather than the consumers of media. Thus, these questions are suggested:

- Are audience studies only done to benefit the producers?
- Should there be a distinction between fandom and everyday media use in general?
- Where is the line between audiences and producers, and has it shifted for all audience members?
- Is the relationship between audiences and their researchers unequal?
- What is the relationship between individual audience members and the texts they consume?

Contrary to the premise that audience research only benefits producers, much audience research is read and appropriated by audience members. Additionally, the line between fandom and everyday media use has to be considered through the lens of the way one defines a “fan.” If the higher level fans are the only types considered, this is very different to a multifaceted definition of fandom whereby differing levels of fandom are recognized. A “fan” who simply consumes a

program faithfully with each new episode is quite different from the fan who collects memorabilia and attends audience-oriented conventions like ComicCon or other sci-fi fantasy conventions (Stever, 2009). It is also true that if the treatment of participants is ethical, there should NOT be a power differential between researchers and audience members. Finally, there are as many relationships between audience members and texts as there are individual audience members, making it difficult to generalize audience studies as they relate to producers and consumers.

While social media has facilitated the distribution of viewer-produced media content, this activity is by no means unique to the internet era of media. Beginning in the 1960s, fans began creating stories that featured their favorite media characters and distributed those stories to other fans via the mail (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Jenkins, 1992; Penley, 1992; Verba, 2003).

In the 1990s, as more media consumers accessed the internet, websites sprang up such as fanfiction.net and later “Archive of our own.” These are just examples, as there are many websites that feature fan fiction.

Is fan fiction legal? “The legality of fanfiction isn’t very controversial. As a matter of copyright and trademark law, the sort of noncommercial, transformative works that fans make tend to fit quite well into the definitions of non-infringing fair use,” says Betsy Rosenblatt, a law professor teaching intellectual property law at University of California, Davis School of Law. She goes on to say that “non-commercial, transformative fan fiction does not infringe intellectual property laws.” It is also what the courts say. No U.S. court has ever held that a noncommercial, transformative fan work infringed copyright (Manente, 2019).

Persona/Celebrity Worship and Other Problem Behaviors

While most media researchers in both psychology and communication agree that parasocial experiences are quite normal and experienced by most media consumers, there is one category that has been found to correlate with a number of psychological problems and behaviors. Celebrity worship was a term coined by Lynn McCutcheon (McCutcheon, Ashe, Houran, & Maltby, 2003) with her colleagues, who published a number of studies seeking to describe what happens when the interest in a celebrity becomes so focused that dysfunction or even pathology can be the result. However, this can be a proverbial “chicken or the egg” question (or, in this case, antecedent or consequence) as it is difficult to understand whether the celebrity worship is the cause of mental illness or, in fact, does the mental illness precede and become an antecedent to celebrity worship.

Various research studies have found that borderline pathological celebrity worship occurs in about 3% to 5% of most samples taken from various types of school and community samples. In addition, about 20% of sampled school and community groups exhibit intense personal celebrity worship. Looking at the instrument designed to measure celebrity worship, the Celebrity Attitude Scale (McCutcheon et al., 2003), items that indicate borderline pathological celebrity worship include “If I were lucky enough to meet my favorite celebrity, and he/she asked me to do something illegal as a favor, I would probably do it.” For intense personal celebrity worship, sample items include “My favorite celebrity is my soul mate” and “If my favorite celebrity were to die, I would not want to live.” The percentages for these categories of celebrity worship have been shown to hold within behaviorally identified fan samples as well as samples from the public, suggesting that “fan” and “celebrity worshipper” are completely distinct and separate constructs (Stever, 2011). Recognizing that the object of worship could be a character rather than a real person, Brown (2021) used the term “persona worship” to describe this phenomenon.

While the mainstream of both audience members and fans enjoy media and various characters and celebrities in a way that helps them derive normal enjoyment from this activity, there are these particular audience members for whom this activity is problematic. Data on mental illness in the United States suggest that the percentage of troubled audience members could very well coincide with those who suffer from various mental illnesses, although clearly further research is needed in this area (Stever, 2011).

Another abnormal outcome for viewers is erotomania, a mental illness whereby the audience member holds the delusional belief that a celebrity (or other high-status individual) is in love with them. An extreme form of this is erotomaniac schizophrenia. Both of these conditions are distinguishable from celebrity worship in that erotomanics persist in their belief that they are special to the target celebrity, even in the presence of evidence to the contrary. In general, a person who has a delusion will believe that delusion in the presence of disconfirming evidence. This is true of all kinds of delusions. The schizophrenic who believes they are a famous person (a grandiose delusion) cannot be talked out of such a belief. It is important to understand that delusional people are not lying because what they believe is true to them. This is an important distinction as it points to the fact that no amount of disconfirming evidence will ever be enough to convince the person that the delusion is not true. Erotomania is rare, but prominent cases have been reported in the news. For example, Margaret Ray stalked David Letterman and was arrested multiple times because she persisted in her belief that they were married. As often happens with this type of case, Ray ended up committing suicide (Bruni, 1998).

Not all erotomanics become stalkers; in fact, only about 10% of cases of erotomania become associated with stalking. These delusions may persist for a lifetime. The target person is of higher status and is the first to fall in love and make advances (i.e., the patient believes the object fell in love first). Ironically, the patient may or may not return that love and will make excuses for what appears to be rejection. These disorders tend to occur in middle age, may be related to life situations (e.g., death of a partner and resulting loneliness), and are more common in women than men. Erotomania can exist in a patient for some time without being noticed. Patients with these symptoms do not usually come forward for treatment and often go unnoticed unless they commit a crime against someone, for example, stalking incidents (Kelly, 2005).

See [Box 9.2](#) for more on the subject of unhealthy celebrity worship.

Box 9.2 Celebrity Worship and Pathology

The definition of borderline pathological celebrity worship is operationalized by a series of items, one of which says, “If I were lucky enough to meet my favorite celebrity, and he/she asked me to do something illegal as a favor, I would probably do it” (Maltby, Day, McCutcheon, Houran, & Ashe, 2006, p. 277).

On January 6, 2021, followers of Donald Trump gathered on the mall near the capitol building in Washington D.C., having followed his messages on Twitter directing them to gather there. On December 19, he tweeted: “Big protest in D.C. on January 6th. Be there, will be wild!” On December 26, he tweeted, “Never give up. See everyone in D.C. on January 6th.” He repeated multiple times his invitation to gather in D.C. to his supporters on December 27, January 1, 3, and 4. All this was in support of his allegation that he had really won the election in spite of overwhelming data to the contrary. When addressing the assembled crowd on January 6, he said,

Unbelievable, what we have to go through, what we have to go through, and you have to get your people to fight. . . . And after this, we’re going to walk down, and I’ll be there with you. We’re going to walk down. . . . We’re going to walk down to the Capitol. . . .

(The complete transcript of what was said at this rally is at the link at the end of this text box.)



Figure 9.6 Washington, D.C.—January 6, 2021: Trump supporters rioting at the U.S. Capitol.

source: www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/dc-january-6-2021-trump-supporters-1888654336

Discussed in this chapter is Brown's (2021) proposal that the four processes of audience involvement can potentially be progressive, one leading to the next. This facilitates an understanding of how individuals who followed Donald Trump might have been motivated to participate in the activities of January 6, 2021. As already noted, transportation has the power to affect beliefs and attitudes held by the viewer (Green & Brock, 2000). As a viewer is absorbed and transported into the reality being painted by the favorite celebrity, it is possible for a parasocial relationship (PSR) to then result. The audience member comes to "know" the celebrity and experiences a sense of relationship, even though it is not reciprocated. As this PSR becomes more intense, identification with the celebrity can cause the adoption of values, beliefs, and behavior changes. If persona or celebrity worship results at the borderline pathological level (McCutcheon et al., 2003), the results can be abnormal and harmful causing the audience members to be willing to do anything to please the celebrity, even if these things are illegal.

This is one possible sequence of processes. Another might be that the follower, over time, developed a parasocial relationship such that when the scenario that the election had been "stolen" was proposed, it was easy to be transported into the rhetoric of this perspective. Identification can follow in either case or might

be concurrent with either transportation or PSR. The important point is that these four processes are fluid and subject to movement and change as the interaction and involvement with the celebrity changes over time.

Social media can facilitate the direct communication from the media celebrity to the audience as happened on Twitter when Trump invited his followers to come to Washington, D.C. This communication enhances a feeling of belonging. The savvy celebrity can use media to further enhance the illusion that a relationship has formed. In the aftermath of January 6, it became clear that members of the insurrection saw themselves as doing Trump's bidding and were shocked when he did not come to their aid as they were arrested after the attack on the Capitol (Sirota, 2021).

This appears to be a case of either transportation leading to a PSR, or the PSR leading to transportation, and identification with a media celebrity that resulted in willingness to break the law, a defining feature of borderline pathological celebrity worship (McCutcheon et al., 2003). Note that clearly not all of Trump's supporters were or are engaged in this type of celebrity worship. This illustration of the process by which borderline pathological celebrity worship can take place is specifically about those who attacked the Capitol on January 6, 2021. It also should be pointed out that not all the supporters who gathered on the mall that day participated in the attack. This would be consistent with data showing that only 3% to 5% of people fit into that category of celebrity worshipper (Stever, 2011).

The timeline on events leading up to January 6, 2021, was taken from www.politifact.com/article/2021/jan/11/timeline-what-trump-said-jan-6-capitol-riot/.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored various forms of connections that audience members form with various types of media. It is important to recognize that these states are fluid and may morph one into the other as a viewer engages with media. Transportation, parasocial interaction, identification, and persona worship can all be present in the same viewer and may morph from one to the other depending on the moment and the content of the current media message (Brown, 2021; Cohen & Klimmt, 2021). A person can be a fan at many levels, from the casual fan to the very committed fan (Stever, 2009). It is important to remember that the line between audience members and media producers is blurry at best.



Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. Have you ever been a huge fan of some media program, person, or phenomenon? How did this affect your life at that time?
2. Have you experienced “transportation,” or becoming so immersed in a narrative that you forgot where and who you were?
3. Thinking about PSR, identification, and celebrity worship, were there any of these concepts that you thought applied to your experience?
4. How do you think the public perception of “fans” relates to the actual experience? Have you observed or experienced a situation where being a fan was stigmatized?
5. Has your own commitment to various forms of media been transient (i.e., changed along the way), or are there some things of which you are a fan that have been a part of your life for a long time? Have you ever joined a fan club? Why or why not?
6. Is the public perception of a sports fan similar to that of other media fans? Is one considered more acceptable or “normal” than the other?
7. If your very favorite band or artist were performing, how far would you be willing to travel to see them? What factors might influence such a decision?
8. Have you ever strongly identified with a media figure? How did this affect you at the time? Was the influence a good one, a bad one, or a mixed one?
9. Have you met one of your favorite celebrities? Or have you had an interaction with a famous person on social media? What was that experience like? Did it change the way you thought or felt about that celebrity?



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