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**“Oh My God, how did I spend all that money?”:
Lived experiences in two commodified fandom
communities**

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February 2023

A thesis submitted to fulfil requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Statement of originality

This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work.

This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

Georgia Carroll

February 2023

Abstract

This research explores the role of commodification in participation in celebrity-centric fandom communities, applying a leisure studies framework to understand the constraints fans face in their quest to participate and the negotiations they engage in to overcome these constraints.

In fan studies scholarship, there is a propensity to focus on the ways fans *oppose* commodified industry structures; however, this ignores the many fans who happily participate within them. Using the fandoms for the pop star Taylor Swift and the television series *Supernatural* as case studies, this project uses a mixed-methodological approach to speak directly to fans via surveys and semistructured interviews to develop an understanding of fans' lived experiences based on their own words.

By focusing on celebrity-centric fandom communities rather than on the more frequently studied textual fandoms, this thesis turns to the role of the celebrity in fans' ongoing desire to participate in commodified spaces. I argue that fans are motivated to continue spending money to participate within their chosen fandom when this form of participation is tied to the opportunity for engagement with the celebrity. While many fans seek community from their fandom participation, this research finds that for others, social ties are a secondary outcome of their overall desire for celebrity attention, which becomes a hobby in which they build a "leisure career" (Stebbins 2014). When fans successfully gain attention from their celebrity object of fandom, they gain status within their community, creating intra-fandom hierarchies based largely on financial resources and on freedom from structural constraints related to education, employment, and caring.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that the broad neglect of celebrity fandom practices means we have overlooked the experiences of many fans, necessitating a much broader future scope for the field.

Permissions and professional acknowledgements

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Epigraph

Forget the overpriced tickets, the merch, and the Ugg boots

That's not why I loved that band

It was the feeling of throwing my hands up and falling in love with life

and never having to land

— “Nobody (reprise)” (FANGIRLS, 2019)

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Preface

In November 2022, Ticketmaster was forced to cancel the general sale for Taylor Swift’s North American Eras tour after unprecedented – but not unexpected – demand during two presale events. In an explanation shared in the days that followed, Ticketmaster (n.d.) revealed that 3.5 million fans had registered for the initial presale, with presale codes issued to 1.5 million for the chance to purchase tickets. They added,

Based on the volume of traffic to our site, Taylor would need to perform over 900 stadium shows (almost 20x the number of shows she is doing) ... that’s a stadium show every single night for the next 2.5 years. (Ticketmaster n.d.)

This story made international headlines, with Swift releasing a statement describing the process as “excruciating” (Horton 2022, para. 1).

After three pandemic-filled years without the chance to see Swift perform live (as well as the fact Swift released five albums between 2020 and 2022 and never had the chance to tour *Lover*, her 2019 release), fans were desperate to purchase tickets. Being able to see Swift live had never been so important to fans, with some spending thousands of dollars on the resale market in a panic to not miss out (Kaplan 2023). Watching on from Australia, I saw friends on social media ride emotional highs and lows as they did or did not receive a presale code and then did or did not manage to snag a ticket. For those who missed out, depression soon turned to anger as fans rallied against Ticketmaster and Live Nation for the way they rolled out the tickets (Kaplan 2023), as well as accusing many of those who did get tickets as not being “real fans”.

I understood where this emotion was coming from.

I am a fan. Being a fan has been part of my identity for as long as I can remember. From musicians, to actors, to sports teams, I’ve cheered, cried, stayed up all night, travelled, and spent what probably amounts to tens of thousands of dollars following the things I love. So when I discovered that celebrity and fandom were things I could study at university, following that academic path was a no-brainer. But the more I studied, the more I realised fandom was always framed as something in which you either did or didn’t participate in. While motivations for participation were examined, very little attention was given to the potential constraints faced by fans, especially those tied to economic capital.

From a purely anecdotal perspective, I know being a fan is *expensive*. I'm lucky enough to be in a position where I've been able to afford the significant amounts I've spent on fannish pursuits over the past decade, but I know many others are not in the same position. Six months before I entered my PhD program, I travelled to the United Kingdom with my best friend, ostensibly to visit family members but really to see Harry Styles perform his first solo show in his "home" city of Manchester. Friends I had in the online One Direction fandom gushed over how we must be such big fans to go all that way, that it truly showed how devoted we were to Harry. A bit under a year later, my favourite NHL team won the Stanley Cup, and I decided to extend a trip to Canada for a friend's wedding to include a stay in Washington DC to see my team celebrate and raise a championship banner for the first time in their history. Again, the conversations I had with fellow fans centred on the status of my fandom and the level of my dedication. The truth of the matter, however, wasn't that I loved Harry or the Washington Capitals any more than anyone else in the fan communities, but I had the money and the time to take these trips. As a single twenty-something working casually while studying, I was in a privileged position that many others weren't in, but it didn't necessarily make me a particularly dedicated fan. Except apparently, it did.

And thus, the premise for this thesis was born.

Chapter 1. Entering the queue (an introduction)

Fandom is inherently an economic exchange. While not every aspect of being a fan costs money, it is undeniable that fandom communities are built on a framework of industry commodification where attempts to “train” fans into obedient consumers take place (Stanfill 2019). Buy a CD. Buy some vinyl. Buy a deluxe CD–vinyl–digital combo. Come to a concert. Come to a convention. Sign up for a streaming service. Don’t forget to purchase some limited-edition merch. Here’s a chance for a meet and greet. Grab a season ticket. There’s some more limited-edition merch. Act now. Buy now. Buy more. Be our biggest fan.

Existing fan studies¹ literature on this topic has broadly framed this as a negative. And while this project is not interested in alleging that the constant demands of industry to purchase, purchase, purchase is a *positive*, it does seek to take a deeper look at the ways fans engage with the practices. One of the flaws of the propensity of fan studies to focus on the ways fans *oppose* industry structures is that it ignores the fans who happily participate within them. At the heart of this project, then, is the engagement of fans with the commodification of fandom communities. Like Stanfill (2019, p. 81), I “take consumption seriously as an integral aspect of being a fan”; however, where Stanfill asks “what kinds of consumption ... are understood as valuable fan behaviour” in the context of the wider industry, I turn the question to the fans themselves. Through looking at how fans are asked to spend, I move to develop a greater understanding of how fans negotiate various forms of consumption – especially those specifically tied to the purchase of official goods and services – as central to their participation within their fan communities.

However, this is not solely a project about consumption itself; it is also a project about the ways consumption practices shape the social realities of fandom participation. When industry holds up a consumer as an ideal participant, how does that change the ways social hierarchies are created and maintained? How do consumption practices impact intra-fandom social networks? And what of the role of the celebrity object of fandom? What happens to the social

¹ The terms “fan studies” and “fandom studies” are often used interchangeably by those within the field. One of the only field-specific journals is the *Journal of Fandom Studies*; however, the primary academic conference is organised by the Fan Studies Network. For the purpose of this thesis “fan studies” is used as the emphasis is on the individuals involved rather than on the overarching structures.

structures of the fandom community when para-social relationships are actively commodified and courted?

Ultimately, this project aims to assist in filling the current gap in the scholarship regarding questions of the economic constraints to (or – potentially – accepted realities of) fandom participation, the role this plays when it comes to social interaction within fandom communities, as well as the gaps in sociology more broadly regarding the study of nonsports fans. To do this, fandom participation is framed as a leisure pursuit. Such a framing allows us to centre economic exchange without dismissing the reality of fan production and participation outside of the commodified official object.

To achieve these aims, four key research questions underpin this project:

RQ1. How does a leisure framework change our understanding of celebrity fandom participation?

RQ2. How do fans negotiate participation within commodified fandom spaces?

RQ3. How does community function within commodified fandom spaces?

RQ4. What is the relationship between ideal consumers and intra-fandom hierarchies?

To investigate these questions, this research used a mixed-methodological approach to explore two case studies: the fandoms of the pop star Taylor Swift and the television series *Supernatural*. While the research methodology is addressed in more detail in Chapter 3, data was collected via anonymous online surveys (n=583), followed by semistructured interviews with fans recruited from the pool of survey participants (n=13).

The remainder of this chapter positions the study by providing a background to its place within fan and celebrity studies, as well as its sociological relevance, before concluding with an overview of the whole thesis.

1.1 A tale of two fields: working at the crossroads of fan and celebrity studies

When you tell people you study fans of celebrities, you're inevitably met with a range of reactions. The most common of these is "Huh, I wasn't aware that was something you *could*

study”. However, the tail end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century saw the study of fans and celebrities grow from “trivial topics” (Ferris 2007, p. 372) into increasingly popular areas of research across multiple academic disciplines, so that fan studies and celebrity studies can now be said to provide insight into a number of central aspects of our social and cultural worlds.

Fan studies and celebrity studies are generally regarded as two distinct fields. Fan studies broadly finds its home in media, cultural, and gender studies, while celebrity studies tends to be more sociological in nature. Since its emergence in the early 1990s, the study of fans and fandoms has traditionally focused on the textual production and transformation undertaken by fans (Jenkins 1992). Celebrity studies, meanwhile, is generally concerned with the analysis of “a *culture* of celebrity” (Holmes & Redmond 2010, p. 6). Thus, while fan and celebrity studies share many commonalities, the two areas largely run parallel to each other. However, the intersection between the two fields is seemingly clear; just as celebrities require fan support to sustain their popularity, so too does much fan engagement rely on celebrities to be a part of a majority of their objects of interest. Who is Taylor Swift without her Swifties? What was *Game of thrones* without its devoted weekly following? What would BTS be without their ARMY? The sociology of sport has created a field in which fans, athletes, and overall industries are able to be studied in conjunction (Brooks 2019; Crawford 2004; Toffoletti & Thorpe 2018); however, this has not broadly translated into fan and celebrity studies, where each of these is frequently seen as a singular object to be researched (Duffett 2014a, p. 163). It is interesting to note that even when the fields do seemingly intersect, this intersection is often left unacknowledged. As Wohlfeil (2018, pp. 27–28) notes,

Media scholars studying fans of celebrities have remained increasingly rare, while the celebrity literature has barely dedicated more than a paragraph to fans until recently either ... most fan scholars are deeply rooted within the discipline-specific research agenda and tradition of their own respective academic fields and fail to look beyond their boundaries.

However, this should not be a question of “either/or” but rather one of relationships and intersections that can allow for a broad picture to be developed of what is increasingly considered a central aspect of our society (Dunn 2020, p. xvii; Wang 2020, p. xx). I believe that the two fields should be viewed as interrelated, rather than as separate entities, as neither can truly exist alone. To study one without the other means seeing only half the story. This

project is therefore located at the intersection of these fields: a sociological exploration of fans, their communities, and the celebrities with whom they seek to interact.

1.1.1 The magic of celebrity

In our everyday lives, celebrity is a phenomenon that is intuitively understood. It is perhaps because of this inherent understanding that the term *celebrity* does not have a singular academic definition. Boorstin (1992, p. 57) describes a celebrity as “a person who is well known for their well-knownness”, while other definitions include “the Names that need no further identification” (Mills 2000, p. 51), “the attribution of glamorous or notorious status within the public sphere” (Rojek 2001, p. 10), “an idolized person or the exalted state of being one” (Roach 2003, p. 213), “an organic and ever-changing *performative practice* rather than a set of intrinsic personal characteristics or external labels” (Marwick & boyd 2011a, p. 140), and “a quality or status characterised by a capacity to attract attention” (van Krieken 2012, p. 10). Through these definitions, at its core, celebrity is simply the experience of being known beyond the realm of one’s direct, personal experience. As Mills (2000, p. 51) summarises, “Those who know [celebrities] so far exceed those of whom they know as to require no exact computation”. While Rojek (2001, p. 17) divides celebrity into “ascribed, achieved, and attributed” forms, and Abidin (2018, p. 4) describes celebrity as needing to reflect “achievement, talent or position”, Turner (2014, p. 3) puts it more simply when he argues, “The modern celebrity may claim no special achievements other than the attraction of public attention”.

Attention may be at the heart of celebrity; however, attracting this attention is not a natural occurrence. While celebrity “may appear to be intimate and spontaneous”, Rojek (2001, p. 10) argues, “no celebrity now acquires public recognition without the assistance of cultural intermediaries”. While Rojek uses the word “now”, such processes have always existed, albeit in varying forms (van Krieken 2019a; Braudy 1986; Garland 2010). Van Krieken (2019a, p. 29), for example, references the early Christian church and its “production” of saints as a site of celebrity creation and promotion. Turner (2014, p. 4) describes the modern version of these intermediaries – which includes those such as managers, publicists, advertising executives, and the media – as the “celebrity industry”. Rojek (2011, p. 10) explains such individuals work behind the scenes to “stage-manage celebrity presence in the eyes of the public”. This celebrity industry has only become more relevant in recent decades as phenomena such as reality television and social media have proliferated, expanding the

ways we can understand celebrity. Various scholars have proposed new forms of celebrity, including “micro-celebrity” (Senft 2008), DIY celebrity (Turner 2014, p. 71), and “internet celebrity” (Abidin 2018) to describe the changing nature of celebrity as it evolves from the more traditional figures of actors and musicians in our new digital age.

While the field of celebrity studies focuses on the specifics of celebrity, its creation, and its role in society, it is not these questions that are of primary interest to this research. Rather than examining the *hows* or *whys* of the creation and maintenance of celebrity, it looks to those looking back at the celebrities: their fans. The kind of fan admiration we see in fandom communities is nothing new; humans have always been fascinated by those in the spotlight. Mills (2000, p. 51) explains, “Wherever the celebrities go, they are recognised, and moreover, recognised with some excitement and awe”. This “excitement and awe” transcends any specific moment in culture or time; it is attention in practice. Celebrities become central figures in the lives of fans, and fans seek information, engagement, and to close the distance (both physical and virtual) between them.

Just as technology has expanded the ways celebrity can be created, so too has it expanded how fans engage with it. Despite this expansion, the concept that underpins the interactions – that of para-social relationships (Horton & Wohl 1956) – has remained consistent. Such relationships develop through the fan’s repeated exposure to the celebrity, which creates an “illusion of [a] face-to-face relationship” (Horton & Wohl 1956, p. 215). Fans have “a hunger to know more about the real lives of these increasingly familiar icons” (Schickel 2000, p. 36) that leads them to “seek knowledge [about celebrities] ... in a variety of ways” (Ferris 2001, p. 31). However, as Horton and Wohl (1956, pp. 215–216) remind us, these relationships are always going to be “one-sided, nondialectical, controlled by the performer, and not susceptible of mutual development”. While Horton and Wohl were writing in a time when radio was the dominant media form through which individuals engaged with celebrities, the inherent nature of para-social relationships has remained constant across six decades of technological changes. The internet allows fans to discover information such as details of celebrities’ families, friendships, and personal lives, available through official social media channels, interviews, and gossip sites. Rojek (2016, p. 3) emphasises the “unprecedented” amount of information about those in the public eye we can now access, knowledge that allows fans to feel as if they *truly* “know” the celebrity (Horton & Wohl 1956, pp. 215–216). As celebrity posts fill our newsfeeds across Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, wedged in

among those of our actual, real-life connections, it is inevitable that the extent to which we feel we know the celebrity and can imagine their place within our lives increases (Marwick & boyd 2011a, p. 147). While scholars such as Marwick and boyd (2011a) and Giles (2018) argue reciprocal relationships between fans and celebrities can occur on social media, as others such as Kehrberg (2015) and Chin (2018) rebut, social media does not actually remove any barriers. Fans using social media to engage with celebrities are arguably no closer to “real” interaction than those who send fan letters, with the medium merely increasing the illusion of knowledge at the heart of para-social relationships (Horton & Wohl 1956).

Regardless of the reality of reciprocity, Ferris (2001, p. 44) describes fan–celebrity interaction as “a bridge between the mediated and the real”. The celebrity industry is well aware of the ways these para-social relationships are formed and maintained and use this to their advantage. The illusions of intimacy afforded by social media platforms are leveraged by celebrities to commodify the emotional responses of fans. If a fan believes there is the potential for recognition and the development of a relationship – no matter how unlikely – their engagement is likely to continue, or increase. This is even more true when it comes to face-to-face fan–celebrity interaction. Hills (2015a, p. 466) explains in these situations that “a felt connection between the fan and celebrity is given tangible materiality”. While the interaction is reciprocal only in the most literal sense, fans “find pleasure and satisfaction in such encounters” (Ferris 2001, p. 28), despite the fact “the power relations between the interactants are clearly unequal and, therefore, protect the actor while constraining the fan” (Ferris 2001, p. 35). Ferris (2001) refers to the outcome of the interaction as a “trophy”, and celebrities are aware of the extreme lengths fans are willing to go to secure this prize.

Despite the ever-increasing popularity of fan conventions and similar events offering the chance to meet one’s favourite celebrity, alongside the proliferation of celebrity social media use, studies of fan–celebrity interaction remain relatively uncommon (exceptions include Bennett 2014a; Dare-Edwards 2014; Ferris 2001; Ferris & Harris 2011; Kim & Kim 2020; Krause et al. 2018; Stever 2016; Stever & Lawson 2016). Working in this space, then, this research examines the allure of celebrity – and celebrity engagement – from the perspectives of the fans who seek it. Celebrity is a fascinating social object; however, rather than studying it in its isolated form, our collective understanding benefits from asking how it is interpreted, consumed, and engaged with by its subjects. As is outlined in the following section, this is an

area of fan studies that remains relatively understudied due to the overwhelming focus on textual productivity within the field (Duffett 2018, pp. 464-465).

1.2 Production, consumption, and what makes a fan

Fan studies is a broad field with an almost endless variety of objects available to research. However, the boundaries of what constitutes a fan, and what participation must include for a fandom to be worthy of study remains – surprisingly – open for debate. In the 2018 *Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies* edited by Paul Booth, chapters on understanding porn consumers as fans (McKee 2018), calling for focus to be given to fans of “high culture” (Hills 2018b), and reflections on researching popular music fans (Duffett 2018) exist alongside a chapter from Hellekson (2018) that traces fan experiences from 1930s science fiction fandom through to the digital fandoms of today. In her chapter, Hellekson (2018, p. 74) draws rather firm boundaries around what a fandom is (or, more specifically, what a fandom should be), stating fans “must actively engage”. She argues, “The fan experience is fandom, which comprises people who post, engage, write letters, talk, meet face-to-face, dress up, or make vids”, emphasising the importance of being “invested in a productive community” (Hellekson 2018, pp. 66–74). Hellekson, here, is contributing to the longstanding debate over the distinctions between an audience member and a fan. It is this very debate that helped create the field of fan studies itself, with early scholars wishing to emphasise the active nature of fans versus the passive nature of general consumers (Jenkins 1992). Fans are known for their productivity, and discussions of phenomena such as fan fiction,² fan art, and cosplay receiving not only academic attention, but also attention from mainstream media outlets such as *The New York Times* (Correa & Genzlinger 2017; Jordan 2018), *The New Yorker* (Burt 2017), and *The Guardian* (Allison 2014; Clements 2018). Hills (2013, p. 133) explains such productivity “has received the greatest attention within fan studies, since it has historically functioned to distinguish sectors of fandom from non-fan audiences”; however, not all fans engage in these “typical” forms of textual productivity, especially outside of text-based fandom communities (Duffett 2013, p. 279). While Jenkins (2012, p. 47) describes media fandom as “founded less upon the consumption of pre-existing texts than on the production of fan texts”, Duffett (2013, p. 279) critiques this, stating, “At

² There is debate as to whether this word should be written “fan fiction” or “fanfiction”; however, following broad academic style guides, this thesis will use both “fan fiction” and “fanfic” (Klink 2017).

this point it has to be said that the *primary* practice of media fandom is simply consuming the text or engaging with the performance”.

Thus, while it is important to examine the ways fans produce their own content, it is just as important to look at the ways they *consume* content. Production is not happening inside a vacuum; for every fan who produces content, there are many others consuming it. Fans are also not just producing content in defiance of the original texts; many create out of love and the simple desire for *more*. Ultimately, there is nothing more central to the act of being a fan than consumption (Stanfill 2019, p. 77). Fans are constantly consuming, whether that is official or nonofficial content, content in the real world or online, content that is paid or that which is free. Consumption is not a singular entity, and when examining the ways fans engage in these practices, we cannot view it through a one-size-fits-all lens.

While, as Stanfill (2019, p. 77) observes, one would think that studying consumption would be a central element of fan studies, in reality, the consumption practices of fans – especially outside the specific action of viewing, reading, or listening – remains largely unexplored. Writing from a consumer marketing perspective, Wohlfeil (2018, p. 3) outlines that greater attention should be given to the examination of the meaning of “the everyday lived fan relationship” with the celebrity object of fandom “means to the individual consumer” as well as exploring “how [this] manifest[s] in everyday consumer behaviour”. Although this project is not placed in the field of consumer marketing, Wohlfeil’s point remains: regardless of the specific field of the researcher, there remains a need for deeper exploration of the role of consumption in celebrity-based fandom communities. Cavicchi (1998) touches on the role of commodified consumption in his seminal work on fans of Bruce Springsteen; however, even as he explains that the fans he spoke to “admit their listening is part of a lengthy and elaborate act of commodified exchange” (p. 60), he – like many of those who came before and after him – is quick to minimise the role of this exchange in the overall experience of being a fan. Likewise, Baym (2018, pp. 82–83) notes that fans often “embrace their consumerism”, while in a neighbouring paragraph states, “In many ways, fans operate and are defined by their unwillingness to adhere to the norms of capitalism”. And this is true. We have decades of research examining the ways fans participate outside the boundaries of capitalism, but there remains a hesitance to dive into this consumerism and make it the centre of our work. Authors such as Geraghty (2014) have written about collecting as a participatory fan behaviour but have framed this through notions of nostalgia and identity, ultimately

arguing “fan culture is not commodified but personalised” (p. 4). We see here the repeated trend of the commodification of fan culture being recognised and then explained away.

There are a number of potential explanations for these trends, and the resulting relative lack of work examining commodified fandom in and of itself: the lack of focus on participant interviews in media studies, the lack of sociological voices in the field, and, as Stanfill (2019, p. 77) notes, the unpopularity of discussing consumption practices in a field that remains largely dedicated to the celebration of all aspects of fan practice. We are allowed to be critical of the industry, but we do not delve deeper into the intra-fandom inequalities that industry creates. Stanfill (2019, p. 77) explains that academics who do link fans and consumption are “in the minority among sports or media studies scholars” as “consumption carries negative connotations”. To *consume* is to be passive, and fan studies was built on the idea of an *active* audience (Jenkins 1992). By adjusting a focus to the processes of consumption, by asking fans how they spend money, and why, and what it means to them, this research hopes to make consumption less of a dirty word within the fan studies field.

Ultimately, consumption means many things to many people. As noted, within the context of fandom, it covers everything from watching a television show to spending thousands of dollars on a meet and greet. And while looking at individual consumption practices can broaden what we understand to be fandom participation (and why), a lot can also be learned from looking at the ways intra-fandom social networks allow consumption to become a shared fan-cultural experience.

1.3 Putting the “community” back into “fandom community”

Scholars in fan studies often underemphasise the second half of the phrase *fandom community*. This is not to say that the notion of community is ignored, but rather that its social meaning is frequently overshadowed by the concept of the collective (Busse & Gray 2011; Coppa 2014, p. 76; Galuszka 2015, pp. 29-30; Hellekson 2018; Peyron 2018; Sandvoss & Kearns 2014, pp. 91; 102-103). While a range of scholars have addressed the specifically social nature of fandom communities (Bourdaa 2018; Bury 2005; 2017; Chin 2018; Hills 2002; 2015a; 2017a; Woo 2018a), it remains common that the group nature of fandoms is accepted as a given rather than seen something to be studied in significant depth. Thus, while fandoms are inherently social spaces, however, the concept of social capital, as well as related concepts such as Granovetter’s (1973) weak and strong ties, remain under-explored

within the field, with D'Amato (2014, p. 135) arguing fan studies lacks “interest in the notion of social capital ... regardless of its potential relevance to the study of the construction of distinctions and hierarchies”.

Fandoms are often described through the metaphor of Anderson's (2016) “imagined community”. Just as every member of a nation can never actually know one another (Anderson 2016, p. 6), so too is this true for fandoms. While individuals may all identify as Swifties, Whovians, or members of the ARMY, the sense of belonging they share is connected not through actual relationships, but through the *idea* of what the fandom means to them. Individuals join fandoms because of a love for an object, and they find community through the process of sharing this love with others. However, just as in the rest of our social world, community within fandom spaces is not a level playing field. Scholars often fall back on narratives of intra-community cohesion, focusing on the positive aspects of community rather than exploring the status and hierarchies that exist within them (Hills 2002, p. 46; MacDonald 1998, p. 136; Pearson 2010, p. 93; Zubernis & Larsen 2012, p. 13). While researchers such as Hills (2018a), Proctor and Kies (2018), Reinhard (2018), and Yodovich (2021) have begun to discuss “fractured” and “toxic” fandom behaviours as an antithesis to cohesion, this project is not focused on such blatantly negative activity. Rather than “contentious communication” (Reinhard 2018, p. 1) or “subcultural squabbles” (Proctor and Kies 2018, p. 129), this project seeks to explore the development of hierarchies and status as inherent features of fandom communities with varying impacts. Pearson (2010, p. 93) questions if “the fannish discourse concerning egalitarian...online communities [is] an accurate representation of the social relationships in fandom”, and thus, exploring the existence of these hierarchies and their impacts on fan experiences represents valuable spaces for us to learn more about overall participation practices and the social experiences of fans.

The importance of status in fandom communities is especially relevant when we look to celebrity fandoms, where it is heavily tied to the ways one is able to interact with the object of fandom. Being “chosen” for a reply from a celebrity on social media, for instance, is considered a significant achievement by fans. In particular fandoms (usually – but not always – music fandoms), fans display proof of any interaction they have received from a celebrity in their profile bios, with dates and the types of interactions received used as a form of social capital within the fandom (Chin 2018, p. 244). Even if the interaction is not a true, reciprocated social interaction (Kehrberg 2015, p. 88), the fan was still noticed by the object

of their fandom, something that remains a distinguishing factor within communities. Individuals who have more than one interaction with a celebrity on social media or who receive an elusive “follow” often find themselves in high positions within fan social hierarchies because of the capital obtained via these broadcasted interactions (Chin 2018; Franck 2019). This behaviour is also seen in the context of in-person fan–celebrity interaction: being able to share proof of engagement with the object of fandom is the ultimate marker of status for many fans. Ultimately, more than traditional social capital, this is an example of what Franck (2019, p. 12) terms “attention capital” in which “proximity to celebrity makes a little celebrity”.

Hierarchies tied to celebrity interaction are just one form present within the space. Chin (2014, para. 1.3), for example, argues that while the gift economy (where fans create fan works to gift to other fans) is often framed as altruistic, it also allows fans to “build on and elevate their status” within their fandom spaces. We can understand hierarchies and fandom status, then, as dependent on the part of fandom one participates in. The hierarchies that may exist within spaces of textual productivity are completely different to those in a different corner of the same overall fandom. However, as certain types of fan behaviour are deemed more “acceptable” by the objects of fandom, so too do certain hierarchies become implicitly approved. This, in many ways, reflects what *obsession_inc* (2009, para. 4) terms “affirmational fandom”, in which fans who behave in certain ways are “sanctioned” (Booth 2016; Hills 2014; Santo 2018). Taylor Swift’s handpicking of fans she has “noticed” on social media to meet her is just one way this plays out in fandom communities; when you play within the boundaries created by industry, your participation is more likely to be deemed legitimate and your status validated.

Despite this, there is little empirical research examining both the existence of these hierarchies and the ways they are viewed by fans. As has been noted, exploring how industry moulds fan behaviour (Stanfill 2019) is only half the story: we need to also be asking fans how *they* feel about being asked to play within the lines. This project examines two different fandom communities commodified in distinct ways and asks fans how they participate, how they consume, how they socialise, and how these strands intertwine to create a holistic fandom experience.

1.4 Thesis outline

We are now at the conclusion of the first chapter, which serves as an introduction to the topic and begins to position itself in relation to existing literature on celebrity, fans, and fandom.

Chapter 2 is a literature review, building on this introduction to provide an overview of the key theoretical and underpinnings of the project. It further examines the fields of celebrity studies, fan studies, and their intersection with sociology, as well as fan consumption, fan labour and exploitation, leisure and fandom, fan–celebrity interaction, and the roles of social and attention capital in the formation of fandom communities.

Chapter 3 is a methodological overview. It explores the mixed-methodological approach of this research project, discusses the ethical considerations related to the study of fans and online communities, and introduces the research participants.

Chapter 4 is the first of three data chapters. This chapter addresses Research Question 1, examining the ways fans participate in commodified fandom communities, and introduces a leisure-based framework.

Chapter 5 is the second data chapter, turning to the explicit role of money in celebrity fandom participation. It answers Research Question 2, exploring the ways fans are asked to spend money and how celebrities leverage the role of attention and engagement to elicit ongoing monetary commitment.

Chapter 6 is the third and final data chapter, addressing Research Questions 3 and 4. It explores the role of community and social hierarchies in commodified fandom communities and the ways consumption shapes intra-fandom hierarchies.

Chapter 7 concludes the thesis, providing an overview of the research findings and key contributions made by the thesis, as well as the main limitations, which builds to the presentation of potential future research directions.

Chapter 2. “The road so far”³: a review of the literature

This chapter provides an overview of the key theoretical approaches underpinning this work, drawing both on sociology and the interdisciplinary fields of celebrity and fan studies. It first gives a brief history of celebrity and fan studies and their intersection with sociology, before turning to the role of consumption, labour, and exploitation within fandom communities. It then discusses the potential of a leisure framework in developing our understanding of fandom’s role in our society, emphasising the benefits of the concept of a leisure “career” (Stebbins 2014). Finally, this chapter outlines the concept of “attention capital” and the ways it can strengthen our understanding of fan–celebrity engagement, as well as the formation of social structures and hierarchies within fandom communities.

2.1 Celebrity studies, fan studies, and sociology

Celebrity is not a new phenomenon (Braudy 1986; Lilti 2017; van Krieken 2019a; Wesołowski 2020); however, the broad study of celebrity remains in its relative infancy. Turner (2010, p. 12) describes the increasing interest in “the analysis of celebrity, celebrities and celebrity culture” as “one of the growth industries for the humanities and social sciences over the past decade”, a view echoed by van Krieken (2019a, p. 2) who explains, “It is important ... to reflect on the deeper significance of celebrity for our everyday life, our sense of self, and relations of status, recognition and power”. Originally writing in 1956, Mills (2000, p. 51) observed, “The world of celebrity ... is now the American forum of public honour”; however, despite the fact such a key figure in the discipline devoted an entire chapter to the role of celebrity in power relations, Ferris (2007, p. 372) notes that “sociology stubbornly ignored” the significance of the subject for many decades. Ferris (2007, pp. 372–373) argues it took “trends in other disciplines” for sociologists to finally enter the field and that only in the last few decades has sociology “taken seriously the idea that celebrity was worthy of study”. Scholars from a wide range of disciplines began to turn their attention to celebrity towards the end of the 20th century, with work by Dyer (1979; 2004), Schickel (2000), Gamson (1994), Marshall (1997), Rojek (2001), and Turner (2004) just some of those who initiated early explorations of the field. However, despite this claim by Ferris that

³ “The road so far” is the message included at the beginning of each episode of *Supernatural* in the place of the more traditional “previously on ...”

sociology began taking celebrity seriously in the 1990s, the sociological study of celebrity arguably did not take off in any significant way until *after* the time at which she was writing. Kerry Ferris is one of the few sociologists who truly engaged with celebrity culture in the early 2000s (Ellis Cashmore and Chris Rojek are two other notable examples), while the first journal dedicated to celebrity studies did not begin until 2010. In the introduction to the first issue of the *Celebrity Studies* journal, Holmes and Redmond (2010, p. 2) reference the reputation of the study of celebrity, drawing on critiques describing it as “a ‘faux’, low-brow area ... tak[ing] students away from the more ‘serious’ or ‘worthy academic disciplines’”. This reputation has slowly shifted in the decade since the journal launched, with analysis of celebrity occurring from a number of perspectives. These include – but are certainly not limited to – persona and branding (Khamis, Ing & Welling 2017; Marshall 2010; Marshall, Moore & Barbour 2015), feminism (Hamad & Taylor 2015; Keller & Ringrose 2015; Weidhase 2015), social media (Bennett 2014b; Giles 2018; Marwick & boyd 2011a; S Thomas 2014; Usher 2015), politics (Bennett 2011; Biressi 2020; Boyle & Kelly 2010; Partzsch 2015; Street 2019; Wheeler 2013), activism (Alexander 2013; Duvall 2015; Duvall & Heckemeyer 2018; Robeers & Van Den Bulck 2021; Williams 2020), and fandom (Courbet & Fourquet-Courbet 2014; Dare-Edwards 2014; Harrington 2018; Hills 2018c; Jerslev 2018; Kehrberg 2015; Patrick 2019; Petersen 2018; Phillips 2015). Broadly, celebrity studies looks at the structural questions of celebrity as an industry and its relationship to culture and society. Rather than examining the specifics of individual stars (although this does occur), the field is interested in “analysing a *culture* of celebrity” (Holmes & Redmond 2010, p. 6).

At the same time, the relationship between sociology and fan studies remains complicated. On the surface, fan studies engages with sociology, with the works of Bourdieu, Adorno, Marx, and Goffman frequently found within the reference lists of projects originating in all departments (Turk 2018). However, such references are a one-way street, with sociologists outside of the sociology of sport (and often, even those within) still hesitant to study fans and fandom communities (Coombs & Osborne 2022). The field of fan studies began to properly emerge in wider academia in 1992 with the release of Jenkins’s *Textual poachers*, Lewis’s *The adoring audience: fan culture and popular media*, and Bacon-Smith’s *Enterprising women: television fandom and the creation of popular myth* (cited in Jenkins 2014, pp. 89–93). Work from this period is often referred to as belonging to the “fandom is beautiful” era (Coppa 2014) because of the ways it arguably “constituted a purposeful political

intervention” aimed at a defence of participatory fan culture (Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington 2017, p. 3). While Coppa (2014, p. 80) encourages the continued relevance of these themes to the field as “fandom is in danger of being owned”, there remains ongoing critique levelled at this position due to its inherent assumption that “progressive fandom [is] the default” (Stanfill 2020, p. 124). Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington (2017, pp. 6–7) outline the forms some of this critique takes, stating it “extends the conceptual focus ... to the overarching social, cultural, and economic transformations of our time”. In recent years, a growing body of work has been developed addressing larger social issues and fandom culture, including timely work addressing the “intersection of reactionary politics and fandom” (Stanfill 2020, p. 124). This work examines concepts such as QAnon (Reinhard, Stanley & Howell 2021), “weaponised patriotism” (Serazio & Thorson 2020) and “fandom violence and the black athletic body” (Johnson 2020), located alongside the increasing focus on fandom and race (Johnson 2019; Pande 2018; Pande 2020a; Lothian & Stanfill 2021; Stanfill 2018b). Despite this, there ultimately remains a continued narrow emphasis on textual fandoms and participatory practices (Duffett 2014a, p. 163). Stanfill (2020, p. 125), for example, describes fan studies’ “customary avoidance of sports fandom”, while Duffett (2018, p. 463) argues the field is “dominated by scholars from television studies and new media” and “has only addressed music lovers in particular ways”. Duffett (2018, p. 463) goes so far as to describe fan studies as “neglecting” nontextual fandoms and argues the “academic traditions” of many in the field “creat[es] some inertia” with regard to its future directions.

If we look at the sociology of sport, where the first field-specific journal (*the International Review for the Sociology of Sport*) began in 1965 (Andrews 2015, p. 369), we can glimpse some of the potential avenues available for sociological engagement with other types of fans. Sociologists have examined the way sports fandom shapes identity (Gibbons 2014; Newson 2019; Tarver 2017; Toffoletti 2017), the role of gender in sports fandom (Pope 2011, 2017; Esmonde, Cooky & Andrews 2015; Pfister & Pope 2018; Toffoletti 2017; Toffoletti & Mewett 2012), sports fans and activism (García & Zheng 2017; Hodges 2018; Irak 2019; Llopis-Goig 2015; Numerato 2018), and the intersection of sports fandom with consumption and commodification (Brooks 2019; Crawford 2004; Elliott 2017; Moor 2007) just to name a very few topics touched upon by what Andrews (2015, p. 369) calls “a flourishing field of intellectual inquiry”. While, of course, these themes have been applied to media and celebrity fandom in various ways in various fields, there remains significant space for the sociological exploration of fans of objects other than sports. Fans are a fascinating microcosm of society,

existing in various ways and at various times as subcultures, consumer cultures, transformative communities, activist communities, and just regular communities, and the hesitancy among sociologists to turn our attention to fandom as a whole seems puzzling in a time when they are such a visible part of our social world. Unlike media and cultural studies where researchers rarely speak *to* fans, branches of qualitative sociology can contribute to this lacking part of the fan studies field through interviews, ethnographies, focus groups, and case studies and help move past textual analysis and theoretical musings into the real, lived experiences of those who participate in fandom in their day-to-day lives.

2.2 Fan consumption

Consumption has long been a field of sociological enquiry, first appearing in the work of foundational scholars such as Marx, Simmel, Weber, and Veblen (Andrews 2020, p. 358). However, as Slater (2005, p. 174) notes, its origins existed as “less an area for substantive research than a barometer of ethical and political positions on the cultural quality and social health of modern society”. Across the first half of the 20th century, “Consumer culture was ... identified with an exploitative, alienating, modern, capitalist culture, and regarded as embodying selfish, dehumanising and materialist values” (Campbell 1995, p. 97). However, Warde (2017, p. 41) notes the “cultural turn” of the social sciences in the second half of the twentieth century had “enormous ramifications for the analysis of consumption”. He explains that through the development of cultural studies,

consumption was transformed from an epiphenomenon of capitalist production, where the consumer was, if not a dupe, at least passive, into a central principle of social order and a realm for individual agency and choice (Warde 2017, p. 42).

The role of agency in consumption is reflected within fan studies where a significant area of friction exists in considerations of the agency of individuals in their engagement with the wider entertainment industry (Hills 2002, pp. 122-123). Despite the dominant narrative of fandom participation as acts of resistance (Jenkins 1992), it is clear that more than anything else, being a fan is connected to consumption (Hills 2002, p. 29; Crawford 2004, p. 4; Sandvoss 2005, p. 6; Stanfill 2019, p. 77). Such consumption, however, is frequently overlooked within fan studies, especially when considering the purchase of goods. As Stanfill (2019, p. 80) notes, cultural studies (and other related disciplines) has long had a trend of rejecting “the idea that audiences were passive consumers mindlessly obeying media” and

thus hesitates to engage in examinations of practices of consumption. This is echoed by Jenkins (2017, p. 222) who notes “an ongoing discomfort among academics with forms of consumption that cannot easily be reread as forms of cultural production” and Hanna (2019, p. 125) who describes consumerism as “at once an integral part of fan culture and a *structuring absence* in fan studies” (Hanna 2019, p. 125, emphasis added).

Due to this rejection of “passive” consumption, fan studies frequently focuses on acts of *prosumption*, in which an individual is simultaneously a producer and a consumer (Ritzer & Jurgenson 2010). Prosumption is far from unique to fan studies, rather existing on an overall societal level. However, its increasing relevance to the development of “web 2.0” technologies over the past two decades (Ritzer & Jurgenson 2010, pp. 19–20) and the ways these technologies have become central to participation within fandom communities means it was an ideal framework to apply to the productive habits of members of these communities (Daros 2022; Galuszka 2015; Jones 2014; Reinhard 2019; Yang 2009). Such focus has created a field in which fan productivity (either actual or desired) has almost become a prerequisite to regard a behaviour worthy of study (Duffett 2017; Hanna 2019).

Similar themes are also reflected in discussions of crowdfunding, one of the most significant ways the intersection of participation and fan spending has been explored to date (Bennett, Chin & Jones 2015a, 2015b; Booth 2015a, 2017, pp. 193–213; Chin et al. 2014; Hills 2015b; Navar-Gill 2018; Scott 2015). Crowdfunding reflects the willingness of fans to financially support projects related to their fandoms, with the most famous example being the 2013 Kickstarter for the Veronica Mars movie in which fans donated almost \$6 million USD to help create the film (Booth 2017; Chin et al. 2014; Hills 2015b; Navar-Gill 2018; Scott 2015). Booth (2017, p. 198) argues that “crowdfunding emphasises the monetisation of fans’ emotional connection to an object”; however, this object is almost universally assumed to be a text. While Booth (2017, pp. 204–207) discusses the ways celebrities such as Kristen Bell and Zach Braff leveraged the para-social feelings fans held for them to encourage donations to their projects, academic work on crowdfunding has focused less on the individual relationship the fan feels for the celebrity (despite this arguably being a key site for the development of the overall emotional connection) and more on the promise of the end product and the power the fan holds in being part of production (Scott 2015, p. 168).

While far less common than studies of fan production and prosumption, economically grounded fan consumption has been explored within a variety of fields and disciplines,

including fan studies (Baym 2018; Booth 2017; Cavicchi 1998; Duffett 2013; Geraghty 2014, 2018; Gilbert 2018; Hills 2002; Martin 2019; Sandvoss 2005; Stanfill 2019; Stevens 2004), the sociology of sport (Crawford 2004; Jackson 2015; Pope 2010), consumer culture (Guschwan 2012; Mastromartino, Chou & Zhang 2017), and consumer marketing (Guschwan 2016; Hedlund 2014; Obiegbu et al. 2019; Trail, Fink & Anderson 2003; Wohlfeil 2018). As with all concepts applied to the study of fans, however, an ongoing issue within discussions of fan consumption is simply the lack of cohesion between these fields. As noted throughout this chapter, both fan and celebrity studies are inherently interdisciplinary. Yet for many, interdisciplinary seems to mean a variety of disciplines talking among themselves rather than to each other (Schimmel, Harrington & Bielby 2007; Turk 2018). While the aims of these fields differ, they are, ultimately, all asking the same question: “What is it that makes fans want to consume?”

Fan studies’ neglect of celebrity fandom (and – arguably just as importantly – celebrity studies’ neglect of fans) minimises the everyday consumption behaviours of a vast majority of individuals who classify themselves both as fans and as belonging to fandom communities. As Hanna (2019, p. 126) argues, fan studies’

continued interest in thinking about fans as *more than* consumers ... are always teetering on the edge of being reductive themselves; suggesting that if fans are exclusive because they are *more than* consumers, it must be because they are *more* valuable to the industry.

Falling into the trap of deeming certain fan practices more worthy than others means we work in circles, merely adding new case studies to existing areas of discussion (Duffett 2017, p. 473). In expanding how we understand fan consumption, we can view the entire fandom landscape as it stands at this moment in time, regardless of whether it shows what we wish to see. Fan studies often frames participation through the lens of textual productivity; however, as Gilbert (2018, p. 320) argues, fan spaces are often structured in such a way that “a culture of fandom in which *participation is structured as consumption*” (emphasis added) is created. While this is especially true for large-scale fan conventions such as San Diego Comic-Con (the subject of Gilbert’s discussion), it is also applicable to wider fandom trends (Baym 2018; Cavicchi 1998). Théberge (2006, p. 493), for example, emphasises that celebrity fan sites are usually “dedicated ... to hawking merchandise (CDs, t-shirts, photos, calendars, sandals, jewelry, and a host of other products)” alongside the information and potential community

spaces they offer fans. However, as Hanna (2019, p. 125) notes, these intersections of consumption and reward are “underrepresented” within the fan studies field, and as such, the data collected for this project on the role of these processes on fan participation is an important contribution to our understanding of such phenomena.

Paying increased attention to the role of consumption – and specifically the role of economic consumption – therefore allows us to gain greater insight into underresearched areas of fan experience. In exploring how fans are asked to spend by industry, we can discover how fans *themselves* view various forms of consumption – especially those specifically tied to the purchase of official goods and services – as part of their participation within their fan communities. Many scholars from media and cultural studies are seemingly hesitant to address questions of capitalist consumption; however, as Sandvoss (2005, pp. 30–31) argues, ultimately, “fans are ... conceptualised as part of our understanding of everyday life consumption in consumer capitalism, not in opposition to it”.

Unique within fandom and celebrity studies, Stanfill (2019, p. 84) has created “a four-part taxonomy of consumption normalised by fans”. Within this taxonomy, Stanfill separates the act of consuming the object of fandom itself from the forms of (economic) consumption that surround it, naming these “consumption 1.0”, “subconsumption”, “supraconsumption”, and “consumption 2.0”. Stanfill (p. 87) states consumption 1.0 is a “baseline for several other forms of consumption”, the most significant of which is “subconsumption”. We can understand subconsumption as forms of consumption “supplementary to and supporting the main consumption” (p. 87). Importantly, Stanfill (p. 88) includes the “costs of attending events” as a form of subconsumption. By understanding that attending a concert, convention, or other form of event requires additional expenses such as flights, petrol, accommodation, and food, we are able to develop a clearer picture of what fans are spending in order to participate in such activities, and we can then begin to explore what this means for the ways fans navigate various constraints to their fandom participation. Discussions of these additional costs are often ignored within scholarship centred on textual analysis, and while beginning the conversation and speaking to industry representatives, Stanfill does not provide any fan-based empirical data to expand our understanding of how such forms of consumption shape their participatory experiences.

One of the key arguments made when discussing the consumption practices of fans is that fandom-related organisations seek to “interpellat[e] fans into an understanding of loyalty as a

marketing strategy” (Gilbert 2018, p. 321), arguably a reflection of the increasing neoliberalisation of fan culture (Booth 2015b; Dubal 2010; Hills 2017c; Numerato & Giulianotti 2018). This neoliberalisation of fan culture is a subset of “neoliberal culture”, which Ventura (2016, p. 2) defines as,

a structure of feeling [that] impels us to extend the market, its technologies, approaches and mindsets into all spheres of human life, to move the ideology of consumer choice to the center of individual existence, and to look to ourselves rather than ... society as the source of our success or the blame for our failure—indeed, to define “success” and “failure” in market terms.

In such a “neoliberal turn”, fandom is promoted “as a capitalist enterprise” with “particular ways of expressing fannish enthusiasm” disciplined and policed (Booth 2015b, para. 1.3). While this can be seen across the entertainment industry as a whole, when implemented as a formal marketing strategy directed at fans, it can become what Guschwan (2012, p. 26) deems “brandom” or “pseudo-fan culture engineered by brand managers eager to cultivate consumer labor and loyalty while preempting the possibility of resistance that participatory fan culture promises”. While this concept is further discussed within the context of fan labour and industry exploitation in Section 2.3, it is important for us to consider the ways consumption is courted through systems of reward to “reinforce it as essential to fan identity” (Gilbert 2018, p. 321). We can see such processes in action through invitation-only meet and greets run by celebrities such as Taylor Swift and season ticket holders being “surprised” with additional merchandise opportunities and meet and greet opportunities with athletes (New York Islanders 2017; Pittsburgh Penguins 2019). Gilbert (2018, p. 327) explains such “rewards ... are predicated on the fan’s role as consumer”, where fans are “idealized as consumers” and aim to give “validation to a hierarchy in which those fans who participate ... are held up as the ideal fans”, serving to “extol the individual over the community” (Booth 2015b, para. 1.3). Booth (2016, p. 48) also discusses industry-influenced fan hierarchies, arguing fans have been “sold ... [on] the notion of the expensive experience”, which creates “class-based hierarchies” (p. 107). There are two layers to such hierarchies, one being this recognition by industry but the other being from “fellow fans who ... recognise the nuanced differences” between forms of consumption, allowing for the formation of “new cultural hierarchies” (Sandvoss 2005, pp. 38–39). This, in many ways, reflects Veblen’s (2012 [1899], pp. 75-76) “conspicuous consumption”, in which consumption becomes an “honorific” display of wealth, wherein individuals gain “reputability” through the

“consumption of valuable goods”. Mason (1984, p. 26) argues that for such consumers, “satisfaction derived from any particular purchase comes not from its value in use but from audience reaction to the wealth displayed by the purchaser”. However, while – as will be discussed throughout this thesis – fans do actively seek status through acts of consumption, we must be cautious in framing their behaviour as an attempt to display material goods devoid of meaning. Crawford (2004, p. 128) urges us to remember that fans “should not be seen as passive recipients of the goods they are sold, but that many...can actively draw on these in constructing and creating...their individual identities and social performances”. Thus, when it comes to fan consumption of celebrity fandom and its related material goods, Stevenson (2018, p. 151) argues, rather than relying on the “binary of cultural dupes or resistant producers and consumers ... the debate needs to develop more complex understandings ... [of] the relationships that fans form with celebrities and amongst themselves”.

Returning to Stanfill’s taxonomy, while it is a helpful place to begin building our understanding of how (economic) consumption functions within fandom spaces, the framework at times reflects unnecessary specificity and often lacks the nuances required for it to be applicable to nontextual fandom participation. Within this taxonomy, for example, attending a concert is classified as “consumption 1.0”, the cost of travelling to the concert and buying snacks while there falls under “subconsumption”, and purchasing merchandise at the event (or at any point afterwards) is “supraconsumption” (Stanfill 2019, pp. 87–91). Additionally, the examples provided by Stanfill (save those discussed as supraconsumption) are heavily tied to event attendance. I argue we can advance these discussions – especially those tied to subconsumption – away from this limiting frame and towards other forms of “supplementary” practices, especially when considering celebrity fandoms. As Wohlfeil (2018, p. 1) notes, “hardly any academic research has actually sought to develop a deeper understanding of how individual consumers’ fan relationships with their favourite celebrities express themselves in everyday consumption experiences and practices”. Key celebrity-centric additions to Stanfill’s subconsumption would be following official social media accounts, viewing award ceremonies, and following the social media of the friends and family of the celebrity to discover additional information about their “lives”. Stevens (2004, p. 59) describes the centrality of fans consuming information about their object of fandom through newsletters, fan clubs, fan-created mailing lists, and fan sites, stating “information,

though intangible, has specific value because it brings the fan closer to the star through the power of knowledge”.

The emotion that the proximity of such objects and information allows fans to feel is important for our conceptualisations of fan motivations, participation, and identity. When purely framing consumption as part of a capitalist system, it is easy to fall into the argument – as those such as Stanfill (2019) do – that the way fans are asked to spend, and thus do spend, is purely capitalist exploitation. However, as Sandvoss (2005) argues, we cannot separate the role of fan identity from the consumption practices of fans. He notes that consumption is imbued with meaning by fans in a way that “removes their object of consumption from the logic of capitalist exchange” (Sandvoss 2005, p. 116). Sandvoss (2005, p. 9) describes fandom as “sustained, affective consumption”, with Stevens (2004, p. 61) also referring to the consumption practices of fans within capitalist systems as “charged with emotion”. Music fandom, in particular, is a site where fan emotion is extremely visible. As Duffett (2017, p. 143) writes, fans who scream “are not doubted as fans” due to their emotional expression, something leveraged by marketing teams, as can be seen in the case of Taylor Swift, whose social media channels frequently feature photos and videos of fans screaming and sobbing while listening to new music for the first time (Taylor Nation 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). This can similarly be seen within sports fandom (both at matches and, increasingly, online), where fans cheer, scream, and cry in both joy and disappointment (Jang, Byon & Yim 2020; Kerr et al. 2005; Ruihley & Pate 2017). When a team loses an important match, visibly upset fans of the losing team are frequently shown on camera to emphasise the impact of the moment on supporters. Duffett (2017, p. 143) correctly notes that celebrity fandom and pop music have “perceived status as sites of emotional excess” and that such sites “remain comparatively unexamined by aca-fans ... and lambasted by mass culture critics”. And while screaming is not the focus of this research, the ways consumption – of both the object itself and of the objects that surround it – are influenced by emotion is extremely important for us to understand. It is within this emotion, within these lived experiences that create meaning, that we are able to gain insight into the motivations of fans to consume and their relationships with those who are asking them to consume. Théberge (2006, p. 494), for example, notes that while touring has “been regarded by the record industry as simply a promotional activity” for fans, it represents an “intense ... expression of their relationship to stars”. As Blumer (1986, p. 51) argues, to “understand the action of people it is necessary for [researchers] to see their objects as they see them”. Thus, if we accept economic consumption to be a key aspect of the

creation and maintenance of fan connection and identity (Grossberg 1992; Sandvoss 2005, pp. 46–47; Stevens 2004, p. 61), we must defer to the lived experiences of the fans themselves.

2.3 Fan labour and exploitation

Fan labour takes a number of forms, and discussions of this labour are perhaps where the intersection of sociology and fan studies is at its strongest, with Marxist and neo-Marxist critique often drawn upon (Stanfill 2018a, 2019; Terranova 2000). The increased interdisciplinarity of these discussions in comparison to other fan-adjacent topics is due to productivity being so lauded within fan studies that it cannot be separated from the fact that it *is* work. However, while the transformative fan production of items such as fan fiction and fan art are inherently labour, they are most frequently only framed in this way within specific contexts. Work on fan labour more broadly remains relatively uncommon, with a special issue of *Transformative Works and Cultures* in 2014 the primary source of journal articles within the fan studies field (Stanfill & Condis 2014), alongside sporadic chapters in edited collections (De Kosnik 2013; McCormick 2018; Stanfill 2018a).

As such, the presence of labour within fandom communities is frequently framed within the context of the “gift economy”, wherein fans participate by “giving, receiving, and reciprocating” fan-created objects such as fan fiction and fan art (Turk 2014, para. 1.1). Chin (2014, para. 1.2) adds that other fandom objects such as “essays, fan websites, and wikis that serve as repositories of knowledge for the fandom” also form significant parts of the gift economy. These gift economies are generally not publicly visible – rather, they exist among members of fandoms within closed fandom spaces, with Pearson (2010, p. 87) explaining that “while profit drives capitalism ... community-building drives the gift economy”. It can therefore be understood as an intra-community economy dependent upon existing levels of social capital where the exchange of gifts “earn[s] status and reputation ... for the individual” (Chin 2014, para. 1.3). As Chin (2014, para. 1.3) outlines, the gift economy allows fans to demonstrate their “expertise in both the technology used to create it ... and the cultural text(s) it references”. By creating a gift of high quality, the creator is able to “build on and elevate their status in their respective fan communities” (para. 1.3). This form of gift economy is most frequently seen throughout film/television fandoms where fan works represent a

significant aspect of fandom participation, with the forms it takes in less transformational fandom communities given little attention to date.

While the gift economy is a key way labour functions within fandom communities, it is not the only form it takes. Morris (2014, p. 274) outlines that “fans cannot really consume without working”, with any behaviour outside of specifically watching/listening/reading the text contributing to the marketing and promotion of the object of fandom (Chin 2014, para. 1.1). Building on the protests and letter-writing campaigns staged by fans prior to social media (Earl & Kimport 2009; Jenkins 1992), fans now take part in hashtag campaigns to renew television series (Anderson-Lopez, Lambert & Budaj 2021; Bourdaa 2021; Guerrero-Pico 2017; Savage 2014; Spence 2014), as well as actively participating in industry-encouraged marketing campaigns (Busse 2015; Guschwan 2012) and undertaking marketing efforts of their own volition (Baym & Burnett 2009; Booth 2017; Yang 2009).

Broadly, the primary way fan labour has been theorised is through the concept of immaterial and affective labour, significantly drawing upon Terranova’s (2000, 2004) work on free labour on the internet (Banks & Humphries 2008; De Kosnik 2013; Martens 2011; Pybus 2011; Stork 2014). Hardt and Negri (2000, pp. 290–293) define immaterial labour as “labour that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication” and categorise affective labour as a subsection of this that produces “intangible” products that create “a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion”. They state, “Such affective production, exchange, and communication are generally associated with human contact, but that contact can be either actual or virtual, as it is in the entertainment industry” (Hardt & Negri 2000, p. 293). Terranova (2000, p. 38) explains that within the context of the online world, such labour refers to “forms of labour we do not immediately recognize as such: chat, real-life stories, mailing lists, amateur newsletters, and so on”. Despite writing before the advent of social media as we know it today, Terranova’s (2000, p. 48) description of the internet as “the extraction of value out of continuous, updatable work” is a perfect representation of these platforms.

Participation on social media functions as a form of affective labour, both within the context of contributing to the value and creation of the site and in creating value-generating content for the object of fandom, something Terranova (2000, p. 48) describes as “extremely labour intensive”. Departing from the majority of work within fan studies, which focuses on the gift economy and fan labour for other fans, this thesis focuses on what Stanfill (2019, p. 151)

deems “lovebor”, or a form of affective labour relating to the “work of loving the object of fandom and showing that love”. Stanfill (2019, 151) separates lovebor from both affective labour and emotional labour (Hochschild 2012), explaining neither “describes the reciprocal relationship between work and love I identify with fans”. They outline, “Lovebor is also a contention that love itself has value”, noting this love “might then ‘appreciate’ the material in an economic sense as well” (Stanfill 2019, p. 151). Unlike the traditional fandom gift economy, lovebor is most visible within celebrity fandom communities. The free labour Yang (2009, p. 534) describes as central to the Chinese music industry star system – including “post[ing] voraciously on online forums ... travel[ing] long distances to attend concerts, and perform[ing] a spectacle of shrieking and cheering at award ceremonies” – is representative of lovebor and recognisable within most modern celebrity fandom communities. Similarly, Stork (2014, para. 1.6) discusses the ways the television series “Glee essentially cultivate[d] a business model that exchange[d] content for fan labor and the attached cultural buzz”. This can also be seen through the existence of celebrity “brand” social media accounts (as opposed to “personal” accounts that, despite their actual control, are presented as operated by the celebrities themselves) in which marketing teams specifically seek to engage with passionate fans to generate hype and the illusion of access (for examples of this see “Taylor Nation” for Taylor Swift, and “Team LN4” and “Official GR63” for the popular Formula One drivers Lando Norris and George Russell, respectively). These accounts see the lovebor being undertaken by fans on social media (such as sharing photos, stories, homemade merchandise, purchases of official merchandise, etc.) and amplify it to excite the fans in question and create further emotion and connection. Stanfill (2019, pp. 144–148) differentiates between “promotional labour” and “lovebor”; however, promotional labour – which they describe as including encouraging others to become a fan of objects, creating buzz, and sharing content – is merely an expression of the love a fan shares for their object of fandom. Such labour is also similar to what Postigo (2009, p. 463) describes as “passionate labour”, in which individuals are happy to work for free due to their love for the object of their fandom, and to Guschwan’s (2012) concept of “brandom”. In a brandom framework, fans are encouraged by marketing teams to “act as co-marketers and salespeople” (Guschwan 2012, p. 20), playing within approved lines in opposition to the participation practices of transformative communities. Lovebor and brandom, then, are helpful frameworks for us to apply when examining the ways fans work with, or in opposition to, industry as part of their participatory behaviours.

However, just as we cannot take popular claims of fan consumption as exploitation as gospel truth, so too must caution be exercised when applying labour frameworks, with the danger of ignoring lived fan experiences frequently overlooked. Stanfill (2019, pp. 131–132), for instance, continues their Marxist positioning, arguing any fan

activity that is invited by industry or encouraged by industry or takes place at official industry sites or benefits the industry in any way is always exploitation in the Marxist sense of surplus value extraction.

While technically true, I argue that viewing fan activity in this way can be unnecessarily negative, especially when – as is the case with Stanfill’s work – fan voices are not considered. Stanfill (2019, p. 132) argues that taking this Marxist stance allows us to “set aside the question of whether fans feel exploited” but does not justify why we should brush past what is arguably the central part of the fan labour: the fans themselves. Nobody is disputing that fan labour *is* labour that serves to make the object of fandom money, but there is far more nuance to the discussion than Stanfill provides. As Terranova (2004, p. 74) argues, such forms of free labour are “simultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited”, a point echoed by Banks and Humphries (2008, p. 407) who note the relationships between fans and their labour “are much more nuanced and complex than the language of incorporation, appropriation or exploitation suggests”. As Terranova (2000, p. 48) expands, “free labour ... is not necessarily exploited labour”, and Chin (2014, para. 6.2.) reminds us,

not to assume that fans performing labor are always being exploited by the media industry. It is vital that we acknowledge that fans often perform labor because there is something beyond monetary gain to be achieved: something like status and access to the media industry.

Fans are aware of their ability to opt out of their relationship with industry at any time and make the active choice to maintain their participation (despite Guschwan [2012, p. 19] claiming that individuals within brandoms “lack real autonomy”), viewing the benefits of their participation as outweighing the potential downsides of any alleged exploitation. This is reflected by Williams (2020, p. 73), who, in her discussion of brandom and theme park fandom argues “fans continue to take part...despite knowledge of their engagement with large corporations and the mechanics of online platforms...there is value to be gained for fans who participate in such knowledge communities outside of more traditional modes of

payment”. This is further made clear when exploring the motivations of participants in celebrity fandom communities. Duffett (2013, pp. 276–277) argues that (almost) all fan participation can be classified through the lens of “pleasures”, in which fans “connect”, “appropriate” and “perform”. Discussing the “pleasures of connection”, he writes, “for many people ... the primary pleasures of fandom stem from their aim of encountering the performer” (Duffett 2013, p. 277). Thus, it is clear that such individuals are willing to participate within official boundaries if it allows them to make progress on achieving these goals. Building on this, Sandi and Triastuti (2020, p. 74) specifically separate themselves from existing literature on free labour, instead focusing on the “rewards” offered to fans, arguing fan labour is “motivated by ... recognition and social participation”. Galuszka (2015, p. 33) draws upon the concept of the gift economy in his discussion of fan labour, using this lens to frame rewards offered by celebrities as reciprocated gifts. Galuszka, like Baym (2015, 2018) and Baym and Burnett (2009), focuses on smaller-scale musicians who rely more significantly on the labour of their fans. While this framing may be applicable to such cases, it begins to get murky when considering more successful celebrities such as Taylor Swift who do not need fans to act as “co-creators” (Galuszka 2015, pp. 32–33) and yet follow this path. The case of Taylor Swift is particularly interesting to consider within the framing of the gift economy, as she is known for presenting her fans with actual gifts (Kaufman 2021). However, such rewards are offered to only a select few, yet the promise of a future chance at being chosen functions to encourage the ongoing labour of thousands. This contrasts with the gift economy’s traditional presentation in which the gifts received are either returned directly to those who offered the labour or previous gift, or function in a way that rewards the entire community (Mauss 2015; Turk 2014, paras. 3.1–3.2).

While Milner (2009, p. 494) calls claims “that fan labour always comes from or results in fan pleasure ... slightly utopian”, he – like Chin (2014) – agrees that we cannot look past the “goals” of these forms of participation, which are the primarily achievable concepts of “implicit ownership, status, esteem, community, social capital”. This contrasts with Stanfill (2019, pp. 156–157) who sees the potential for monetary compensation as the only “route out of exploitation”. Milner (2009, p. 505) emphasises the disconnect between academics discussing fan labour and the fans performing this labour when he notes, “While scholars have altruistically wondered about the exploitation of fans by producers, *Fallout* fans would rather be financially exploited than have their immaterial labor ignored”. It is within this grey space that my study positions itself, emphasising that the opinions of fans themselves should

hold more weight in discussions of labour, exploitation, and participation than they are currently given. Stanfill (2019, p. 11) uses the metaphor of “domestication” in their examination of fan-industry relations, and while there is an undeniable layer of truth to this description, I take issue with the end result of this metaphor that likens fans to “meat and milk ... a living resource to exploit”. I disagree with Stanfill’s (2019, p. 11) ultimate claim that the willingness of fans to exist within these processes does not matter as they “do not fully understand” how they are being “domesticated”. Even if certain fan actions serve only to benefit industry, it does not negate the lived feelings and experiences of the fans, with Baym and Burnett’s (2009, p. 435) assertion that “We know little about how fans perceive their own contributions or how they reconcile this tension between empowerment and exploitation in their own lives” remaining true more than a decade after they were writing. Thus, in exploring the ways fans navigate commodified fandom spaces, I make the deliberate methodological decision to give voice to the fans participating in these practices in order to better understand their lived experiences.

2.4 Leisure

It is undeniable that the entertainment industry is central to modern leisure experiences, with Dunn (2020, p. xvi) going so far as to argue that “leisure time today is driven by fandom”. When Dunn refers to “fandom” as driving leisure time, however, he is not referring to active fandom communities but rather to the consumption of entertainment products such as films, television shows, and sport. These are the forms of media consumption actively measured by leisure time surveys and the ways the vast majority of individuals engage in fandom-adjacent behaviour. Fan studies has historically attempted to distance itself from such behaviours; however, this does not mean that it is not beneficial to frame fandom participation as a leisure activity.

There is no singular definition of leisure; however, Schultz and McKeown (2018, p. 233) explain it has

traditionally been defined in three main ways, as time (that which is not work), as activity (freely chosen), and as a state of mind (denoted by such things as intrinsic motivation, perceived freedom, and positive affect).

For greater specificity, this project draws on a definition offered by Stebbins (2017, p. 4), who describes leisure as

uncoerced activity engaged in during free time, which people want to do and, in either a satisfying or a fulfilling way (or both), use their abilities and resources to succeed at this.

Stebbins (2020, p. 16) is clear in his argument that free time is not “synonymous with leisure” but rather that leisure is something one uses their free time for. In addition, Stebbins (2020, p. 16) argues that often “leisure is not really freely chosen” as it must be understood “in relation to [its] larger personal, structural, cultural, and historical background”. This is echoed by Rojek (2010, pp. 5–6), who outlines one’s “capacity to dispose of non-work time is economically conditioned and culturally coded”, with the very nature of leisure “reflect[ing] distinctions of class, gender, ethnicity, education, and bodily health”. Fandom is no exception to this rule, with Jenkins (2008, p. 3) noting “some consumers have greater abilities to participate in this emerging culture than others”. Couldry (2011, p. 492) highlights the likelihood of a relationship between one’s degree of fandom and access to free time, as “intense fandom requires knowledge acquisition and knowledge performance (both of which take time)”. He notes that this, in turn, means those with “less disposable time are therefore likely to be under-represented among those practicing intense fandom”, specifying this may include “those with heavy job commitments ... [and] those with heavy family commitments” (Couldry 2011, p. 492).

There remains an insufficient body of literature exploring the impact of potential constraints on participation in fandom communities, on both a personal and a community level. Fandom communities have historically been framed as spaces for marginalised identities (Jenkins 1992); however, this has tended to focus on gender (Dunn & Herrmann 2020; Morrissey 2016; Scott 2019) and sexuality (Dajches & Stevens Aubrey 2022; McInroy 2020; Meggers 2012) and, more recently, race (De Kosnik & Carrington 2019; Pande 2018, 2020a; Stanfill 2018b). While, as noted by Rojek (2010), access to leisure is impacted by intersectional constraints, class remains largely absent within discussions of fandom culture. In not addressing the role that class plays within fandom communities, we are leaving out a key piece of the puzzle of who can participate in fandom, and why. This is especially true when we consider participation within commodified fandom spaces where “the intensive

relationship of fans to consumption ... produces the normative fan as one with disposable income” (Stanfill 2019, p. 102).

As is common when it comes to sociologically aligned studies of fans, sports fandom is one of the few areas of fan experience that has been studied using a leisure studies framework (Gibson, Willming & Holdback 2002; Green & Jones 2005; Jones 2000; Pope 2017; Smith & Stewart 2007; Spracklen 2015, 2017, 2021; Sturm 2011). This is arguably because sport and physical activity are considered central forms of leisure on a broader scale, and thus sports *fans* are adjacent to existing popular topics within the leisure studies field. In addition to sports fandom, the centrality of tourism within the leisure space has created room for the study of fandom tourism – where fans travel to sites of significance related to their object of fandom, such as locations from television shows and movies, hometowns or places of residence of celebrities, and so on (Erdely & Breede 2017; Hills 2017b; King 1993; Lee, Busser & Park 2019; Lee & Scott 2009; Marling 1996; Reichenberger & Smith 2020; Thompson, Taheri & Scheuring 2022). It can be seen, then, that a majority of existing work focuses only on behaviour that is the most visibly leisure-aligned. It is obvious, for example, that tourism is a leisure activity, and thus, while a beneficial area of study, studying only fandom tourism does not expand the ways we can understand fandom *itself* as a leisure pursuit. Broadening our understanding of fandom participation *as a whole* as a leisure activity allows us to develop greater insight into the wider benefits on offer to participants, as well as the constraints that may be faced.

If we see that “passive” forms of media consumption such as television viewing, listening to music, and watching films are where most leisure time is undertaken, then it serves that those who engage in fandom communities represent those engaging in a more committed leisure relationship. It thus becomes useful to look to Stebbins’s “serious leisure perspective” as a framework to enhance our understanding of fandom participation as a leisure pursuit (Lamond 2020, pp. 37–39). This project does not look to specifically apply the serious leisure perspective to analyse the results of collected data, as such an application is a project in and of itself requiring the use of specialised scales (Akyıldız Munusturlar & Argan 2016; Gould et al. 2008; Jones 2000). However, using aspects of the framework remains a beneficial way to position fandom participation within the broader leisure world. Stebbins has spent his career developing the serious leisure perspective, a broad framework created in an attempt to explain the overall leisure landscape. According to Stebbins (2014, p. 3), all leisure can be

considered either serious, casual, or project based. What Dunn (2020, p. xvi) refers to as “fandom”, then, is best described by what Stebbins (2017, pp. 38–39) deems “casual leisure”, which he explains is “considerably less substantial” than serious leisure, being “immediately, intrinsically rewarding” and a “relatively short-lived pleasurable core activity, requiring little or no special training to enjoy”. In contrast to casual leisure, Stebbins (2009, p. 14) explains,

Serious leisure is the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity sufficiently substantial, interesting, and fulfilling for the participant to find a (leisure) career there acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience.

While no research has been specifically undertaken into the relationship between serious and casual leisure within fandom communities, based on existing literature we can assume that if an individual considers themselves a member of a fandom community and actively participates within these spaces, one has moved from “casual” into “serious” territory. This is evidenced by Stebbins’s (2017, p. 29) description of the relationship between a “sports buff” and those who “consume sports as casual leisure”. Watching a game, listening to an album, or watching an episode of a television series does not make someone a member of a fandom, even if they may be a “fan”. This distinction connects back to the longstanding debate within media – and fan – studies as to the different forms of audiences and, indeed, fans themselves. A limited body of work connecting the serious leisure perspective to fandom participation exists, with Lee and Scott (2009, p. 138) arguing,

The association between fandom and leisure involvement is evident from the perspective of serious leisure, which suggests that one’s heightened involvement in a chosen leisure activity can provide him/her a source of identity, enduring satisfaction, sociality, and alternative lifestyle.

Additionally, while not specifically drawing on Stebbins, Kelly (2004, p. 8) inadvertently mirrors him in his assertion that “fans ... are those who take leisure seriously”. Similarly, Lamond (2020, p. 39) argues that when it comes to fans attending conventions, there is “a high likelihood that many are engaging as part of a serious leisure practice”. We can also look to research undertaken by Gibson, Willming and Holdnak (2002, p. 422) who in their exploration of American college football fandom as serious leisure conclude, “Perhaps we should pay more attention to sport spectatorship and fandom as a form of leisure”.

The production and consumption of fan fiction is perhaps the most straightforward way to place fandom participation within the realm of serious leisure hobbies (Hill & Pecoskie 2017); however, it is far from the only form of fandom participation that can be understood in this way. Gibson, Willming and Holdnak (2002, p. 400), for example, argue, “The category of the hobbyist should be expanded to include what we term the sport enthusiast”. This use of the term “enthusiast” echoes Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998, pp. 138-139) and their continuum of fan types, divided into “fans”, “cultists”, and “enthusiasts”. Within these divisions, “enthusiasts” mirror Stebbins’ “hobbyists” most closely, with the category described as “based predominantly around activities rather than media or stars” (Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998, p. 139). They continue, “the enthusiasm tends to revolve around the production of things, from railway models to plays to second-hand dresses” (Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998, p. 150), reflecting what Stebbins (2014, p. 7) refers to as “collectors, makers and tinkerers”. For enthusiasts, Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998, p. 145) explain, “It is the use of skills that become paramount”. It is important to note that this continuum does not reflect the *worth* of types of fans (Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998, p. 141), but rather, much like the divisions present within Stebbins’ serious leisure hobbies, is used to demonstrate the changing nature of production and consumption across forms of participation. Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998, pp. 138-139) describe “cultists” as having “very explicit attachments to stars or to particular programmes”, and it is within these attachments that we can find a connection between the knowledge accumulation of celebrity fans and what Stebbins’ (1994) deems the “liberal arts hobbies”. Stebbins (1994, p. 175) initially defined “liberal arts hobbies” as related to “the search for *broad knowledge* of an area of human life and the search for this knowledge for its *own sake*”; however, drawing upon Jones (2000) and Gibson, Willming and Holdnak (2002), he later comes to refer to the “liberal arts hobby of sports buffs” (Stebbins 2017, p. 29), demonstrating its direct relevance to fandom. Stebbins (2014, p. 101) describes these “buffs” as “more or less knowledgeable experts” vis-a-vis regular consumers, indicating the knowledge obtained through their in-depth consumption of their object of interest – or fandom – transforms their leisure experience.

It is within such a transformed leisure experience that individuals can experience what Stebbins (2014, p. 1) deems a leisure “career”. Participation in these “careers” is “driven by a desire to get better at their chosen leisure ... activity” (Stebbins 2014, p. 1), and for those within fandom communities, “getting better” may be as simple as improving their skills in writing fan fiction or increasing the depth of their knowledge about their object of fandom.

Stebbins (2020, p. 73) describes “five career stages: beginning, development, establishment, maintenance, and decline” but notes that not all leisure careers are subject to decline (which, he explains, may stem from lack of continued ability or loss of interest). In terms of celebrity fandom, one can understand these stages as discovering the celebrity, beginning to learn more about them and engaging with the wider fandom community, establishing an identity as a member of the community, and the ongoing, committed support of the object of fandom and participation within their community. It is in this final maintenance stage that Stebbins (2020, p. 73) explains individuals “are able to enjoy to the utmost their pursuit” of their leisure career. This enjoyment is also reflective of what Blackshaw (2010) deems “liquid leisure”. The concept of liquid leisure emerged from what Bouwer and van Leeuwen (2013, p. 584) refer to as a perceived “state of crisis” in the leisure studies field related to the conflict between the traditional “orthodox leisure science paradigm” and the perceived requirements of studying leisure in a postmodern age. It is argued that traditional “positivist analyses fail to take individual meaning (of leisure activities or attitudes) into consideration” (Bouwer and van Leeuwen 2013, p. 585), thus necessitating the creation of new ways of understanding the postmodern leisure experience. Blackshaw (2010, pp. 141-142) argues “liquid modernity ushered in a new phase for leisure, which saw it ingeniously empowered by the human imagination” and through this, he argues, we are able to participate in leisure activities which “animate us to reach out towards some super-sensible truth, higher than ourselves, that provides us with a purpose for living”.

Blackshaw (2010, pp. 142-143) uses the example of “hard core...football supporters” to demonstrate what he refers to as “devotional leisure practice”, clearly demonstrating the connection between fandom and liquid leisure. While Best (2013, pp. 89-90) challenges Blackshaw's framing of fandom, arguing it “overlook[s]” what he deems to be the key aspect of “fan solidarity”, Best himself draws a flawed conclusion when he challenges the authenticity of consumption-based identities in fandom communities. Best (2013, pp. 87-89) argues that we should view fandom as serious rather than liquid, however, neglects to observe the existing commonalities between the two concepts. To Blackshaw (2010, p. 142), devotional practice mirrors Stebbins’ theory of serious leisure, arguing, “those who commit themselves to [this form of] leisure do so as a *vocation*; the relationship between their life and their leisure is fundamental” (emphasis added). Thus, through such forms of participation, “leisure can be viewed as a ‘facilitator’ of meaning and a domain for individual freedom” (Bouwer and van Leeuwen 2013, p. 586), wherein “leisure opens us up to self-

creation” (p. 589), expanding past what Best (2013, p. 89) describes as “consumer based, logocentric celebration of the inauthentic”.

Individuals engage in leisure careers to find self-fulfilment but are also aware that pursuing such a career is not without cost (Stebbins 2014). Stebbins (2014, p. 12) explains these costs may come in the form of “disappointments, dislikes, or tensions”. While not all those who participate in fandom communities transform it into a leisure career, adding the framework to our theoretical arsenal strengthens the ways we can work against industry exploitation as the default assumption of fan labour and consumption. Fans are not simply “domesticated” by industry for their “meat and milk” (Stanfill 2019, p. 11) but rather engage with fandom objects to a variety of extents and through various negotiations of the ways they will engage with and overcome the “costs” their fandom leisure career presents them with. Whether this be the very notion of industry presence, or a shortage of time or money, a leisure framework allows us to prioritise the experiences of those participating as they understand it.

2.5 Interaction and attention capital

Attention is a central – yet frequently overlooked – feature of our modern social world. Existing literature discussing the role of attention is broadly divided into two similar – yet fundamentally different – concepts: the economy of attention and the attention economy. Despite their almost identical names, the two concepts diverge when considering the role of attention itself in the equation. The attention economy – as first introduced by Goldhaber (1997, para. 12) – draws on the fact attention is “an intrinsically scarce resource” wherein each individual has “a certain stock of attention at [their] disposal”. The attention economy, then, relates to how these stocks are used: what is it that individuals are giving their attention to? The economy of attention, however, as conceptualised by Franck (2019), is used in reference to the attention an individual themselves attracts. Franck (2019, p. 8) calls “the attention of others ... the most irresistible of drugs” and refers to the ongoing “struggle for attention” present in our social worlds (p. 15). It is this attention, then, that is the concept at the heart of celebrity culture (Franck 2019; van Krieken 2019a, 2019b), with the most straightforward form of attention capital being media industry presence (Driessens 2013a, p. 550; Franck 2019, p. 13). Franck (2019, p. 9) explains,

People enjoy nothing more than looking at faces shining with publicity. Nothing increases circulation more than as much gossip as possible about the world of the

stars. Nothing increases viewing figures more than the commotion around the stars themselves.

This research, then, is most interested in the economy of attention, as its focus is given to the subject accumulating attention rather than those spending it. The economy of attention is vital to our understanding of both celebrity and fandom cultures, especially within the context of online spaces in which broad forms of attention capital are at their most visible. While celebrity remains the key realm in which the economy of attention has been applied, Franck (2019, p. 17) cautions against assuming attention capital is limited to celebrity. By expanding our application of attention capital to *fans* of celebrities, we can further both our understanding of fan social hierarchies and what van Krieken (2019b, p. 5) calls “second-order wealth creation” as it pertains to fan–celebrity engagement.

Fan–celebrity engagement, then, is anchored in the concept of attention capital, with fans wishing to engage with their favourite celebrities largely because they *are* celebrities. There are numerous ways fans can interact – or more accurately “interact” – with the celebrity objects of their fandom. Scholarship to date has focused on a wide variety of these interactions, including those that take place on social media (Bennett 2014a; Dare-Edwards 2014; Marwick & boyd 2011a, 2011b; Kehrberg 2015), in a face-to-face setting (Ferris 2001; Ferris & Harris 2011; Hills & Williams 2005; Stever 2016), and that labelled as “celebrity worship” (Brooks 2021; Maltby et al. 2006; McCutcheon, Lange & Houran 2002; Sansone & Sansone 2014; Zsila, McCutcheon & Demetrovics 2018). The default relationship between fans and celebrities can be understood as “para-social” (Horton & Wohl 1956). These relationships develop through the fan’s repeated exposure to the celebrity, which creates an “illusion of [a] face-to-face relationship” (Horton & Wohl 1956, p. 215). Fans have “a hunger to know more about the real lives of these increasingly familiar icons” (Schickel 2000 p. 36), which leads them to “seek knowledge [about celebrities] ... in a variety of ways” (Ferris 2001, p. 31). This includes information such as details of their families, friendships, and personal lives, available through official social media channels, interviews, and gossip sites. Rojek (2016, para. 2) emphasises the “unprecedented” amount of information about those in the public eye we can now access, knowledge that allows fans to “‘know’ [the celebrity] ... in somewhat the same way as they know their chosen friends” (Horton & Wohl 1956, pp. 215–216). However, as Horton and Wohl (1956, pp. 215–216) remind us, these relationships are always going to be “one-sided, nondialectical, controlled by the performer, and not

susceptible of mutual development”. Despite the fact these relationships are “inevitably one-sided” (Horton & Wohl 1956, p. 216), Rojek (2016, para. 1) states that “for a variety of reasons ... we may have the temerity to feel that we *belong* to their story and vice versa”. Schickel (2000, pp. 4–5) explains,

Some part of these [fans] has been in intimate contact with the well-known individual for years. Secrets, hopes, and dreams have not exactly been shared with the celebrity, but he is somehow bound up in them.

Frequently described as an “illusion” (Horton & Wohl 1956; Schickel 2000), para-social interactions are nonetheless the primary way fans engage with the celebrity object of their affection.

Hills (2015a) draws attention to the ongoing dichotomy within scholarship regarding the alleged pathological nature of para-social interaction. Discussions both within and outside academia frequently focus on the extreme behaviours of celebrity stalkers and those fans who take their admiration of the celebrity too far (Ferris 2001; McCutcheon, Aruguete et al. 2006; McCutcheon, Lange & Houran 2002; Schlesinger 2006; Wilson et al. 2018). Researchers in psychology have referred to such behaviour as “celebrity worship syndrome” (Brooks 2021; McCutcheon, Lange & Houran 2002; Maltby et al. 2006; Sansone & Sansone 2014; Zsila, McCutcheon & Demetrovics 2018); however, the universality – or, indeed, accuracy – of such a framing is questionable, with an attempt to tie the phenomenon to “advanced stages of addiction” (McCutcheon, Lange & Houran 2002, p. 82) particularly erroneous. Focusing on the extreme minority of individuals who “become dangerous in their pursuit of celebrities” (McCutcheon, Lange & Houran 2002, p. 83), and claiming such behaviour “is associated with a tendency for people to report fewer and less intimate friendships than they did before becoming a fan” (McCutcheon, Lange & Houran 2002, p. 69), is at odds with work on para-social interaction and relationships from outside the psychology field and makes sweeping arguments ignoring the nuances of fan experience and the role of community in celebrity fandom spaces (Hills 2015a; van Krieken 2019a). As noted by Stever (2011, p. 1357), “many very committed fans, whose commitment to a celebrity could be perceived as celebrity worship, also carry on normal relationships and normal, healthy, and satisfying lives”. Stever (2011, p. 1357) offers somewhat of a critique of the celebrity worship syndrome framework from within the field of psychology, noting “there is confusion in the literature as to the relationship between being a celebrity fan and being a celebrity worshiper”. While

McCutcheon, Lange and Houran (2002, p. 69) claim even belonging to a fan club is a “mild ... form of celebrity worship”, as noted by Stever (2011, p. 1357), “the assumption that being a fan and being a celebrity worshiper are synonymous could be fundamentally flawed”. Horton and Wohl (1956, p. 223) themselves state “for the great majority of the audience, the para-social is complementary to normal social life”; however, as Hills (2015a, p. 465) explains, these relationships are often “depicted as a kind of substitute for ‘real’ social interactions”. Hills (2015a, p. 465) highlights “a number of writers aligned with fan/celebrity studies have sought to revalue para-social relations”, moving further away from such depictions.

Fandom participation on social media does not exist within a bubble, and Hills (2015a, p. 464) argues “the concept of para-social interaction is problematised ... by its focus on an assumed social dyad (the lone fan and the individual celebrity)”. Van Krieken (2019a, pp. 105–106) “stress[es] the group nature of much para-social interaction” and emphasises

the ways in which it functions as social cement and as a basis for community formation [where] the value of the para-social interaction is most fully developed in its linkage with real life relationships.

The relationship with the celebrity allows for a “construction of shared meaning and emotional response” with other fans (van Krieken 2019a, p. 103), something which Hills (2015a, p. 464) refers to as a “shared fan-cultural performance and validation”. Hills (2015a, p. 471) describes the role of para-social interaction in fandom communities as functioning as “a kind of fan-cultural ‘glue’” where these interactions “become a kind of currency for group affiliations and exchanges”, a concept he defines as “multisocial interaction”. Hills (2015a, p. 471) explains that in such interactions, “there is no one clear ‘object’-relation ... fans can simultaneously draw on celebrities as a resource within their self-narratives *and* share and perform these narratives with multiple fan others”. Thus, by looking past the strictly para-social, we can explore the complex social structures that form within fandom communities. Such social structures also move celebrity fandom further away from the negative connotations of “celebrity worship” or dysfunctional social engagement, rather re-establishing these interactions as “expanding and developing in ever-changing ways every individual’s social world” (van Krieken 2019a, p. 99). Despite the theoretical framework of multisocial interactions, very little empirical exploration of the concept has occurred. Exceptions to this include research undertaken by Yin (2021), examining digital fandom in

China, and Watson's (2019) exploration of the ways LGBTQIA+ Australians "read" celebrity media. My study, then, aims to contribute to this body of work by exploring the varying roles celebrity plays in different forms of fandom community, including the ways the relationship to the celebrity versus that between fans is conceived.

2.5.1 Social media and celebrity interaction

Over the past two decades, the expanding nature of social media has created an unprecedented amount of (perceived) access between fans and celebrities. Kehrberg (2015, p. 86) describes Twitter as "a primary medium for communication" between the two groups, and it is only rivalled by Instagram in terms of level of access to the "lives" of celebrities. Marwick and boyd (2011a, p. 142) emphasise the value of authenticity created through celebrity "dialogue and engagement with fans" on social media, an idea echoed by Giles (2018, p. 81) who refers to Twitter as an "indispensable publicity tool" for celebrities, even if for some "the risks posed by frequent Twitter use" – such as trolling and criticisms from members of the public – "outweigh its positive affordances" (p. 83). When discussing fan use of social media, Marwick and boyd (2011a, p. 147) explain that "following a famous person's [posts] over a period of time may create a ... feeling of 'knowing' them" in much the same way that they "create a sense of ongoing connection with one's real-life acquaintances". However, there remains an ongoing division among those who study celebrity social media use as to whether communication on platforms "pregnant with the possibility for immediate, continuous interaction" can still be considered para-social (Kehrberg 2015, p. 88). Marwick and boyd (2011a, p. 147) explain, "Twitter ... provide[s] the possibility of actual interaction with the highly followed person, in the form of a direct message or @reply", and Kehrberg (2015, p. 87) adds this "constant, immediate" possibility is what "uniquely defines celebrity/fan relations on social media".

However, while "Twitter allows celebrity practitioners to create a sense of closeness and familiarity between themselves and their followers" (Marwick & boyd 2011a, p. 147), as Chin (2018, p. 251) explains, the likelihood of actual communication occurring between a fan and celebrity largely comes down to the luck of posting at the right time. Marwick and boyd (2011a, p. 148) argue fans are able to "engage in discussion with a famous person"; however, most interactions between fans and celebrities rarely resemble a "discussion" and are more likely to take the form of "follows", "likes", and "retweets" (Chin 2018; Kehrberg 2015). Despite this, Giles (2018, p. 88) argues that "Twitter members can reasonably expect to get a

reply from most celebrities”, drawing upon research undertaken by Stever and Lawson (2013) and Stever and Hughes (2013) in which select celebrities were shown to have a high rate of response to fans. (Notably, Marwick and boyd [2011a, p. 142] remind us, “not all ‘celebrity’ accounts are authored by the celebrity in question”.) In the 8 years since these studies were undertaken, however, the number of followers of celebrity Twitter accounts has increased exponentially, decreasing the chance of any individual fan being noticed. Katy Perry becoming the first Twitter user to reach 50 million followers occurred less than 5 years after Ashton Kutcher was the first user to reach one million (Cashmore 2009; Hernandez 2014). In February 2014, Taylor Swift was reported as having 38.7 million followers (Hernandez 2014), and at the time of writing in January 2023, she has more than doubled that number, now boasting over 92.4 million followers. Perhaps the most notable part of Marwick and boyd’s (2011a, p. 142) discussion is the assertion that “part of the appeal of Twitter ... is the perception of direct access to a famous person”. As Kehrberg (2015, p. 93) summarises,

This suggests that while scholars laud the possibility for social interaction between fans and celebrities on [social media] in theory, it is not in practice taking place ... relationships between users and stars ... are by all measurements still para-social.

Fans using social media to engage with celebrities are arguably no closer to “real” interaction than those who send fan letters, with the medium merely increasing the illusion of knowledge at the heart of the phenomenon (Horton & Wohl 1956).

One of the most important aspects of the economy of attention is what Franck (2019, p. 12) refers to as “an accounting system” in which a “social share price of individual attention” is created. Franck (2019, p. 12) explains,

What is important, then, is not only how much attention one receives from how many people, but also from whom one receives it – or more precisely, with whom one is seen. The reflections of somebody’s attentive wealth thus becomes a source of income for oneself. Mere proximity to celebrity makes a little celebrity.

It can be seen, then, that to be noticed by a celebrity – especially a celebrity object of fandom – is an extremely important part of the economy of attention within fandom communities (Chin 2018; Kehrberg 2015, pp. 87–88). Importantly, the greater the social and attention capital of the individual fan, the more this capital accumulates (van Krieken 2019a, p. 57) and the greater the likelihood of attention from a celebrity becomes.

Two distinct trends of scholarship have emerged when it comes to the study of fan–celebrity engagement on social media: that which speaks about fans and that which speaks to them. Marwick and boyd (2011a), Stever and Lawson (2013), Van den Bulck, Claessens and Bels (2014), Kehrberg (2015), and Usher (2015) undertook analysis of public tweets to support their discussions, while Bennett (2014a), Bond (2016), Ledbetter and Redd (2016), Kim and Song (2016), Pennington, Hall and Hutchinson (2016), Krause, North and Heritage (2018), Kim and Kim (2020), and Zsila et al. (2021) used surveys to collect data from fans regarding their experiences with such methods of engagement. Despite the prevalence of work that fits within these categories, there remains few studies that draw on interviews or other qualitative-heavy methods of data collection to further explore the phenomenon in fans’ own words. This, then, is a key area that this project aims to assist in developing.

2.5.2 Real-world celebrity interaction

While social media may allow for fans to feel closer to their favourite celebrities, the gold standard of fan–celebrity engagement is that which occurs in a face-to-face setting (Ferris 2001, p. 26). Unlike para-social interactions, meeting a celebrity in person allows fans to have “direct contact” with the celebrity, functioning as “something closer to an authentic interactional encounter” (Ferris 2001, p. 26). Ferris (2001) divides the ways fans can meet celebrities into three categories: prestaged, fan staged, and unstaged. While others such as Stever (2016, pp. 111–112) have presented additional categories of interaction, one can see that these are merely providing layers of specificity that can be sorted under the umbrella of Ferris’s framework (e.g. Stever [2016, pp. 111–112] discusses charity events and competition prizes as two separate categories of interaction, when both can be understood through Ferris’s concept of the prestaged interaction). Ferris (2001, p. 33) notes that while fan–celebrity encounters contain “varying degrees of intent and mutuality”, they are almost all reliant on the fact “the fans seek out the celebrities; the celebrities do not seek out the fans”. There are a number of constraints that fans face when meeting celebrities due to the “highly stage-managed” (Hills 2015a, p. 466) nature of the events. Ferris (2001, p. 35) refers to the “regulations” fans must adhere to when meeting celebrities, noting “staff and security personnel are present at all times”. Interactions are also time limited, with fans often only being granted seconds in the celebrity’s presence, further restricting any potential for significant connection. Despite this, Stever (2016, p. 106) argues that there are cases in which fans “have real and positive relationships with their favorite celebrity, [which] are

reciprocated on some level by the celebrity”; however, the evidence she presents largely does not match this conclusion. Stever (2016) uses the term “friendly acquaintanceship” throughout her article to refer to the relationship between Josh Groban – the celebrity object of her research – and a select group of his fans. She explains her use of this term by stating, “In all but the rarest of cases, the word ‘friend’ would not apply as friendship presumes equitable interaction and access. But an acquaintance is known and recognized” (Stever 2016, p. 109). The accounts Stever presents relate to Groban recognising fans at various events, which is a stretch of the definition of acquaintance and does not consider “the fundamental asymmetry of knowledge ... [and] asymmetries of power ... usually favouring the star rather than the fan” (Ferris 2001, p. 28).

Despite the ever-increasing popularity of fan conventions and similar events offering the chance to meet one’s favourite celebrity, studies of face-to-face fan–celebrity interaction remain relatively uncommon. If para-social relationships are flagged by some as a negative, this is even more true for face-to-face interactions where a desire for such a meeting is often framed by scholars as “pathological”, tied to longstanding beliefs in such fans being “seen as suspect, possibly unbalanced, and threatening in a variety of ways” (Ferris 2001, p. 28). Researchers such as McCutcheon, Scott, et al. (2006), Spitzberg and Cupach (2008), and McCutcheon et al. (2016) focus on the potential of fans to stalk a celebrity of interest, despite Ferris (2007, p. 376) arguing such research “rarely reveal[s] strong relationships between these dismal personality traits and celebrity worship” and that these “hypotheses assume the worst”. Ferris (2007, p. 376) acknowledges her own contribution to the body of work on celebrity stalkers, noting her 2001 article tried “to distinguish the dangerous fans from the merely dedicated” and in doing so associated “fanship with the sensationalised social problem of celebrity stalking”. This research, then, contributes to the expansion of the body of knowledge regarding face-to-face fan–celebrity interaction. Rather than continuing themes from existing work focusing on the potential behavioural extremes of fans who seek celebrity interaction, the data collected for this project emphasises the voices of fans and their understanding of the role of meeting celebrities in their fandom participation practices. In applying the concept of attention capital as a potential motivator for fans who seek to engage with celebrity objects of fandom, we can reposition the desire as a normal part of how our social world is structured, while also strengthening the intersection of fandom and celebrity studies.

2.6 Community, attention, and social capital

As noted in Chapter 1, social capital is central to the functioning of fandom communities as inherently social spaces (D’Amato 2014; Hills 2002). The concept of social capital became a key focus for sociologists in the second half of the 20th century. As outlined by Field (2017), social capital has been conceptualised in three related, yet distinct, ways, with Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam each developing their own framework to explain the various ways social ties exist within society. While each of these conceptualisations is important in its own way, for the scope of this thesis, the following definition set forth by Bourdieu (1986, pp. 248–249) is most relevant:

Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital, a “credential” which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word.

Or, put in its simplest form, social capital refers to the benefits one can gain through group membership. The relationships one shares with other members of a social group – be that, for example, a club, a professional network, or a fandom community – provide opportunities that would be otherwise inaccessible to individuals. Bourdieu (1986, p. 250) refers to the “unceasing effort of sociability” required to maintain social capital, noting that individuals must “invest” in relationships “that are directly usable in the short or long term”. While on the surface this form of social capital may seem to be in opposition to the friendship-based networks that are frequently described as central to fandom communities, we can see these processes in action through the previously described gift economy and the strategic relationships developed to increase one’s chances of celebrity engagement.

However, it is also useful for us to look to Putnam’s (2000) concepts of “bridging” and “bonding” capital to gain a more rounded picture of the role of social capital within fandom spaces. Expanding on his own work on social capital and societal decline, to Putnam, bridging capital represents inclusion, while bonding reflects stronger ties and may be exclusive (Williams 2006, p. 597). Williams (2006, p. 597) also notes the relationship between bridging and bonding capital and Granovetter’s (1973) theory of “weak” and

“strong” ties. Granovetter (1973, p. 1368) likens weak and strong ties to the differences between acquaintances and friends but argues that “community organisation [is] severely inhibited” should a community only be comprised of strong ties (p. 1373). The application of bridging and bonding capital, or weak and strong ties, to fandom communities – especially when using a leisure framework – allows us to understand the different forms social connections can take. Not all relationships within fandom communities are friendships; however, little attention has been given to the ways these relationships are structured (Pearson 2010, p. 93).

It is also important for us to look to the overall formation of fandom communities as a structure in and of themselves. It is not groundbreaking to apply Anderson’s (2016) notion of “imagined community” to fandom spaces. As Morimoto and Chin (2017, p. 174) outline,

A central truism of English-language media fan studies is that modern fandoms are “imagined communities” fostered by technologies that enable geographically dispersed people to overcome time and distance in forging virtual communities of affect.

These communities of affect reflect Anderson’s (2016, p. 6) explanation of the imagined, in which he writes,

It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.

Just as we will never know everyone in our nation, so too will we never know the vast majority of individuals in our fandom communities. Additionally, as Peyron (2018, para. 3.7) argues, the process of fandom community names furthers this, serving “as to actualize and solidify potential social links around a shared passion”. Therefore, uniting under the brand of “Swifties” or the “*Supernatural* family” deepens the connection an individual feels to others who also identify with the name. Thus, while an “imagined community” framework is not novel, it remains a beneficial way to develop our understanding of the social structures of online fandom spaces.

The extent to which an individual engages with their fandom community as a source of identity varies, and as such it is helpful to also look at the concept of “wispy communities”

presented by Fine and van den Scott (2011, p. 1321) in which individuals participate in “worlds of action that are temporary, limited in time and space, and have the potential of being displaced by other more insistent identities”. Fine and van den Scott (2011, p. 1320) refer to these as a subset of imagined communities reflecting “an intersection of individuals, cultural identity, and leisure worlds”. While for many fans, fandom participation is significantly tied to their identity, for others, it reflects a “wispy identity exist[ing] in latent memory” (Fine & van den Scott 2011, p. 1321), drawn upon in key moments such as events or releases. Applying this wispy community framework allows us to develop a deeper understanding of the varying forms of participation and sociality within fandom spaces and the impact this has on feelings of belonging and connection to both the community and to the object of fandom.

To understand how the economy of attention functions within fandom communities, we need to look at both *actual* celebrity and the concept of “celebrity” fans, or those who hold significant status within a particular fandom space. MacDonald (1998) presented what remains one of the only in-depth explorations of fandom hierarchies. She states that fan hierarchies “exist along multiple dimensions”, breaking down these dimensions into five separate categories: “knowledge, level of fandom, access to ‘inside’ knowledge, leaders, and control of venue” (MacDonald 1998, p. 136). The more capital one holds in one or more of these categories, the higher their status and position within the particular hierarchy. Additionally, MacDonald (1998, p. 138) explains, “Fans may occupy multiple positions simultaneously, and thus fans’ positions within fandom are determined by their position within all possible hierarchies”. That is, a fan who may possess significant amounts of knowledge regarding the object of fandom as well as being in contact with individuals related to its production will hold a higher overall position in the fandom when compared to an individual who may only possess the background knowledge. These hierarchies are, of course, dependent on the participation of the individual in wider fandom communities. The knowledge one may possess, or the contacts one may have, is irrelevant unless the individual can be compared to others in a social situation. Building on Bourdieu, Hills (2002, p. 57) presents the concept of “fan social capital” to describe “the network of fan friends ... that a fan possesses, *as well as* their access to media producers and professional personnel linked with the object of fandom”, thus forming a key way fandom social hierarchies are developed. However, while he states such social capital “must also be closely investigated in future analyses” (Hills 2002, p. 57), it is only really Chin (2018) who has taken him up on this call

to action. Thus, there is significant room to further develop our understanding of social capital within fandom communities.

The role of status within fandom communities creates what is often referred to as “Big Name Fans”, or BNFs (Hills 2006; Mullens 2005). Through the nature of their popularity, these fans possess significant attention capital, something easily visible on social media. Van Krieken (2019b, pp. 5–6) refers to the “seductive power of social media” in which attention is “an essential component” of the platforms’ existences. The visibility of attention capital on social media via prominently displayed followers, likes, and shares on profiles and individual posts “reflect[s] ... [and] increase[s] ... attention capital” (van Krieken 2019b, p. 5). This centrality of attention capital on social media serves as a significant factor in the formation of hierarchies within online fandom communities (Chin 2018, p. 244; Galuszka 2015, p. 29; Kehrberg 2015; Marwick & boyd 2011a; Zubernis & Larsen 2018, p. 156). Before newer fans learn anything about the individuals themselves, they are likely to follow fans who have a high number of followers as this follower count is seen as a form of authentication of their place within the fandom. The quest for individual status means that other fans desire attention from these BNFs, with Franck (2019, p. 13) noting that “one may work one’s way up in the economy of attention just by persistently keeping at the heels of those who are better off, just by being constantly seen in their vicinity”.

As MacDonald (1998) highlights, hierarchies are not just developed on the basis of knowledge, and it is important to also layer the forms of status obtained via celebrity engagement (Zubernis & Larsen 2018, p. 156) and what Booth (2016, p. 107) describes as the “class-based hierarchies” that are encouraged via industry-approved consumption practices. Due to the lack of attention given to the hierarchies present within fandom communities, the empirical data collection undertaken by this project provides a valuable contribution to our understanding of how these communities are structured and the impact of various forms of participation on these structures. However, it is also important to consider the inherent differences between the various types of fandom communities, which to date has not been the subject of any significant research. Through the manual comparison of literature on fans across fan studies, the sociology of sport, and cultural studies, it is clear that the ways fans of a television series participate and gain status within their community frequently differ from the participation habits of fans of, for example, a musician or a sports team. It is important that we do not fall into the trap of painting the participatory behaviours of all fandom

communities with the same brush because we are failing to consider those outside our own disciplinary interests. While certain modes of participation are considered norms for a solid reason, we cannot simply assume that these are always the dominant ways fans involve themselves within their communities. What my research aims to contribute, then, is an examination of the ways fans from different forms of fandom community participate within these communities and an investigation of the forms of participation most highly valued and rewarded with attention and status.

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the key theoretical frames and literature relevant to this project. In identifying key gaps – namely, the integration of fan and celebrity studies; the investigation of economic consumption, especially as it pertains to claims of exploitation; the application of a leisure-based approach to the study of fandom; and the potential benefits of introducing the economy of attention to the study of fan–celebrity engagement and intra-fandom social structures – this chapter positioned itself within the field and provided a base on which key arguments are developed throughout the data chapters to come. First, however, the following chapter addresses the methodological approach applied in this research.

Chapter 3. Methodology

As outlined in Chapter 1, this project uses a descriptive, exploratory multiple-case study approach (Forrest-Lawrence 2019) in which the Taylor Swift and *Supernatural* fandoms are used to explore the “common characteristics” and “situational uniqueness” found within the wider phenomenon of commodified fandom communities (Stake 2006, pp. ix–x).

Additionally, this research is grounded in a symbolic interactionist approach (Blumer 1986). Blumer (1986, p. 48) argues the core of such an approach lies in its “*direct* examination of the actual social empirical world” in which for the researcher to “understand the action of people it is necessary for him to see their objects as they see them” (p. 51). Rather than relying on textual analysis or purely statistical examination, to provide an empirical exploration of the phenomena of interest, we must look to

descriptive accounts from the actors of how they see the objects, how they have acted towards the objects in a variety of different situations, and how they refer to the objects in their conversations with members of their own group. (Blumer 1986, pp. 50–51)

Fandom communities can be clearly understood as “social worlds” in which individuals’ “collaborative activity ties them into a set of direct relations” where meaning is formed (Gilmore 1990, p. 149), and as such, an interactionist approach allows for an in-depth exploration of these phenomena.

This chapter is divided into five sections. First, an outline of the dual case study approach is provided, including an overview of the two chosen case studies, as well as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on each. Then, the methodological framework of the project is outlined, exploring the mixed-methodological approach, which used anonymous surveys and semistructured interviews. An overview of participant recruitment and interview participant profiles are also included. Third, this chapter looks at the ethical considerations of the project, including insider research, emotional research, the role of ethics in fan studies, and the ethics of research on social media. Next, a brief overview of methodological limitations is given, before finally, the research questions are restated to prepare for the three data chapters to come.

3.1 A dual case study approach

3.1.1 “There was a Taylor Swift song on the bus that I hopped to the motel, and uh, I liked it, Sam. I liked it a lot”⁴: a tale of two fandoms

In his discussion of multiple case study research, Stake (2006, p. 1) emphasises that cases chosen for a project must be “similar in some ways”. This relates to the first question invariably asked when someone finds out that this thesis uses both Taylor Swift and *Supernatural* as case studies is “Why? What do they have in common?” A television series about two monster-hunting brothers and a pop star known for her love songs may not seem the closest of companions at first glance; however, while the objects themselves may exist in very different worlds, their fandoms share a number of similarities.

The first of these similarities is that I, personally, identify as a fan of both Taylor Swift and *Supernatural*. While this personal connection is explored in significantly more depth in Section 3.4.1 of this chapter, it is important to note from the outset, as its presence was inescapable throughout the research process. However, this relationship is far from the only similarity between the two fandoms.

Supernatural premiered in September 2005, while Swift released her first album in 2006. Aside from a brief disappearance from public life in 2016, her career has remained active with a lively fan community since that time, just as *Supernatural* has – until late 2020 – produced consistent content over the same period. While many fandoms remain active – and fans remain active within said fandoms – for decades (Driessen & Jones 2016; Harrington & Bielby 2010a, 2010b, 2018; Hills 2018c; Petersen 2018), outside of rare series such as *Doctor Who* and *Star Trek* (which have run for decades but featured breaks at various times), it is uncommon for an object of fandom itself to continuously release content over such a significant period of time.

Both Taylor Swift and *Supernatural* also have extremely active online fan communities. While almost every fandom can be found in specific pockets of the internet (Burt 2020; Fansided Editors n.d.; Horovitz 2020), the social media presence of both *Supernatural* fans and Swifties is significant enough to cross into mainstream awareness (Billboard Staff 2020;

⁴ Ladoucer, Kripke & Glass 2015

Carras 2020; Fahey 2020; Romano 2020; Seemayer 2020). The active nature of these fanbases appealed to my research as visibility allows observability, as well as the increased likelihood of research participants and relevant data being obtained.

Fans of *Supernatural* and Taylor Swift additionally share a passion for wanting to meet the objects of their fandom. While this is arguably true of all fans, the potential for this to actually occur within these two fandoms is particularly notable. While *Supernatural* is just one of the dozens of cult films and television series that populate the contemporary fan convention landscape, the sheer scale of its presence within the scene is staggering. Not only are there over a dozen events each year where fans can meet the actors, but the main cast is also almost always in attendance. For example, at the time of writing in June 2023, the website “RosterCon” shows Jensen Ackles and Misha Collins scheduled to attend twenty conventions between January 2023 and August 2024 (RosterCon n.d.c; f), with Jared Padalecki also scheduled at seventeen of these (RosterCon n.d.b). While series such as *Doctor Who* have a similar number of dedicated events to *Supernatural*, it is the access to the core members of the cast at these events which differs. While every fan will of course have their preferred celebrity guests, of the last four “Doctors”, Jodie Whittaker is scheduled to attend five conventions (RosterCon n.d.d), Matt Smith (RosterCon n.d.e) and David Tennant (RosterCon n.d.a) are both listed as attending three, and Peter Capaldi (RosterCon n.d.g) has no fan conventions on his schedule across the same period. There is an increased opportunity for fans of *Supernatural* to meet key cast members than is found in many similar fandom communities, and fans are willing to spend thousands of dollars to engage in these brief interactions (Creation Entertainment, n.d.). In comparison to actors, musicians offer their fans far fewer opportunities to partake in meet and greets. When these do occur, they are either extremely expensive, limited to a small number of promotional prizes, or are reliant upon sponsorship connections. Thus, Taylor Swift presenting fans with the illusion of wide access via her free, handpicked “secret sessions” and backstage meet and greets sets her apart from her contemporaries (Johnson 2018; Silman 2014; UMusic n.d.). The *actual* likelihood of a fan meeting Swift may only have minutely increased, but fans see the potential and, in many cases, transform their approach to fandom participation. As explored throughout the data chapters, the pictures and stories from these interactions are frequently shared on social media, creating a form of status among other fans (Chin 2018; Ferris 2001). The importance of this (perceived) access to and engagement with either Swift or the cast of *Supernatural* by their fans played a key role in the selection of these fandoms as case studies. The ways fans

negotiate their participation around these forms of commodified celebrity interaction is something that is yet to be explored in any significant way, and as such, this research aims to develop a deeper understanding of these cross-fandom behaviours. Using two case studies rather than the single case study project that remains the norm in fan studies (Booth & Williams 2021, p. 4; Herzog 2012, para. 2.10) allows for the exploration of “the nature of the difference between the one and the other and what this might tell us” (Thomas 2011, p. 517). Examining a fandom with both a traditional text-based object and one without allows us to obtain a broad picture of the relationship between fans, celebrity, and consumption. While two fandoms with the same “type” of celebrity object may seem to be a more obvious choice, Ragin (1992, p. 1) notes, chosen case studies should be “similar enough and separate enough to permit treating them as comparable instances of the same general phenomenon”. The similarities highlighted throughout this section demonstrate how the fandoms for Taylor Swift and *Supernatural* can be easily compared when exploring the wider phenomenon of commodified fandom participation, while their distinct object form allows for contrast and exploratory depth to be obtained. When framing celebrity-centric fandom participation as a leisure pursuit, these two fandoms illustrate the varying ways fans structure and negotiate their participation practices. This allows us to develop a greater understanding of such affirmational engagement, something largely missing from the literature to date.

3.1.2 COVID-19: fandom in a pandemic

The first half of 2020 was meant to feature the long-awaited ending of *Supernatural*, as well as Lover Fest, the exclusive festival-style concerts planned by Taylor Swift. However, by January, there was news of a rapidly spreading virus, and by March, it had become clear that the world was entering an unprecedented crisis as COVID-19 (COVID) was declared a global pandemic.

While I was relatively lucky in that the lockdowns that occurred in an attempt to halt the spread of COVID had no direct impact on my research in the ways that it impacted the fieldwork, lab work, and general candidacies of many others working on their PhDs in 2020 (and beyond), there were unexpected developments within the worlds of my case studies. The data collection for this project occurred between April and October 2019, and as such, many of the results – especially quotes from the interviews – reflect a fandom space vastly different from that which now exists. Not only has the landscape of concerts and conventions so central to my case studies drastically changed, but the pandemic also brought significant

changes both to *Supernatural* as a show and to the discography and narrative of Taylor Swift. The following sections, therefore, outline the impacts of the pandemic on my case studies and resituates the project within this new world.

3.1.2.1 *Supernatural* S15: from fanon to canon ... and back to fanon again

After 14.5 years on air, *Supernatural* was set to conclude in May 2020 (Highfill 2019). However, when COVID hit, the final episodes of the series were yet to be filmed, meaning the highly anticipated end to the series was put on hold (Darwish 2020). The first 13 episodes of the 20-episode season aired on schedule, with the final of these episodes airing on 23 March 2020. An additional five episodes had been filmed before the shutdown, leaving just two episodes to film (Darwish 2020). Filming began again in mid-August (Highfill 2020a), with the final day of filming on 10 September (Highfill 2020b). The second batch of episodes began airing on 8 October, 2 days short of the 1-year anniversary of the start of Season 15 (Jacobs 2020).

Episode 18 of the 20-episode season featured something many fans had been waiting over a decade for: a proclamation of love from the angel Castiel to Dean Winchester (Radulovic 2020). The ship between the pair – dubbed “Destiel” – first became popular after Castiel’s introduction in Season 4 of *Supernatural* when he saved Dean from hell (Opie 2020). On the history of the ship, Robinson (2020, para. 13) states,

One of the biggest controversies in the show’s long history ... is how *Supernatural* teasingly emphasised the palpable chemistry between Ackles and Collins without formally engaging their characters in a romantic relationship.

This “teasing emphasis” has over the years led to accusations of queerbaiting from fans (Brennan 2018, 2019; McDermott 2018). Queerbaiting is described by Fathallah (2015, p. 491) as

a strategy by which writers and networks attempt to gain the attention of queer viewers via hints, jokes, gestures, and symbolism suggesting a queer relationship between two characters, and then emphatically denying and laughing off the possibility.

As the end of the series drew near, an actual relationship between Dean and Castiel was not on fans' radars (Opie 2020), and yet, as Episode 18 drew to a close, fans bore witness to a love confession ... followed by immediate death. This death was described by Radulovic (2020, para. 2) as "for real perma-perma death (resurrection happens so often on *Supernatural* that they need a super extra death)", thus fulfilling the "well-trod trope ... [of] bury your gays" (Robinson 2020, para. 15). Bury your gays is a "worn out cliché" where "confirmed queer characters are disproportionately more likely to die on-screen", with characters "often meet[ing] their unfortunate fates just after experiencing romantic fulfillment" (Bridges 2018, p. 122). Of the episode, Opie (2020, para. 12–13) states,

It's hard not to see Destiel's final moment as just an extension of the show's "no homo" approach to all-things queer ... Strained, lacklustre, and clichéd to the point of being offensive, this essentially one-sided confession is queer-baiting taken to its most disappointing extreme.

In this single episode, the trajectory of the *Supernatural* fandom changed forever. However, it was more than just Episode 18 that contributed to the upset of fans; significant disappointment continued after the finale aired on 19 November 2020 (Elvy 2020; Robinson 2020; Romano 2020). Showrunner Andrew Dabb claimed that COVID restrictions "didn't affect the core parts" of the final episodes (cited in Gelman 2020, para. 3); however, as Robinson (2020, para. 9) states, "It's tough not to view those final two episodes through the lens of a COVID-challenged shoot". Despite Castiel being killed off in Episode 18, it was expected by fans that he would return for the finale (Romano 2020). When fans viewed the final episode, however, Castiel was conspicuously absent, a fact that Robinson (2020, para. 16) describes as having "no logical excuse". Robinson (para. 18) continues, "COVID is the only reason I can see why Castiel wouldn't be standing next to Sam and Dean on that heavenly bridge in the end".

While an entire thesis could (and likely will) be written on the final three episodes of *Supernatural*, this is not that thesis. Rather, this explanation serves to reposition the feelings of the fandom in a world where the series is finished and finished in a way that may not have been the initial plan (Robinson 2020). As previously stated, the data collection for my project occurred over a year before the airing of the finale, and while fans were asked what their hopes were for the end of the series, the reality is something nobody could have foreseen.

Robinson (2020, para. 2) summarised it thusly: “Sam and Dean may have toppled God, but even the Winchester boys couldn’t overcome COVID-19”.

3.1.2.2 Taylor Swift: from *Lover* Fest to folklore ... to evermore

From the beginning of her career, Swift has released albums on a 2-year cycle. This cycle allowed for a multiple-month album lead-up and single releases, the actual release, and then a year of touring before beginning the cycle again (Cirisano 2017; Mansfield 2014; Warner 2012). Following this trend, after 6 months of speculation, countdowns, announcements, and single drops, Swift released her seventh studio album *Lover* on 23 August 2019 (Atkinson 2019; Bruner 2019b; Sheffield 2019). When planning this project, I deliberately structured my data collection around this cycle to capitalise on the anticipation in the lead-up to the album release. Additionally, this would have meant this data would largely retain its timeliness as my original submission plans would align with the release of her next album.

Just under a month after releasing *Lover*, Swift announced that instead of her regular worldwide concert tours, the aesthetic of the album was better suited to festival environments (Kaufman 2019). Swift was set to perform at festivals in nine countries between June and August 2020, with the tour culminating in *Lover* Fest, a two-city, four-show event in the United States (Kaufman 2019b). In the second half of 2019, Swift performed songs from *Lover* at six events as ongoing promotion for the album, becoming what would be the closest fans would get to a *Lover*-era concert. After the initial COVID outbreak, in early April 2020, Swift participated in the global Together at Home lockdown concert event. She performed “Soon you’ll get better”, a song from *Lover* written about her mother’s cancer battle, with lyrics that could also be applied to those sick during the pandemic (Lopez 2020). Shortly afterwards, on 17 April, Swift announced the cancellation of the tour, with plans to reschedule for 2021 (Sollosi 2020).

However, exactly 11 months after the release of *Lover* – 23 July 2020 – Swift shared a post to her social media accounts announcing that a brand-new album would be released the next day. In a statement, Swift (2020a) explained, “In isolation my imagination has run wild and this album is the result”. The album – *folklore* (the album name and song titles are stylised without capitals) – contained 16 tracks, with a bonus 17th track available on the eight deluxe physical editions Swift released (the deluxe version was later uploaded to streaming platforms). On 10 December 2020, Swift once again surprised the world by announcing a

second album release with the reveal of *evermore* (like *folklore*, *evermore* and the tracks it contains are stylised without capital letters). Less than 6 months after *folklore*, she shared that she was “elated” to release “*folklore*’s sister record” at midnight on 11 December (Swift 2020b). In subsequent tweets, Swift wrote she and the team behind *folklore* “couldn’t stop writing songs”, and despite previously treating “albums as one-off eras”, there was “something different with *folklore*”, which meant in completing it, she “felt less like [she] was departing and more like [she] was returning” (Swift 2020c).

Swift is known as an autobiographical songwriter, with her songs historically containing references to her real-life experiences and relationships. Swift has leaned into this throughout her career, with Théberge (2021, p. 3) describing her lyrics as “often appear[ing] to have been ripped from the pages of a teen’s diary (her own diary)”. This relatability is used by Swift to create the illusion of a personal relationship with her fans where she can be viewed not as a distant celebrity, but rather as one of them (Chittenden 2013; Kennedy 2014; Tilchen 2019). However, in releasing *evermore*, Swift stepped away from this, verbalising for the first time the “imaginary/not imaginary” stories being told as she “wandered deeper” into “escapism” (Swift 2020c), thus entering uncharted territory for both her presentation of self and her relationship to her fans.

3.2 A mixed-methodological approach to fan studies

As a field, fan studies is not known for its strong methodological approaches (Evans & Stasi 2014). Busse (2018, p. 10) notes that those within the field “draw from various disciplines ... and employ diverse methodologies, all of which affect how they can successfully yet conscientiously study and engage fandom”; however, as most individuals within fan studies come from media and cultural studies backgrounds, the primary research methods in the field are textual analysis and ethnography (Busse & Hellekson 2012, p. 49; Coker 2021, p. 179; Evans & Stasi 2014, p. 17; Waysdorf 2020). The assumption of familiarity with these methods means much work published in journals or presented at conferences will either very briefly touch on the methodological approach or not address it at all (Evans & Stasi 2014, p. 5). Click and Scott (2018, p. 7) emphasise the “relative dearth of information about the methods of fan studies”, and while this is slowly changing (the *Journal of Transformative Works and Cultures* published a special issue devoted to methodologies in 2020, and Paul Booth and Rebecca Williams released a collection on fan studies methods, research, and

ethics at the end of 2021), it is unlikely it will ever obtain the central role it has in other fields and disciplines. While not all who research fans use textual analysis (Bennett 2018; Gilbert 2021; Kington 2015; Popova 2020; Stenger 2021; Woo 2021), it is far less common to find methods that focus on the collection of primary data such as surveys, interviews, ethnographies, and focus groups than it is in other fields, especially those in the social sciences such as sociology.

It is not just fan studies, however, that has a limited focus on methodological approaches – its sister field celebrity studies also frequently glosses over empirical methods, rather analysing broad societal issues through the lens of celebrity culture (Turner 2010). As explained in Chapter 1, the study of media and celebrity fandom has been relatively untouched by sociology, despite the flourishing domain of the sociology of sport, a field that often addresses fandom and fan culture. Within the sociology of sport, a wide variety of methodologies are applied to the study of fans, including the mixed-methodological combination of interviews and surveys (Guest & Lujten 2018; Jones 1997; Kerr 2009). Thus, the relevance of this methodology has been demonstrated within the field, despite its lack of widespread application to the study of media and music fans.

Pearce (2012, p. 829) notes mixed-methodological approaches to empirical research have “held currency in sociology for decades”, with the use of multiple research methods normalised “far before the term mixed methods research was coined”. There is a significant body of work addressing the definitions and frameworks of mixed-methods research (Creswell et al. 2003; Johnson, Onwuegbuzie & Turner 2007); however, for the purposes of this work, the “simple, broad definition” provided by Salmons (2015, p. 524) suffices: “Mixed methods studies are those that include at least one qualitative and one quantitative method at some stage of the study”. Johnson, Onwuegbuzie and Turner (2007, pp. 123–124) define the different types of mixed-methods research, and within that framework, this project fits within “qualitative dominant mixed-methods research” (also symbolised as QUAL + quan). According to Johnson, Onwuegbuzie and Turner (2007, p. 124), qualitative dominant mixed-methods research is

the type of mixed methods research in which one relies on a qualitative, constructivist–poststructuralist–critical view of the research process, while concurrently recognising that the addition of quantitative data and approaches are likely to benefit most projects.

Data collection for this project occurred in two stages using two different research methods: online surveys and semistructured interviews. This combination of methods is one of the most popular in mixed-methodological studies (Bryman 2006, pp. 102–103), and allows for “research that is both big in scope and deep in meaning” (Salmons 2015, p. 524). In such research designs, starting with “the quantitative component is done with the goal of generalising and validating the dominant qualitative study” (Hesse-Biber, Rodriguez & Frost 2015, p. 11). This reflects what Greene, Caracelli and Graham (1989, p. 258) label a “complementary mixed-method study” in which the mixed methods “are used to measure overlapping but also different facets of a phenomenon, yielding an enriched, elaborated understanding”.

While pragmatism is arguably the most popular research paradigm for mixed-methods researchers (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie & Turner 2007, p. 125), this research uses an interpretivist lens rooted in symbolic interactionism (Crotty 1998, pp. 72–78). Such a lens is central to this project as it allows for the exploration of fandom communities as a microcosm of our larger social world with their own rules, norms, and social truths, while emphasising the voices and experiences of the fans themselves.

3.2.1 Surveys

While a central aim of this research is to emphasise the voice of the fan – something that arguably necessitates a purely qualitative methodology (Booth & Kelly 2013, pp. 57–58) – the overall focus on the role of economic capital within fandom communities meant the addition of anonymous online surveys allowed for the collection of key data from the broadest possible range of participants (Bennett 2018, p. 36). Relying solely on semistructured interviews would restrict the sample and conclusions able to be made, and while results from purposively sampled surveys are not generalisable on a population level, a larger number of respondents creates greater possibility for depth of findings and analysis.

Despite Bennett (2018, p. 36) stating there is a “wealth of studies” using survey data within the fan studies field, the reality is that such works are a mere drop in the fan studies ocean (Bennett references just six in her chapter). Because of this, there is little published quantitative data on non-sports fandom trends and participation, with a notable exception being Kington’s (2015) mixed-methodological study of fan convention attendance. Kington’s work is also relatively unique in that it focuses on demographic data – including income –

something many published surveys either do not ask or do not include in publication. The importance of conducting a survey within this project is therefore evident, especially as we bring a sociological lens to fan studies.

Using initial research questions as a guide, a single set of survey questions were created and then duplicated so that changes could be made to make references specific to each case study (see Appendix A for a complete list of survey questions). These surveys were hosted on Qualtrics, which is also where primary data analysis took place. Each survey was 53 questions long, with 15 of these questions relating to demographics. The remaining questions were a mix of yes/no and multiple choice (35 questions), ranking on a scale of 1 to 10 (two questions), and a single open-text question. Additionally, four of the multiple-choice questions allowed respondents to select “other” and write in their own answers.

3.2.1.1 Survey analysis

An initial analysis of the survey data took place at the end of the collection period (April–July 2019) using the statistical tools built into the Qualtrics platform (versions 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022). This included both descriptive results for all questions and relational analysis between sets of questions (often with demographic data as a variable). Once familiarity with the data was established, further relational analysis was undertaken using both Qualtrics (2019, 2020, 2021, 2022), SPSS (version 26), and Microsoft Excel (2016) to prepare crosstabs and graphs. In certain circumstances, basic statistical significance testing was undertaken; however, due to the primarily qualitative nature of this project, further advanced statistical analysis was not required.

As this research is interested in the role of economic capital on fandom participation, key questions asked survey respondents to provide their personal and household incomes. For ease of completion, participants were asked to identify and respond using their home currency, and thus for analysis to occur, it was then necessary to convert these to a single currency. Due to a majority of participants – as well as the two objects of fandom themselves – being from the United States, all incomes were converted to \$USD. A historical currency rate tracker was used to find the average conversion rate for the 3-month period of data collection, with the converted currencies then manually applied to each response. This conversion process was applied to four questions in total: personal income, household income, average yearly spend, and amount willing to spend. While this process does not

claim 100% accuracy, the general stability of the currency rates between USD and the main currencies converted (AUD, CAD, GBP, NZD, EURO), as well as the use of ranges rather than specific amounts within the provided answers, means it was deemed sufficient for the purposes of this exploratory project.

The single open-text question – asking participants what they believed would make someone the “most dedicated” fan – necessitated qualitative analysis. Responses were uploaded into NVivo (version 12) and manually coded, with 25 codes emerging from the *Supernatural* survey, and 28 from the Taylor Swift survey (a complete list of codes are found in Appendix B).

3.2.2 Interviews

While the specifics of interview sampling and recruitment are detailed in Section 3.4.3 of this chapter, it is also noted here that interview participants were recruited from the pool of those who had successfully completed the online survey. Survey participants were able to register their interest in being contacted for the second stage of the research project, and after the close of the surveys in July 2019, a period of recruitment in which volunteers were contacted took place. Following this period, the semistructured interviews took place over a period of approximately 6 weeks in July to September 2019.

As with the surveys, a single interview schedule was initially developed, before making the changes necessary for specificity to each case study (see Appendix C). The interview schedule was largely based on the themes of the survey, reflecting the key aspects of the research questions. While the broad structure of each interview followed the schedule, emphasis was given to fluidity of the conversation and allowing attention to be given to each response before following up with the next question, which aimed to have a thematic connection. Of the 13 interviews, 12 were conducted via Zoom and recorded using the inbuilt feature, and the 13th interview was conducted in person and recorded using the voice memo iPhone app.

3.2.2.1 Interview analysis

Interviews were initially transcribed using automated transcription service “Temi” (version 2020); however, each transcript was then manually checked for accuracy. After interviews

were transcribed, the transcripts were uploaded into NVivo (version 12) for coding. Rather than using the automatic coding functions of the program, a primarily inductive – but blended – coding method (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard 2019, p. 264) was used to develop initial codes by hand as they appeared within the transcripts. While there was no official set of codes to use before beginning the coding process, broad themes were anticipated to be present due to the nature of the research design. As initial research questions and themes underpinned the development of the interview guide and survey questions, it was expected that these themes would appear within the interview transcripts, eventually becoming codes. Thus, rather than being purely inductive or deductive, this coding method “allowed structure and theoretical relevance from the start, while still enabling a closer inductive exploration” as the coding process continued (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard 2019, p. 264).

Transcripts were read question by question, and the overarching theme – or themes – of the participant responses served as the basis for code creation. A descriptive coding (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard 2019, pp. 264–266) method was used in which codes simply referred to the broad concept being discussed (e.g. “money”, “concerts”). Each response within each transcript was coded, with the codebook growing as each interview was analysed. At the conclusion of this first layer of coding, 19 codes had been identified within the Taylor Swift transcripts, and 11 identified within the *Supernatural* transcripts (see Appendix D).

Once this first layer of coding had been completed, a document was created in which codes served as chapter headings with coded quotes from the transcripts pasted underneath. Also included in these documents were survey responses sharing the theme of the code (e.g. “money” included responses to survey questions asking about income and fandom spend; “participation” included data on sites and levels of participation). These documents were then printed into bound documents for further analysis, conducted by hand. The first version of the *Supernatural* document was 176 pages long, and the first Taylor Swift version was 293 pages. However, in doing this, the many double – or triple – categorisations became evident. There was then a need to decide which of the codes each quote was best suited to or whether certain codes were superfluous – such as separate categories for “online” and “social media”. Many quotes included in “participation” were also found in the more specific “online” or “dedication”, and many in “dedication” were also found in “money”. This involved a process of re-analysing the transcripts with the codes and research questions in mind, determining which code was most applicable with regard to the larger story emerging within the data. This

analysis occurred on two levels: each transcript was read in its original form, and each section of the bound code document was read within the context of that code, with notes made as to whether that code referred to the nuances of the quote or whether it was merely a descriptive category the quote matched on a broad scale. Negative cases were also identified during this process; however, this was expected due to the exploratory nature of the research and would thus form part of the findings as a whole. As this project was primarily concerned with broadly exploring phenomena that had not received significant previous attention, it was determined that codes with greater specificity were not required as the research questions aimed to identify broad trends within the data (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard 2019, pp. 265–266).

Once coding had been completed, the data was returned to for continued immersion (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard 2019, pp. 265–266). A process of colour coding took place, identifying specific quotes with particular depth and relevance. At this stage, the two sets of codes were also analysed on a side-by-side basis to discover quotes that were either similar or conflicting between the two case studies. This process continued as the analysis was integrated into written chapters (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard 2019, pp. 265–266).

3.3 Research participants

3.3.1 Recruitment

As a sequential mixed-methods project, recruitment for this research took part in two stages. Research participants were initially recruited via a process of purposive sampling on social media platforms (Humphreys 2020, pp. 87–89). As the participants sought for this research were members of one of two fandom communities, this was the key criterion for requirement. No official screening was undertaken; rather, self-identification was deemed sufficient as fandom itself is a process of self-identification rather than a gatekept community. While not a compulsory criterion for recruitment, participants were also encouraged to be active participants within their fan communities on social media. Participants were required to be at least 18 years of age to meet ethical guidelines regarding research involving children (National Health and Medical Research Council 2018, Section 4.2). While this research would not have posed any significant risk to those under the age of 18, restricting participants by this age limit ensured ethical standards were being met. Recruitment was designed to occur through the social media platforms where potential participants were active

(Humphreys 2020, pp. 87–89). This method of recruitment has grown in popularity alongside the rise in popularity of social media itself (Gelinias et al. 2017; Hokke et al. 2020; Humphreys 2020; Gelinias, 2017). Section 3.1.13 of the National Statement (National Health and Medical Research Council 2018) outlines, “The recruitment strategy for a project should be relevant to the research ... topic/subject matter, the potential participants and the context”, and therefore, targeting individuals who participate in online fandom through the locations of participation was the obvious method to choose.

Posts were created on Twitter with key information about the study and links to the survey, as well as encouragement for individuals to retweet the post onto their own timelines in a form of snowball sampling (Humphreys 2020, pp. 89–91). Posts were also shared on Tumblr, Reddit, and in fandom-related Facebook groups. These Facebook groups were the only “closed” spaces where recruitment occurred in that individuals were required to be “approved” to gain access and the ability to post and comment. The moderators of each group were messaged through the Facebook Messenger system to explain the research project and gain permission to share the call for participants within the groups. Once permission had been given, Facebook posts were created within the groups with the explanatory image and links to the survey provided.

The calls for recruitment were shared at varying times throughout the recruitment period, which lasted 3 months from April to July 2019. The number of times the call for participants was shared was platform dependent, with each social media site having different regulations and expectations regarding the sharing of such posts. The call was therefore posted once per Facebook group, once on Reddit, and numerous times across the recruitment period on Twitter and Tumblr due to their nature as open spaces rather than closed groups.

As the initial recruitment was for survey participation, no direct contact was required; however, individuals were able to respond on each social media platform should they wish to do so. Additionally, as the surveys aimed to reach as many potential participants as possible, no cap was set, with individuals encouraged to share the calls for participation among their own fandom circles.

Further discussion of the ethics of social media recruitment occurs in Section 3.4.3.2.1 of this chapter.

3.3.2 Survey participants

Over the initial recruitment period, 536 individuals began the *Supernatural* survey, with 301 submitting completed responses (56.2% completion rate). A total of 561 individuals began the Taylor Swift survey, and 282 submitted completed responses (50.3% completion rate). This was a total of 1,097 surveys started, with 583 completed, for a completion rate of 53.1%.

Survey participation was completely anonymous, with participants not required to provide any identifiable information. Demographic data was collected from each of the survey participants to gain an understanding of their overall identity. This data was not intended to be representative of the entire population of the fan communities but rather to allow for initial exploration of the themes.

An overwhelming majority of participants from both fandoms identified as female. There were significantly more male participants in the Taylor Swift survey than the *Supernatural* survey, with 10.3% (n=29) of respondents identifying with this option. The potential gender bias from the surveys is discussed in Section 3.5.4 of this chapter.

When it came to age, *Supernatural* participants were reasonably evenly distributed, with each category having between 16.3% and 25.2% of the whole. In contrast, Taylor Swift fans skewed significantly younger, with 57.3% (n=162) of participants aged from 18 to 24 years and just 0.7% (n=2) in both the 35 to 39 and 40+ categories.

Responses to a question on marital status showed that more than half the participants in each survey indicated that they were single. A total of 28.6% (n=86) of *Supernatural* respondents stated they were married, and 6% (n=18) stated they were divorced in comparison to 11.4% (n=32) and 1.8% (n=5) of Taylor Swift fans, respectively.

Participants were also asked to share the highest level of education they had obtained. Most respondents indicated they had a university qualification, with 55.1% (n=166) of *Supernatural* survey participants and 63.7% (n=180) of Taylor Swift participants sharing they held either undergraduate, master's, or doctorate degrees.

Participants were asked to share both their nationality and their country of residence throughout the survey. As discussed in Section 3.5.3 of this chapter, issues were faced in providing individuals the option to write their nationalities, with 16% (n=45) of Taylor Swift

respondents and 12.6% (n=38) of *Supernatural* respondents entering their race or ethnicity. As such, data from country of residence is used to discuss the location of individuals within the project. More than half the participants in each survey were from the United States, with the four next most common countries being Australia, Canada, New Zealand, England, and Germany. Taylor Swift participants were spread across a total of 24 countries, with *Supernatural* participants spread across 31.

While not a rule, most responses from the Taylor Swift fandom came from single, university-educated female participants under the age of 30, while participants from the *Supernatural* fandom were also mostly single, university-educated female participants but across a much wider age range.

3.3.3 Interview participants

At the end of the survey, participants were given the option to register their interest in participating in the interview portion of the research. This reflects what Onwuegbuzie and Collins (2007, p. 292) refer to as a “nested” sampling design, where “sample members selected for one phase of the study represent a subset of those ... [from] the other facet of the investigation”. Clicking a provided link opened a separate survey document, allowing original survey data to remain anonymised. The second survey allowed participants to register their names and email addresses, consenting to be contacted to organise face-to-face interviews.

More than double the number of participants in the *Supernatural* survey volunteered to participate in the interview portion of the project in comparison to participants in the Taylor Swift survey. Sixty *Supernatural* participants – or 19.9% of survey respondents – registered their interest in the interviews, compared to 26 Taylor Swift participants (9.2% of survey respondents). Due to the disparity in responses received between the two case studies, only half those from the *Supernatural* cohort were contacted. The 60 responses were jumbled, and 30 were randomly selected to be emailed. The decision to do this was made to balance the responses from each fandom so that there was not an overrepresentation from the *Supernatural* cohort while still allowing for as many participants as possible to take part. There is ongoing debate among qualitative researchers as to whether one must achieve “saturation” in sample sizes (and indeed what is meant “saturation” itself; Mason 2010; Trotter 2012). Crouch and McKenzie (2006, p. 496) argue against this trend, stating “a small

number of respondents ... is the way in which analytic, inductive, exploratory studies are *best* done". Thus, while 13 interviews were completed (n=7 Taylor Swift fans; n=6 *Supernatural* fans), which is below the number often recommended in purely qualitative studies (Mason 2010), the fact that the interview data is combined with the data obtained through surveys (n=583) and does not claim to be generalisable on a population level means it remained a sufficient sample to address the exploratory aims of this project.

Respondents were sent a generic email, outlining why they were being contacted and inviting them to confirm their interest in interview participation. If a response was received, a time to conduct the interview was arranged, usually 1 to 2 weeks after the initial email due to the negotiation of time zones. All but one interview were conducted via Zoom, with the remaining interview taking place on the University of Sydney campus as the participant also attended the university.

To maintain anonymity, pseudonyms are provided for each interview participant. These pseudonyms were chosen based on characters and references in each of the case studies. For *Supernatural*, participants were named after female characters from the series. For the Taylor Swift fandom, names were chosen from those mentioned in her songs. Names were assigned randomly, except for James, the sole male participant in the interviews.

3.3.4 Participant profiles

Supernatural

Jody, Donna, Ellen, Jo, Mary, and Charlie range in age from their late twenties to their fifties. Three are single, and three are married, and all described themselves as White. Jody, Donna, Ellen, and Jo are all American, while Mary and Charlie are Australian.

Taylor Swift

Abigail, Betty, Cornelia, Dorothea, Inez, James, and Rebekah⁵ range in age from their early twenties to their mid-thirties. Four of the participants are single, one is divorced, one is in a

⁵ These names come from the following songs, in mentioned order: "Fifteen" (*Fearless*); "betty" (*folklore*), "Cornelia Street" (*Lover*), "dorothea" (*evermore*), "betty" (*folklore*), "betty" (*folklore*), "the last great american dynasty" (*folklore*).

de-facto relationship, and one is married. All described themselves as White. Abigail is Australian, while all others are American; however, Inez currently lives in New Zealand.

3.4 Ethics

3.4.1 Reflexivity, emotions, and studying our own fandoms

I am a fan of both *Supernatural* and Taylor Swift and have identified as belonging to both fandoms to varying degrees for over a decade. I fell in love with Taylor Swift's music as a 14-year-old and began watching *Supernatural* with my brother a few years later. Engaging with both has brought me friendships, amazing experiences, and helped shape my identity as I entered adulthood. While I shifted away from active participation in the fandom communities over time, my continued engagement with, and enjoyment of, the objects themselves means I remain straddling the borders of the fandoms. This position is not rare among those who study fans and fandom; it is generally presumed. Like many within the fan studies field, I identify as an "aca-fan", a position defined by Stein (2011, para. 3) as an academic "who stud[ies] a media object of which they are a fan". It is important to note, however, that my decision to study *Supernatural* and Taylor Swift was not solely because of my own fandom. While I was aware my insider position would be beneficial while undertaking this research, my exposure to both fandom worlds meant that I had observed phenomena of broad sociological interest outside my own personal attachments.

There have been numerous debates over the usefulness of the term aca-fan or "scholar fan" over the past two decades (Booth & Williams 2021; Hills 2012); however, it remains a valuable descriptor when identifying how we exist in relation to our research. It is important to note that most of the discourse surrounding the relevance of the term aca-fan exists within the context of work being undertaken without engaging with fans. Hills (2012, p. 19) – for example – argues that aca-fans breach the barrier of "too close",

not simply when [their work] celebrates fandom per se, but also when a scholar mediates his/her own area of fan experience without engaging with alternative or rival modes of fan activity.

A distinction, therefore, needs to be made between academic work that discusses fans and fan practices and that which engages with them. It is one thing for us to debate the extent to

which our academic writing should be “overly confessional” (Hills 2002, p. 12); however, it should be close to an expectation that research involving fan participants – rather than just discussing their textual creations – should intersect with our own fan identities and experiences. Jenkins (2012, p. xiii) notes, “Many contemporary fan scholars have complex and long-term relations with the fandoms they study”, a fact that exists in contrast to the “strict critical distance” (Cristofari & Guitton 2017, p. 716) researchers in other fields often ensure they have from their objects of focus. Booth and Williams (2021, p. 5) remind us that “there is no one-size-fits-all approach to negotiating one’s potential identity as an aca-fan” but continue that one must be willing to interrogate their approach before undertaking their research.

However, with this territory comes the need to “look at how [my] investment changes, shapes, and perhaps limits [my] insight” (Stein 2011, para. 3). While reflexivity is important in all forms of research, and even more so when one is undertaking insider qualitative research, as Stein (2011) emphasises, studying your own fandoms comes with its own set of methodological challenges due to the often-deep emotional connections shared with the fandom objects. This process is therefore an interesting exercise in reflexivity and navigating the opinions of others, as my own experiences as a fan are unable to be separated from my research into the fandom communities I’m investigating (Deller 2018, pp. 129–130). Hills (2012, p. 15) notes that aca-fans draw upon “presumed passion” but must “articulate with a detached, critical sensibility”, an argument echoed by Jensen (2014, p. 213) who states, “Those of us who study fans and fandom are part of an academic system that is still not particularly comfortable with emotional engagement or popular culture”. There have been times throughout the process of writing this thesis when I have been told by those within my home department that I am too close to my case studies. That my writing displayed too much personal passion, or that arguments made in early drafts too heavily reflected my identity as a *fan* rather than an academic. During presentations, I was questioned as to whether I was sure I should be studying something with which I clearly shared a significant emotional connection. Jensen (2014, p. 207) argues, when it comes to the study of fans and fandom, academia is “still struggling with a presumed reason/emotion divide”, and my experiences throughout the thesis writing process have reflected this, shaping my reflexive engagement with my work. The process of identity interrogation referenced by Booth and Williams (2021, p. 5) was therefore a constant presence throughout my research project as I navigated the changing

nature of my relationship to the objects of fandom, as well as the ongoing explanations and rationalisations required when explaining my research area to those outside the field.

In a broader discussion of qualitative insider research, Thurairajah (2019) uses a metaphor of “cloaking” and Superman’s secret identity to navigate the methodological challenges of this process. She describes researchers as having the ability to present themselves as “fully cloaked”, “strategically undressing”, or “naked” with their participants, reflecting the degree to which they reveal their shared identity. While this metaphor does not completely map onto the experience of aca-fan research, it is a helpful framework for undertaking processes of self-reflexivity. It is impossible for an aca-fan to undertake fully cloaked research, not least because it undermines the entire point of such research. However, just as it is impossible to be fully cloaked, one should also not reveal themselves as being completely naked. While Hellekson (cited in Brooker, Duffett & Hellekson 2018, p. 68) argues, “It is not at all crucial that scholars have a fannish relationship with the object and communities they are studying”; in undertaking my fan-centred – rather than text-centred – research, I knew that the “insider” status my fandom afforded me was an extremely important way to gain the trust of my participants. There is a long history of distrust between fans and academics, with the former cautious of their portrayal by the latter (Hills 2002, pp. 3–8; Larsen & Zubernis 2012, pp. 48–55), and revealing my own status as a fan was an important ethical and methodological decision. I was open with my participants about my own fandom experiences, and while not entirely “naked”, I also knew that I had to be open and honest with my participants. When conducting interviews, participants became more open and welcoming when I had my own answers to the questions I was asking them (e.g. “When did you become a fan?” [2008 for Taylor, around 2012 for *Supernatural*]; “What’s your favourite song?” [At the time of the interviews, “Out of the woods”, but now there’s a strong argument for champagne problems]; “Have you been to a convention?” [Yes, both as a fan and in an old job. And yes, I’ve met the boys]). By demonstrating my own “credentials”, the participants were able to trust the motives behind my interest in their fandom participation, and that I was not planning to portray them in a negative light (Dwyer & Buckle 2009, p. 58).

It is interesting to note, however, that engaging in increased reflexivity caused Kathy Larsen (2021) to significantly adjust her position on insider fandom research. Larsen – and her co-writer Lynn Zubernis – built a profile for themselves in fan studies on the back of their

passionate explorations of *Supernatural* fandom. In this solo-authored chapter, however, Larsen (2021, p. 90) argues,

Ultimately, assuming the acafan position either puts us in the position of privileging the fan side in ways that make us dismissive of methodologies that are not predicated on passionate identification with or defense of the fan position, or it eventually forces us to acknowledge that hybridity is an unattainable ideal.

I argue that this is a flawed conclusion that comes from the form of insider research Larsen was undertaking, in which she never truly separated her fan self from her academic self, rather integrating both into a complicated whole (Larsen 2021, p. 86). Larsen (2021, pp. 85–86) notes that she and Zubernis “revelled” in their “growing status in the fan community” that came from the access their work was giving them to those involved with the show, demonstrating the value of weighting given to the *fan* in aca-fan. While balancing the hybrid profile of aca-fandom is complicated, I refute Larsen’s claim that it is an “unattainable ideal”. One can research their own fandoms without being so immersed in the communities that they suffer shocks to their system when they are reminded of the actual task at hand. While Larsen (and – to a lesser extent – Zubernis) are engaging in reflexive analysis of their research, the key issue is that this reflexivity – for the most part – did not occur *during* the research. Rather, Larsen is reflecting on her research years after it took place and at a time where she no longer held the same relationship with *Supernatural* that she had at the time the research was undertaken. It is easy in hindsight to acknowledge potential issues in the way a project was approached; however, this is not the same as ensuring processes of reflexivity are present throughout the research itself. Larsen’s experience reflects part of the wider dearth of methodological rigour within fan studies (Booth & Williams 2021, pp. 2–3) in which a focus on concepts such as reflexivity has been frequently glossed over, especially by those from departments outside of sociology and anthropology. Larsen (2021, p. 89) ultimately argues, “We should dispense with the concept [aca-fandom] as a methodological framework”; however, as others such as Cristofari and Guitton (2017, p. 727) note, it can be viewed as “a positive and ethical way to engage with fan communities, and a particularly sound stance to investigate this segment of consumer demographics”.

Ultimately, rather than understanding research as an aca-fan as distinct from other forms of insider research, repositioning the approach within broader methodological conversations within sociology and anthropology – among other disciplines – can allow us to move past the

debates of *should* we study our own fandoms to *how can we* ethically and reflexively study our own fandoms in the manner of anyone studying a community to which they belong. While I still believe it is methodologically beneficial to describe myself – and my research – as belonging to the aca-fan tradition, it is in many ways reductive to be having ongoing debates within the fan studies field when so much literature on insider research exists in the broader academic world. I am an aca-fan, but I could just as easily describe myself as an “insider” or an “insighter” (Sharp 2021), or simply note that I am undertaking qualitative insider research. There is significant baggage tied to the aca-fan label, both within and outside the fan studies field; however, as discussed in the following section, our fannish identities are enmeshed with our roles as researchers and can benefit – rather than limit – us as we navigate our fields.

3.4.2 Emotional research

Holland (2007, p. 204) argues that “emotions play an important part in the field at a number of levels”, and yet the role of emotionality in qualitative research remains contentious. The issue of emotional engagement is one with which I have particularly grappled throughout this project as I navigate my relationship with my research objects. I am an emotional person. This is something I have come to accept about myself, especially when it comes to the things I love. What this means in practice, however, is that acknowledging and reflecting upon my emotional nature has become a vital aspect of my research process. As referenced by Jensen (2014), emotionality is not generally considered “acceptable” within academic research, and Holland (2007) discusses ongoing debates in the social sciences regarding the role of emotion in the research process. However, as Gray (2008, p. 936) notes, “Emotional reactions are part of human life and are, therefore, never absent from the research situation”, and this is especially true in a field such as fan studies where researchers are constantly cautioned to not let their passion overwhelm their scholarly rigour (Hansal & Gunderson 2020; Hills 2002).

When the place of emotion in research is discussed, a significant portion of the existing literature draws on the negative: how do researchers negotiate feelings of fear, anxiety, and guilt? A look through the bibliographies of works touching on these topics sees words such as “violence”, “abuse”, “danger”, and “risk” appear time and time again (Bloor, Fincham & Sampson 2010; Coles et al. 2014; Drozdowski & Dominey-Howes 2015; emerald & Carpenter 2015; Markowitz 2021). But what happens when the topics are lighter and the feelings are positive, or complicated? How should we reflect upon our research experiences

when emotions are present but not overpowering? Is acknowledging their presence sufficient?

In some of the only fan-studies-specific work on this subject, Hansal and Gunderson (2020, para. 1.3) “call for an [methodological] approach that includes reflections on the researchers’ emotions throughout the research process”. They emphasise a desire “to shift the perspective to how fannish attachment to the subject(s)-object(s) of study can, in fact, be a driving force, and a resource rather than an impediment to good research” (Hansal & Gunderson 2020, para. 1.4). My fannish attachment is what brought me to this research topic, which allowed me to observe the gap in both fan studies and the sociological literature. This attachment allowed me to understand more than just *what* was happening; my emotions allowed me to recognise the complex emotional navigations being undertaken by fans as they engaged within their fandom communities, thus driving the construction of this project. Even if I had wanted to, it would be detrimental to this research to try and conceal my fannish identity as it lies at the heart of the project itself.

When it comes to the data collection process, Burkitt (2012, p. 459) argues,

If ... we understand emotion as a motivating factor to reflexivity, colouring and infusing reflexivity itself, we can also put emotions back into the context of social interactions and relationships in which they arise. Emotion is not just something that we reflect on in a disengaged way, it is central to the way people in social relations relate to one another.

When interviewing my research participants, this centrality of shared emotion was evident, with participants frequently asking me to discuss my own memories and feelings. While they found my research topic interesting, they were less interested in me as an academic and more interested in my experiences as a fan. The interview process involved constantly walking to the edge of – and then pulling back from – a fannish conversation centred on emotional connection rather than a structured interview. And while a feature of semistructured interview methods is their conversational flow, ensuring that a level of formality and rigour remained was an ongoing conscious process. Throughout the interviews, I saw myself and my own experiences mirrored in the stories shared by my participants, and while exciting – and at times validating – I had to remind myself that these were not conversations between equals but rather exchanges where I held power. While the participants sought my opinions, I had to

prevent myself from providing too much detail for fear of it shaping their responses to my questions.

It was also necessary to navigate emotion outside my data collection. In contrast to the potential issues raised by Hills and Larsen, a key part of my reflexive process has been the necessity of acknowledging that this is not an unabashedly positive account of my fandom objects: rather, it critiques many of their most integral structures. Instead of my fannish background placing me in danger of being too positive about the communities I study, I have instead had to grapple with not coming across as too negative, as the forms of commodification and industry processes I explore often anger the side of me who wants all fans to have equal access to happiness within fandom spaces. Additionally, my relationship with both Swift and *Supernatural* has changed significantly throughout the time I have spent working on this research, although this is to be expected with any project that covers a span of years. There have been times where I have no longer wished to call myself a fan, contrasting with times where I listened to “All too well (ten minute version)” on repeat for days. These shifting waves of affect and connection reflect the fact that one is never *just* an aca-fan or that studying a subject you are emotionally connected to is a straightforward process to navigate. Rather, the fact I can be crying with excitement at a Taylor Swift concert at one stage of this research and frustrated with every part of her public existence at another demonstrates the need for constant reflexive check-ins to ensure these emotions do not unnecessarily colour the interpretation and analysis of the project data. Wanzo (2015, para. 4.1), however, notes that these contradictory emotions are not necessarily a negative, rather stating, “It is also the love – and at times disappointment – that can produce scholarship that really articulates the intellectual stakes of a work”.

Hansal and Gunderson (2020, para. 1.5) argue, “Actively drawing on (fan) researchers’ emotional entanglement in the field ultimately has the potential to enrich and deepen our academic engagements” and call for what they deem “a fannish methodology”. This “fannish methodology” avoids “denying existing emotional entanglements, [with] the dual position as fan and researcher ... both actively embraced and critically reflected upon” (Hansal & Gunderson 2020, para. 8.3). This research, then, embeds itself within a version of this fannish methodology in which my own fannish affect is always present. Rather than viewing it as dangerous, limiting, or nonacademic, I see my emotional connection as enhancing the way I approach the research. Locating this project within sociology perhaps assists in this

positioning, as it is a discipline more familiar with insider research than others such as media and communications or English, where many of the fears regarding aca-fan proximity originate. As Bondi (2016, p. 232) notes, *all* researchers are expected to have a degree of passion for their subjects in order to power the “‘drive’ needed to conduct research”, and thus, rather than overpowering my research, my identity and emotional connections to Taylor Swift and *Supernatural* have simply enhanced the journey.

3.4.3 Ethical considerations

The National Statement (National Health and Medical Research Council 2018, Section 3.1.13) outlines, “Each research project is shaped by the field to which the research question relates, the research question itself, the desired outcome, and the context in which it is conducted”. As, methodologically, this project can be considered “internet research” (Association of Internet Researchers [AoIR] 2012, p. 3), ethical considerations unique to both this form of research and the specific fan studies field are central to this project.

While internet research is an extremely broad area, AoIR’s (2012, p. 3) ethical guidelines outline internet research includes work that

uses the Internet to collect data or information, e.g., through online interviews, surveys ... [and/or] studies how people use and access the internet, e.g., through collecting and observing activities or participating on social network sites ... or other online environments or contexts.

Researchers are thus expected to refer to these guidelines as they develop an ethical strategy applicable to their own projects (Busse 2018, p. 10). However, just as fan studies is not overly engaged in methodological discussions, so too are ethical concerns often considered an afterthought (Click & Scott 2018, p. 7). While work addressing ethical issues facing fan studies researchers does exist (see, e.g., Bennett 2018; Busse 2018; Busse & Hellekson 2012; Dym & Fiesler 2020; Freund & Fielding 2013; Jensen 2016; Willard & Scott 2021), it often focuses on the ethics of working with fan-created texts, usually a completely separate set of considerations to those faced by researchers who focus on the experiences of the fans themselves. Of course, fans are not the only online community to be studied, and so a broad body of literature discussing various forms of ethical consideration was used to develop a broad framework to use for this project. These are discussed in the following sections.

3.4.3.1 Ethical approaches to fan studies

Jenkins (2012, p. xiii) presents a three-pronged ethical consideration for aca-fans:

the acknowledgement of our own personal stakes in the forms of popular culture we study, the accountability of the ethnographer to the communities we study, and the sense of membership or affiliation with the populations at the heart of our research.

Locating one's work within this framework allows us to claim our identity as a fan while also "acknowledg[ing] the personal bias ... and how that affects our choices and opinions" (Busse 2018, p. 14) as we undertake our research. Jenkins (2012, p. xiv) emphasises the ethical importance for aca-fans of "being transparent about one's positionality, and choosing a granularity of analysis appropriate to [their] actual knowledge and experience". Throughout my research, I had to consistently reflect on my own position and be conscious of not mirroring my own experiences within the spaces I was studying onto my participants. The importance of this is reflected by Dwyer and Buckle (2009, p. 55) who in discussing the relevance of discussing insider status in qualitative methodologies explain, "The personhood of the researcher, including her or his membership status in relation to those participating in the research, is an essential and ever-present aspect of the investigation". Jenkins (2012, p. xiii) explains,

Aca-fans recognise that what we put into print matters, that academic claims carry cultural weight and can have consequences for those depicted in our accounts; we need to assess the impact of those claims before putting them out into the world.

Here, Jenkins (2012, p. xiii) is describing an "ethical obligation to write in conversation with the communities we are studying" (an argument echoed by Brooker, Duffett & Hellekson 2018, p. 67). This concept of "writing in conversation" was present throughout my methodological choices – ensuring I was not just observing phenomena on social media but that I was speaking to as many fans as possible and collecting data in their own words. In my interviews, I aimed to "test [my] ideas with the larger community before publishing them" (Jenkins 2012, p. xiii), gauging through discussion the lived experiences of my participants as they related to the themes of my research.

Blumer (1986, p. 86) does not discuss situations in which researchers hold existing insider status in a community of interest; however, he does argue that symbolic interactionism

requires researchers to “take the role of the acting unit whose behaviour he is studying”. By stressing the dangers of “objective” observation, Blumer (1986, p. 86) instructs those studying communities to focus on the direct voices and interpretations of those who belong to the group rather than on any preconceived ideas. Aca-fandom, then, is inherently a symbolic interactionist approach so long as the researcher does not solely rely on their own experiences but rather amplifies those of their participants.

3.4.3.2 Ethics and social media

As this research focused on fans who self-identify as active in an online fandom, social media use was a central concept to be considered, both from an ethical standpoint and more broadly regarding actual data collection. The following sections provide an overview of the ethical considerations given to participant recruitment on social media and the use of social media data in observations and results.

3.4.3.2.1 Social media recruitment

As has been noted, targeted participants for this research were fans of Taylor Swift or the television series *Supernatural* who participated in online fandom spaces, spoke English, and were aged over 18 years. As is the case with many Australian universities (Hokke et al. 2020), The University of Sydney does not have a clear policy regarding research recruitment via social media. Hokke et al. (2020, p. 12) note social media “presents a multitude of opportunities to engage research participants” but note “empirical literature examining the ethical implications of recruiting, retaining, or tracing participants via SM is limited”. When considering the ethical framework of this project, justification for participant recruitment was drawn from universities who have made statements on the use of social media for this purpose, as well as the National Statement (National Health and Medical Research Council 2018, Section 3.1.13). Guidelines from Edith Cowan University describe social media as a helpful tool to recruit participants so long as full participant information statements and consent forms are shared with survey links (Gifkins & Suttor 2013). Additionally, Harvard University states, “Online recruitment advances are not inherently offensive, intrusive, or worrisome, any more so than being approached actively in person, via mailing, by telephone, etc., or passively by posters, flyers, and the like” (Harvard Catalyst 2017, p. 12). Just as individuals can ignore “passive” recruitment strategies such as posters calling for participants

on toilet doors or notice boards, so too could individuals scroll past the posts on their social media timelines.

Hokke et al. (2020, p. 23) raise the potential ethical issues of researchers using personal social media profiles as part of their recruitment strategy, which they note ethical review boards may perceive “due to concerns regarding coercion, sample representativeness, and the potential risks to researchers”. When posting on Twitter, Tumblr, and Reddit, I created new accounts specifically for purposes of participant recruitment. As an active Twitter user, I did also share tweets from the new research account on my personal account as I knew there were potential participants within my followers from my own participation in my target fandoms. Due to the nature of research into fan communities, sharing from my personal account where I participated within the fandoms increased my “insider” status and demonstrated that I was not an outsider looking to judge their participation behaviours.

Recruitment on Facebook was more complicated when it came to the use of personal accounts as there is no option to create secondary profiles. Therefore, when contacting page moderators and posting recruitment calls within the groups, I posted under my own personal account. To minimise any risks to my own privacy, I ensured I increased all privacy settings prior to doing this and did not accept any friend requests that came from these posts.

3.4.3.2.2 Using social media posts in research

The use of social media posts in research is a contentious issue (Ahmed, Bath & Demartini 2018; Beninger 2017; boyd 2010; Fiesler & Proferes 2018; Hibbin, Samuel & Derrick 2018; Williams, Burnap & Sloan 2017), as while posts such as those made on Twitter are technically “public”, users may not be aware “they are available for analysis and scrutiny” (Ahmed, Bath & Demartini 2018, p. 81). As noted by Fiesler and Proferes (2018, p. 1), researchers using Twitter data often “do not gain consent from each Twitter user whose tweet is collected, nor are those users typically given notice by the researcher”, a fact that Williams, Burnap and Sloan (2017, p. 1150) describe as “deeply problematic” due to the potential identifiability that “may expose users to harm”. Therefore, while Twitter provides researchers with “opportunities to study a range of topics in a naturally occurring setting” (Ahmed, Bath & Demartini 2018, p. 79), care must be taken to ensure ethical boundaries are created and maintained during data collection and discussion. This is an area familiar to those in fan studies as they are “often confronted with a model of semi-public spaces and expectations of

privacy that are unlike many other online public blogs and forums” (Busse 2018, p. 12), although this most often refers to the study of fan fiction and related phenomena where fans often operate under pseudonyms separate to their “real life” identities (Busse & Hellekson 2012; ; Dym & Fiesler 2020; Freund & Fielding 2013).

While my primary use of social media was to recruit participants, throughout the course of my data collection, there were frequently times where I wished to collect tweets I observed in my own personal social media use, such as during the final episodes of *Supernatural* or Swift’s surprise album drops and subsequent “Taylor’s version” album re-releases. When seeking ethics approval for my research, the following guidance was provided by the Low Risk Human Research Ethics Committee:

While the Twitter and Instagram posts that will be analysed are public, as the consent of the posters will apparently not be obtained, direct quotes or other identifying information should not be used in any publications. (Ethics Office, personal communication, 18 December 2018)

In edits submitted for final approval, I included the following, which was ultimately approved:

However, should pertinent tweets from verified users be discovered, such tweets will be identified and quoted as the nature and expectations of public, verified accounts differs from those of private individuals. (G. Carroll, personal communication, 12 February 2019)

Therefore, my data includes tweets from individuals such as Swift and her official team (“Taylor Nation”) but does not quote individual fans (except where they are shared by Taylor Nation after posting in the hopes of gaining public visibility). This is important because, as Fiesler and Proferes (2018, p. 2) note, there is “the potential for content quoted verbatim to be tied back to the person who created it”, even if anonymising measures are taken. While in general, the “harm” mentioned by Williams, Burnap and Sloan (2017, p. 1150) is a lot less relevant when considering tweets about fandom than the health contexts discussed by Ahmed, Bath and Demartini (2018) or Gelinis et al. (2017), there are still serious ethical considerations regarding private information and pseudonymous accounts. Dym and Fiesler (2020, para. 2.1.) explain, “Fandom falls into these categories [vulnerable communities or privacy-sensitive] due to not only the large number of LGBTQ participants but also different

stigmas associated with fandom”. Fans often have separate social media accounts solely for fandom participation; however – as is the case with my own Twitter account created to participate in NHL fandom – it is common practice to link to “public” accounts in your bio or to reveal information that is relatively easy to connect back to a real identity. While this may not be an issue for those you trust in a fandom space, Busse and Hellekson (2012, p. 39) recount instances where “relationships were negatively affected” by the connection of fandom pseudonyms to real-life identities, referring to such deliberate connections as “a cardinal fannish sin” and something that “ethical researchers must keep in mind”.

3.5 Limitations

Hindsight is 20:20, and thus, limitations and oversights in research methodology become evident over time (Mauthner & Doucet 2003, p. 418). Despite the best of intentions in research design, four key limitations regarding methodology have been identified. These are an overrepresentation of certain social media platforms within responses, limitations in the sampling of interview participants, missing questions on race and ethnicity within the survey, and a heavily skewed female response. These limitations are expanded in the following sections.

3.5.1 Limitation 1. Overrepresentation of certain platforms

Participant recruitment for this project occurred across four key online platforms: Twitter, Tumblr, Reddit, and Facebook. As there was no limit on the number of participants from each platform, inevitably, certain platforms were overrepresented in the results. The number of respondents from each platform is impossible to determine as individuals were not asked to provide this specific information (and many individuals participated evenly – or near evenly – across multiple platforms); however, from the popularity of engagement with various recruitment posts, it can be estimated that Twitter was a key source for *Supernatural* participants, and Reddit was a key source for Taylor Swift participants.

This bias in the rate of responses from users of particular platforms means results speak to pockets of users rather than a unified whole; however, as this was an exploratory project, a representative population sample had not been sought. It is therefore important to note the limitations present and the potential for response bias; however, the data collected remains applicable to lived experiences and speaks to broad trends within the fandoms. As is further

discussed in Chapter 7, future research would benefit from focusing on a single social media source to obtain greater depth of insight.

3.5.2 Limitation 2. Interview sampling

Building on this, a second identified limitation is the sampling method undertaken for the in-depth interviews. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the research took a mixed-methodological approach, with the anonymous survey first taking place, followed by semistructured interviews.

A choice was made to select interview participants from within the pool of survey respondents as this would allow a percentage of respondents to contribute to a deeper investigation of its themes. As the surveys were completely anonymous, the only method available to obtain interview participants was to ask for volunteers at the completion of the survey. This approach was limited as it relied on individuals indicating their interest at the time they completed the survey, with no way to re-engage the population later. Individuals were also not contacted as soon as they submitted their interest but rather at the completion of the survey collection period, a potential 3 months after initial survey submission may have occurred. As noted in the previous section, there was an overrepresentation of interest in interview participation from the *Supernatural* fandom, with 60 individuals (20%) expressing interest compared to 27 from the Taylor Swift participant pool (9.6%). Additionally, the nature of this sampling method meant the interview sample faced the same issues as the survey sample: that of the overrepresentation of participation sites.

As discussed in Section 3.3.3, while the scope of this project was limited to the time constraints of a PhD project, I was able to conduct a sufficient number of interviews. However, future research would benefit from a sampling structure allowing for a wider range of interview participants to be sourced, with a focus on specific sites of participation.

3.5.3 Limitation 3. Race and ethnicity

Discussions of the lack of attention given to race and ethnicity in the fan studies field have increased in recent years; however, there remains a limited number of voices discussing these issues, most of whom are people of colour themselves (De Kosnik & Carrington 2019; Pande 2018, 2020a, 2020b; Woo 2018b). Pande (2020a, p. 3) explains, “The simultaneous presence

and absence of race as an analytical category within fan studies as a discipline are glaring”, further noting, “A lack of attention to how (unmarked) whiteness underpins these strategies has led to some persistent blind spots regarding the operation of race/racism within these spaces” (2020b, para. 1.1). When constructing my surveys, I included questions asking for a range of demographic data that included nationality and country of residence but did not ask for race or ethnicity. This reflects Pande’s (2020a, p. 4) argument that “race is seen to be relevant to an analysis of fandom only when controversy entails overt and identifiable racist behaviour”.

Pande (2020a, p. 4) states that for most scholars within the field, there operates

a process of deferral. This occurs when scholars, usually at the beginnings of their presentations or essays, declare an absence or footnoting of race in their analysis. As a rhetorical strategy, this implies that discussing race as an analytical category, while important, does not intersect meaningfully with the aspects of identity they *do* discuss.

This deferral echoes Pillow’s (2003, p. 177) cautioning against using reflexivity as “a confessional act”. And yet, this is, to an extent, what I am doing here – noting the absence of race in the analysis of my data that is to come. While not an intentional omission, this very lack of intention reflects the inbuilt structures of Whiteness within the field (Pande 2020b, para. 2.1).

This omission is further notable when one considers the ongoing controversy and discourse around Whiteness and Taylor Swift (Cullen 2016; Dubrofsky 2016; Prins 2020; Russell Cook 2014; Sunderland 2016). Prins (2020, pp. 144–145) discusses “Swift’s investment in white femininity as a cultural identity” while emphasising this “whiteness is noticed by not just those critiquing it ... but also by an assembly of online trolls, white supremacists and white nationalists”. While Swift spoke out against this in 2019 calling white supremacy “repulsive” (O’Neil 2019), the connections between her radicalised identity and “star text” are inescapable (Prins 2020). Prins (2020, p. 144) notes that it “remains difficult to centre that whiteness” in academic research and explorations of Swift (and her fandom) and, like Pande (2020a, 2020b), draws on the invisibility of whiteness and its existence as “a nonrace” to explain the lack of emphasis on Swift’s identity as a white woman in these discussions.

While individuals were not specifically asked about their race or ethnicity, as noted in Section 3.3.2, 16% (n=45) of Taylor Swift survey respondents and 12.6% (n=38) of *Supernatural* survey respondents answered the question asking for their nationality with their race or ethnicity. A total of 10.6% (n=32) of those completing the *Supernatural* survey indicated their nationality was “white” or “Caucasian”, with an additional 2% (n=6) responding with another race or ethnicity such as “Aboriginal Australian”, “American Indian”, “Native American”, “Hispanic”, “Mexican American”, and “New Zealand Māori”. Of those who completed the Taylor Swift survey, 9.2% (n=26) responded that their nationality was “white” or “Caucasian”, while 6.7% (n=19) indicated they identified with another race or ethnicity including “Asian”, “Hispanic”, “Biracial”, “Latina”, “First Nations Canadian”, and “Cook Island Māori”. Additionally, of those who included a race or ethnicity in their response, 47% (or 3.2% [n=9] of total survey population) indicated they were “New Zealand European” or “Pakeha”, perhaps indicating a greater awareness of New Zealanders to the importance of their ethnic backgrounds.

Despite this unintentional data collection, this research project is not doing the work it should to reduce the inbuilt white-fandom-as-default present across the field. My own identity as a white woman undertaking research into familiar case studies means acknowledging my privilege in existing in a space where this nonrace is allowed to flourish. This privilege should have been acknowledged alongside an exploration of participant data that included information on race and ethnicity within the surveys rather than where it has ended up – here in a discussion of methodological limitations. Pillow (2003, p. 178) notes reflexivity “requires the researcher to be critically conscious through personal accounting of how the researcher’s self-location...influence[s] all stages of the research process”, and while Section 3.4.1 of this chapter addresses the notion of reflexivity as it pertains to issues of insider research, these four limitations – and especially this particular limitation of race and ethnicity – demonstrate a lack of sufficient reflexivity within the research design process. While Mauthner and Doucet (2003, p. 415) ask if there is “a limit to how reflexive we can be, and how far we can know and understand what shapes our research at the time of conducting it”, in the case of this project, the knowledge and understanding should have been in place prior to the start of the research process. While Pande (2020a, p. 3) notes there is “very little consensus around what concrete efforts the discipline needs to take”, the first step should be ensuring this demographic data is collected – especially by those of us who are not people of colour ourselves – and able to be analysed and included for future work to build upon.

3.5.4 Limitation 4. Gender

The gendered division of participants within this project heavily skews female. When asked to select their gender during the survey, 93.3% (n=281) of *Supernatural* survey respondents and 88.6% (n=250) of Taylor Swift survey respondents indicated that they identified as female, and to many researchers, this could be considered problematic.

The potential overemphasis of gendered fan practice is an ongoing issue within academic discussions of fans. Scott (2019, pp. 5–6) refers to a “structured secondariness for female fans and their preferred modes of engagement” within the wider media industry but also notes fan studies “has from its inception characterised fan culture as a female-dominated and potentially feminist space”. Discussing similar themes, Jenkins (2014, p. 101) argues “fan studies needs to look more closely at traditionally masculine forms of fan activity”, reflecting a divide between studies of traditionally “male” and “female” fan practices (Ford 2014, p. 56). These separations also exist within the sociology of sport, where female fans are often discussed as their own entity rather than a part of the fannish whole (Pfister & Pope 2018; Pope 2013, 2017; Toffoletti 2017; Toffoletti & Mewett 2012). Therefore, while the data presented within this project refers overwhelmingly to female fans, this is not a unique occurrence across studies of fandom and does not inherently reflect a limitation of the sample population.

As there is limited demographic data on fandom communities available, it is impossible to know the extent to which the responses within this project reflect the wider fandom populations; however, it is generally accepted that both fandom communities do heavily skew female (Busse 2013, p. 82; Larsen & Zubernis 2012). These results therefore represent not so much a bias towards female members of the fandom communities as a nonrepresentative sample of the population, but rather the reality of their overall gendered nature.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the methodological and ethical underpinnings of this research project, emphasising its mixed-methodological approach and the unique ethical considerations related to its position as insider research into online fan communities.

With the conclusion of these discussions, this thesis now transitions from the first into its second half: the results and discussion of the undertaken research.

3.6.1 Research questions

As outlined throughout the previous chapters, this thesis is an interdisciplinary sociological exploration of the commodification of fandom and its impact on the lived experiences of fans. To obtain insight into this phenomenon, four specific research questions were devised:

RQ1. How does a leisure framework change our understanding of celebrity fandom participation?

RQ2. How do fans negotiate participation within commodified fandom spaces?

RQ3. How does community function within commodified fandom spaces?

RQ4. What is the relationship between ideal consumers and intra-fandom hierarchies?

The choice of these questions initially stemmed from engagement with the literature discussed in Chapter 2, with the concepts then tightened throughout the data collection and analysis process. As exploratory research, these questions were additionally chosen for their potential to provide breadth of detail into an underexamined phenomenon. The next three chapters address each question in turn.

Chapter 4. Fandom and leisure

The term *fandom* is often used as a catch-all collective to describe any group of fans, regardless of their object of interest, community engagement, or forms of participation. However, there are significant differences in the conceptualisation and formation of individual fandom groups dependent upon the object of fandom and the relationship shared between it and its fans. A vast majority of the existing literature on fandoms focuses on transformative, textual communities; however, this is far from how most fans experience participation in their day-to-day lives (Duffett 2014b, 2015; Hassan 2014). Despite now being in the fourth decade of fan studies as an academic field, there remain gaps in our understanding of the ways fans in celebrity-centric fandom communities participate vis-a-vis those in text-based fandom communities. This chapter aims to address this through the exploration of participation habits in two forms of celebrity-centric fandom community: one that is attached to a traditional textual fandom object (the television series *Supernatural*) and one that is not (the popstar Taylor Swift).

However, solely exploring *how* fans participate does not present us with the complete picture. It is important to note that fans face varying barriers to participation, impacting their modes of participation and overall fandom experience. This is a typically neglected area of investigation (Hassan 2014, p. 55); however, in positioning fandom as a leisure pursuit in which varying levels of constraints bind fans, we can observe fandom as a space inherently shaped by access to free time and economic capital. While previous literature has argued that fans are exploited by industry-controlled methods of participation (Stanfill 2019), a leisure framework allows us to see that access to fandom is not equally accessible to all who wish to participate. Instead, it can be considered a hobby where the fans who participate retain agency to choose their level of commitment and the structure of what becomes a fandom “leisure career” (Stebbins 2014).

This chapter, then, addresses the following research question:

RQ1. How does a leisure framework change our understanding of celebrity fandom participation?

To answer this question, this chapter first identifies how participating in celebrity fandom communities functions as a leisure pursuit. It then uses data collected in anonymous online surveys and semistructured interviews to explore these participation methods in greater depth, contrasting the operation of “affirmational” celebrity fandom practices with those seen in traditional “transformative” fandom communities. It argues that participation in fandom communities comprises broader behaviours than the production and consumption of fan works and that forms of participation such as the curation of update accounts and discussions of news and theories related to the celebrity object of fandom should be given equal consideration in academic discussions. This chapter then explores the potential and actual constraints faced by fans and how they negotiate their eventual forms of participation within the context of their broader commitments. Ultimately, this chapter argues that a leisure framework allows us to expand our sociological understanding of celebrity fandom participation, moving from the traditionally transformative assumptions of media and cultural studies to a more significant exploration of the role of celebrity in the lived experiences of fans.

4.1 Fandom participation as (a) leisure (career)

Media and celebrity fandom has not traditionally been framed as a leisure activity, and when it has, it is usually through the lens of tourism rather than as a leisure pursuit in and of itself (Erdely & Brede 2017; Hills 2017b; King 1993; Lee, Busser & Park 2019; Lee & Scott 2009; Marling 1996; Reichenberger & Smith 2020; Thompson, Taheri & Scheuring 2022). This contrasts with sports fandom that Pope (2017, p. 1) describes as “a multi-faceted form of ‘serious leisure’” that has been the subject of academic work on leisure over a number of decades (Gibson, Willming & Holdnak 2002; Hardin 2013; Jones 2000; Spracklen 2021; Williams 2007). However, there are arguably no significant differences between participation methods in sports and celebrity fandoms (Coombs & Osborne 2022; Crawford 2004; Reysen & Branscombe 2010), especially as the rise of digital and consumer cultures has increased the celebrification (Driessens 2013b) of both individual athletes and sports in general (see, for example, the significant increase in celebrity status of Formula 1 drivers following the hit Netflix series *Drive to Survive*). As Crawford (2004, pp. ix; 4) notes, 21st Century sport can be “sold along other forms of ... ‘entertainment’”, wherein “fans can first and foremost be seen as consumers”. This can also be seen through Guschwan’s (2012, p. 21) framing of sporting organisations as brandoms in which “teams cultivate and manage the strong feelings

of attachment” of fans, shaping the ways fans engage and participate. The similarities between participation methods of sports fans and general celebrity fans is reflected in a range of literature, including that which discusses sports fans seeking interaction with athletes (Coduto 2022; Feder 2020; Hakim 2021; Kassing & Sanderson 2010; Sanderson & Kassing 2014), engaging in online social communities (Coduto 2022; Kennedy et al. 2022; Kirkwood et al. 2019; Kunert 2021; Norman 2014; Stavros et al. 2013), and displaying strong emotional connections to their object of fandom (Branscombe & Wan 1991; Cottingham 2012; Jones et al. 2012; Mastromartino et al. 2017; Wann & James 2019). It therefore follows that we should expand our sociological understanding of these celebrity-centric communities through the application of a leisure framework.

As outlined in Chapter 2, a beneficial way for us to explore participation in celebrity fandom communities is through the concept of a “leisure career” (Stebbins 2014). Stebbins (2014, p. 1) outlines that participation in a leisure career is “driven by a desire to get better at [a] chosen leisure ... activity”, and in celebrity-centric fandoms where participation is intrinsically built on the affection a fan feels towards the celebrity in question, this manifests through the resulting drive to learn more about them and deepen this connection. Celebrities are designed to be “consumable persona[s]” (Marwick & boyd 2011a, p. 140), carefully curated to create an environment in which fans desire engagement above all other forms of participation. This form of fan participation can be understood through obsession_inc’s (2009) distinction between transformative and affirmational fandom (Booth 2016). Obsession_inc (2009, para. 5) describes affirmational fandom as being a space in which

the source material is re-stated, the author’s purpose divined to the community’s satisfaction, rules established on how the characters are and how the universe works, and cosplay &etc. occur. It all tends to coalesce toward a center concept; it’s all about nailing down the details.

While traditionally affirmational fandom has been aligned with masculine fandom practices tied to media texts (Hills 2014; obsession_inc 2009), expanding the framework to celebrity fandom behaviours allows us to better conceptualise the ways fans engage with their celebrity objects of fandom and how this differs vis-a-vis fans of media texts. As obsession_inc (2009, para. 4) notes, both affirmational and transformative fandoms are “celebrational”; however, affirmational fan practices stick closely to the desires of the object of fandom and their industry connections (Booth 2016, pp. 30; 37–52).

This was reflected in survey results that showed 84% (n=237) of Taylor Swift fans consume update accounts, with 7.4% (n=21) curating them. This is in comparison to the 41.2% (n=124) of *Supernatural* fans who consume such accounts and the 3.7% (n=11) who produce them. Update accounts exist as almost an antithesis to fan fiction in which fans are dedicated to tracking every move of their fandom object. This is usually a celebrity but can also exist for television series and films. One of the biggest Taylor Swift update accounts, “Taylor Swift News”, boasts over 338,500 followers and describes itself as the “best source for the latest and most reliable news on Taylor Swift for 10+ years”. This account – and the many others like it – provides updates and “on this day” recaps and shares relevant news and information from other credible sources. Framing this participation as an affirmational fan practice in which sharing this information helps fans “nail down the details” (obsession_inc 2009, para. 5) allows us to better understand the motivations for fans to participate in these ways. Rather than seeking to craft their own interpretations of a text, these fans seek to spread official, source-based information, providing ease of access to others who wish to participate in this way.

In addition to update accounts, interview participants also explained other forms of fan-based news and discussion that formed parts of their participation practices. Betty’s primary participation platform was Reddit, and she explained that part of what drew her to the site was the fact it was “more discussion based”. Drawing distinctions to other platforms where Taylor fans congregate, she said,

So compared to like Twitter or Tumblr, um, I would say it’s more discussion based and it’s not just like, “Oh, she wore an amazing outfit” or “look at this gif”. Like it’s, it’s not so much reactionary, like it’s really umm. Like, “Oh, what do you think tour will be like?” And then, you know, like writing a sentence or a paragraph, um, some people get really into like, analysing the lyrics. And so that’s also really interesting. And also since it’s, um, since it’s more of a message board, like you don’t get bogged down with like reblogs or retweets or random things like that.

The preference for these informative, discussion-based forms of consumption further demonstrates the prevalence of affirmational fandom within celebrity-centric fandom spaces.

Analysed survey data revealed the largest disparity in forms of participation between the two fandoms was tied to fan fiction, where 72.1% (n=217) of *Supernatural* fans read fan fiction and 33.6% (n=101) wrote it, in comparison to the 7.1% (n=20) of Taylor Swift who read it

and the 0.7% (n=2) who wrote it. This difference can be linked to the form of fandom object and the role of fan fiction within transformational and affirmational celebrity fandom communities. When fan fiction is written about celebrities rather than fictional characters, it becomes known as “real person fiction” or RPF (Piper 2015; Popova 2017; B Thomas 2014). This form of fan writing is often considered controversial as some consider it to be “an unethical denial of a celebrity’s personhood” (Piper 2015, para. 1.1). As such, it is – in general – a far less popular fan practice than in fandoms centred on a text where such textual production is expected. A search in July 2022 on Archive of Our Own (Ao3) revealed just 1,261 stories in the Taylor Swift RPF tag, compared to the 266,696 in the tag for *Supernatural*. Ao3 is not the only home for fan fiction, however, and a search of the Wattpad fan fiction database revealed thousands more stories written about Taylor Swift, and it can be assumed that many more are also located on Tumblr and other fan spaces that may be restricted to those who are part of the community. It is interesting to note an additional 22,258 works can be found in the “*Supernatural* RPF” tag, a space where fans create content related to the actors from the series rather than their characters.

It is within this space of RPF that the lines between transformative and affirmational fandom begin to blur. Duffett (2013, p. 283) in his categorisation of fan practice as a pleasure of appropriation, describes RPF as a fan practice in which fans “reinvent their heroes”. In this framing, fans are engaging directly with the celebrity as they imagine them to be. For example, fans who believe in “Gaylor” – the conspiracy theory that Taylor Swift is hiding her “real” nonheterosexual sexuality (Cruz 2022; Jones 2022; Packer 2022) – engage in this form of fan practice even if they are not engaging in the creation of fan fiction as it is traditionally understood. Of the Taylor Swift fans who indicated they produced fan content, 10.2% (n=5) noted their primary form of content creation was the discussion of fan theories with others, something that Swift is known for encouraging through the inclusion of hidden messages and easter eggs within her content (Bruner 2019a; Lang 2017; Shamsian 2017; Skelley 2020). Fans who take their theorising further than the specific, actual clues left by Swift are crafting their own narratives and interpretations away from the reality of not only Swift’s private identity but also her public, curated celebrity persona.

Interview participants were aware that there were two case studies as part of this project, and at times, this became a topic of conversation. During Rebekah’s interview, we began to discuss fan-created content and the differences between the two fandoms:

I think [fan content is] definitely a part of it [Taylor Swift fandom], but I don't think it's as big of a part of it as it is with the *Supernatural* fandom. I know that's like huge for them. Um, I think the thing about fan creation with Taylor is that it doesn't get the attention from her and I'm not sure with the *Supernatural* fandom, but I think maybe that's more like attention within the fandom and not necessarily like seeking the, the people in the show, which that might not be true. I think there is community in our fandom, but it's the community is sort of the goal is to get attention from Taylor, you know, and I don't think our like fandom the like fan art or fan fiction gets any attention from her.

Rebekah's emphasis on the "goal" of participation being "attention from Taylor" demonstrates affirmational fandom in practice. In knowing transformative practices do not receive the celebrity engagement and approval desired by fans, they instead seek modes of participation that follow the implicit rules outlined by Taylor and her team. This also reflects Duffet's (2013, pp. 277–280) description of participation via the pleasures of connection in which "primary pleasures of fandom stem from their aim of encountering the performer", something which is expanded upon in Chapters 5 and 6.

4.2 Leisure constraints

While a somewhat pervasive narrative exists around fandom in which it is conceived as an equitable space of participation, leisure inherently exists within capitalism (Rojek 2014; Smith Maguire 2017; Spracklen 2014; Stebbins 2020), and thus, access to both leisure time and the means to participate in certain leisure pursuits is bound by a range of constraints. While economic means are arguably the most significant structural constraint to leisure participation, it is far from the only factor at play. The nature and amount of work an individual undertakes, their participation in the education system, as well as family and caring responsibilities all contribute to the ways they can – or cannot – participate (Rojek 2010, pp. 11–12; Smith Maguire 2017, p. 428). Just as this is true for "traditional" leisure activities (such as recreational sport, art, and music), so is it true for those who wish to participate in fandom communities (Lee & Scott 2009, p. 138). We therefore cannot make assumptions as to the extent of one's passion for their object of fandom or commitment to their fandom community without considering the factors potentially constraining their access to leisure time and, therefore, ability to participate. Thus, the following sections explore the

nonmonetary constraints faced by fans, with economic constraints explored in greater depth in Chapter 5.

Before examining the potential constraints faced by individuals in their fandom participation, it was important to understand just how much time they were spending on fandom-related activities. To establish this baseline, survey participants were asked to share the amount of time they spent per day on fandom participation. There was a significant difference in responses between the two case studies, with 59.1% (n=167) of Taylor Swift fans spending under 1 hour per day, while 68.5% (n=206) of *Supernatural* fans spent over 1 hr. At the far end of the scale, 10% (n=30) of *Supernatural* fans said they spend over 5 hours every day participating in their fandom community. While this may initially seem a significant period of time, according to the We Are Social (2022) *Digital report*, per day, the average Australian spends 6 hours 13 minutes using the internet, 3 hours 44 minutes watching television, 1 hour 57 minutes on social media, and 1 hour 7 minutes playing video games. While not necessarily segmented activities (an individual may be streaming a television show using the internet while playing a video game on a secondary – or tertiary – device, for example), nor distinguishing between time spent for work and for leisure, we can see that a significant portion of Australians spends at least a quarter of their day connected to the digital world. Far from abnormal or excessive, then, the reported extent to which respondents participate in their fandom communities is broadly aligned with general population digital trends.

In line with the results from the surveys, interview participants from the *Supernatural* fandom discussed higher levels of time devoted to fandom participation than those from the Taylor Swift fandom. Donna shared,

Right now it's probably, I'd say somewhere around 3 to 4 hours a day. Um, for a while it was a lot more, it was like all the time I was just, you know, fandom, fandom, fandom. But I've kind of pulled myself back from that and started, you know, doing other things like cleaning my house [laughs]. The important stuff.

In this comment, Donna acknowledges that fandom participation does have the potential to overpower other parts of your life, reflecting the significant time and resource investment often required. In addition to the time required to participate in the fandom itself, Jo discussed the time impact of specifically consuming the textual object of fandom, explaining,

I mean, when I first started watching, like I said, I bought all of the DVDs and I watched all the seasons probably in 4 weeks. And that's while working a full-time job. It was from the time I woke up 'til the time I went to work, got home, watch *Supernatural* and just it becomes, yeah, a part of me, we can't help it.

The sheer amount of content is a key point of differentiation between television fandoms and those around other forms of fandom objects. There are 320 episodes of *Supernatural*, and with each episode being 42 minutes long, it means there are 224 hours – or 9 days and 8 hours – of the series to watch. Jo became a fan when there were fewer episodes than this, but in framing her ability to watch it all in “4 weeks” as an achievement, she demonstrates the commitment that is required to simply watch the series, especially as a new fan with a back catalogue to catch up on. The *Taylor Swift complete collection* Spotify playlist has a playtime of 20 hours and 16 minutes, which, while not an insignificant length of time, is still 204 hours – or 8.5 days – shorter than the time required to watch all *Supernatural*. Additionally, individuals are able to passively listen while taking part in other daily activities such as commuting, working, and studying. While, as data collected for this project shows, the textual (or musical) object of fandom is only one part of fandom engagement and consumption in celebrity-centric communities, it must still be considered in relation to rates of, and access to, participation.

Not every fan who was interviewed knew the specific amount of time they spent on fandom participation or had participation that followed any particular pattern. Betty explained that her participation was often more convenience-based, sharing,

I'm on Reddit about an hour a week. So, um, well I, what I tend to do is like, I'll check it probably around lunchtime, like when I'm on my break at work, just to see if anything interesting has happened. I read a lot of news articles and so I always post the more like ... I don't, I won't, well, I'm trying to think of the word. I guess the ones are more about the industry and like how Taylor's affected the industry.

Like Betty, Inez discussed the sporadic nature of her online participation, explaining,

Yeah, it's really hard because like, you know, you just get a notification and then you check it so you don't like think about how many times you spend doing that. Um, but I dunno, I would say like probably a few hours a week.

One cause of variation in participation patterns is the cyclical nature of content release by objects of fandom. It is extremely rare for any object of fandom to release content daily, and as such, it is natural for a fan to participate more frequently during “active” periods. Survey participants were asked whether their participation varied alongside these content release cycles, with 97.5% (n=274) of Taylor Swift fans and 81.7% (n=246) of *Supernatural* fans answering that it did. Abigail expanded on this form of participation, explaining,

It really differs depending on what Taylor herself is doing. You know, like when the lead-up to *Lover* I spent a lot of time looking at that and trying to keep up with her promo and speculation and things, I was checking it every day, you know, anywhere from half an hour to a couple of hours. Um, but that was, you know, in that sort of intense couple of weeks. Now it's pared down a bit, there's not as much happening, I'll check it like every few days, 10 minutes to half an hour when I check it. Then when something happens, the process starts again, it's cyclical.

These patterns were also mentioned by Ellen from the *Supernatural* fandom who shared that her participation takes place over

like maybe an hour a day and in varying intensities 'cause it could be just, you know, scrolling through Twitter today, I had some comments, you know, it's not always like that sometimes. Um, I'm, like a content provider because I've gone to cons where I've, uh, taken a photo and that photo just kind of explodes or like, you know, it's the first shots of them coming out of the gold panel and everyone retweets that. So most of the time it's the, you know, reading and maybe commenting here and there ... But sometimes it's a little more intense.

Here, there is no single set of behaviours that can be used to define how fans engage with their fandom communities.

Additionally, in considering the participation practices of individual fans, we must also consider the factors potentially constraining their access to leisure time. Thus, it is important to explore the impact of nonmonetary commitments on overall fandom participation before drawing any conclusions as to the relationship between rate of participation and level of dedication to the object of fandom – if indeed this is at all ever possible. To begin this exploration, a number of survey questions were asked to gauge the impact of nonmonetary commitments on overall fandom participation. These questions addressed employment status,

caring responsibilities, and any current education being undertaken to examine the ways these factors intersected with individuals' fandom experiences.

4.2.1 Employment

The first of these questions addressed the concept of traditional employment. As its antithesis, the most notable barrier to participation in all forms of leisure activities is, obviously, work. Participants were asked whether work had ever impeded their ability to participate in fandom communities. In response to this question, 63.5% (n=191) of *Supernatural* fans and 60.1% (n=169) of Taylor Swift fans indicated that it had. However, it is not as simple as asking if work does or does not impact fandom participation, as “work” is not a monolithic experience. The rate at which an individual works, the amount they earn, and whether they are studying or have additional caring responsibilities are all important for us to understand in order to begin establishing conclusions regarding the overall relationship between work and fandom participation. Thus, to further explore this relationship, survey participants were asked to indicate the number of hours per week they engaged in paid employment (Table 1).

Table 1. How many hours per week do you engage in paid employment?

Hours	<i>Supernatural</i>	Taylor Swift
0	23.6%	18.6%
<10	6.1%	9.7%
10–19	9.8%	10.4%
20–31	10.1%	10.8%
32–40	26.9%	20.4%
40+	23.6%	30.1%

This data was then comparatively analysed alongside the previous question to determine if there was a relationship between the number of hours worked and whether they reported the restricted ability to participate. There was a more significant relationship between the results

among the fans of *Supernatural* than the fans of Taylor Swift. Of the *Supernatural* fans who at the time of survey completion worked zero hours of paid employment per week, 57% (n=40) said work had never constrained their ability to participate in fandom communities, while 80% (n=57) of those who worked at least 40 hours per week indicated that it had. In contrast, 53.8% (n=28) of Taylor Swift fans who reported working zero hours per week said employment had constrained their ability to participate in fandom activities, with those who worked 40 hours per week reporting only a slightly higher percentage at 57.1% (n=48), albeit representing a larger percentage of the overall sample.

The impact of work on fandom participation was also discussed by interview participants, with many recounting stories of balancing fannish activities with work commitments. Speaking in 2019 before the rise in remote working that came alongside COVID, Donna explained,

My job is kind of unique in that I get to work from home 3 days a week. Um, and those 3 days are pretty slow at work. So if I want to write on those days, I totally can because [laughs], yeah, my, my work life isn't very taxing. Um, so it hasn't gotten in the way of anything that I've wanted to do really. But I think I am unique in that because I know other people who are, you know, tweeting out, "Oh my God, I can't believe I have to work for three more hours because this story has to come out", and you know, that kind of thing.

Contrasting her own work situation with others', Donna uses the word "unique" to indicate her awareness that not everyone had the kind of flexibility her job allowed in order to participate in fandom activities when and as she wished. This demonstrates the impact that employment can have on a person's ability to participate within their chosen fandom community.

Donna's ability to engage in fandom activities while working contrasted with Mary who discussed the way increased responsibility and changing priorities around work had impacted her fandom participation over time. She explained,

So I've had a really big shift recently in the way I think about it. So I think about my work as my priority a lot more now than my fandom. And it used to be the other way around. So I used to find it a bit frustrating that like, you know, I, because, uh, when I was doing most of my travel, I was technically only part-time at work. I was

there until like 5:00 pm every night even though I was meant to finish at four and that kind of thing. Yeah. Like I was a little bitter about that kind of circumstance and also working two jobs at the time. So it was like, that was one of my jobs. And then my weekend job, it was kind of like, well, when do I have time for fun? Um, and my fun would be going overseas for 3 weeks and like going to a bunch of conventions and so like it was, um, I don't know if it was the healthiest work-life balance, but it's the one that I chose [laughs]. And now it's mostly like, I definitely prioritise my work, um, and I was meant to be going to BurCon [convention in Burbank, California] and NJcon [convention in New Jersey] uh, like the next few weeks. But I have decided I'm saving up for a house instead. So I'm a real adult over here [laughs].

In jokingly referring to herself as a “real adult”, Mary demonstrates the way the prioritisation of work vs leisure time and the expectations of responsibilities that come with adulthood are viewed by society. She understood that spending significant amounts of money on fandom participation was not the traditionally “responsible” thing to do, and as such, as she aged, she would be – to an extent – expected to reprioritise her spending habits and the place of a career in her life. Additionally, her reflection on feeling “a little bitter” in relation to the circumstances required to fund her prior fandom activities shows that sacrifices are often required to participate in the ways one wishes. Mary's previous fandom participation involved regular international travel to attend fan conventions, an activity that required the investment of both time and money, as well as the ability to take leave from work, avenues not always available to those with an interest in such forms of participation. While Mary was previously able to negotiate these constraints, the fact that over 60% of survey participants in both fandoms reported their participation being constrained in some way by their employment demonstrates that this is not always possible.

4.2.2 Education

Work is not the only constraint individuals can face that impacts their fandom participation. Undertaking formal education is also a time and resource-consuming process that can impact the ways individuals are able to participate within their fandom community. Thus, in addition to considering paid employment, survey participants were asked whether they were currently in the process of studying. Of the Taylor Swift respondents, 45% (n=125) indicated they were currently students; however, this number dropped to 23.6% (n=69) among fans of

Supernatural. As can be seen in Table 2, the majority of those studying were undertaking full-time undergraduate degrees; however, any form of study can be understood as a barrier to participation in leisure pursuits.

Table 2. Are you currently a student?

	<i>Supernatural</i>	Taylor Swift
No	76.4%	55%
Yes, high school	0.7%	4.6%
Yes, undergraduate, full-time	15.0%	28.2%
Yes, undergraduate, part-time	4.0%	2.5%
Yes, postgraduate, full-time	1.7%	6.8%
Yes, postgraduate, part-time	2.3%	2.9%

Studying is not necessarily a standalone activity, with many individuals undertaking paid work alongside their classes, further constraining the amount of time they have available for leisure pursuits. Thus, to develop a further understanding of overlapping responsibilities, individuals' study status was compared to the number of hours per week they engaged in paid employment. Of survey respondents in the *Supernatural* fandom, 92.5% (n=74) and 92.9% (n=65) of those who worked 32 to 40 hours and 40+ hours per week, respectively, were not currently studying. However, 44.1% (n=29) of those working under 10 hours per week also studied full time at the undergraduate level, as did 24.1% (n=7) of those working 10 to 19 hours, and 23.3% (n=7) of those working 20 to 32 hours. Over 50% (n=29) of those currently studying both full and part-time at the undergraduate level also undertook paid employment, while 100% (n=5) of those studying full-time at the postgraduate level also worked. When looking at results from the Taylor Swift survey, there was a lower rate of those who worked over 32 hours per week without studying, with 15.8% (n=9) working 32 to 40 hours, and 15.7% (n=13) working over 40 hours per week. Over 50% (n=62) of survey respondents who worked under 32 hours were also studying. When looking at the type of study respondents were undertaking, 65.4% (n=51) of those studying an undergraduate degree full-time also

engaged in paid employment, as did 85.7% (n=6) of those studying an undergraduate degree part-time and 73.7% (n=14) of those studying a postgraduate degree full-time.

The impact of studying – and compounding responsibilities – on fandom participation was discussed by interview participants. Inez explained,

I'm like quite a busy person, 'cause I work and study full time. So umm, sometimes like when stuff comes out, you know, like a music video or a song or whatever and like everyone's all over Twitter and Tumblr and Facebook and like, you know, I can't always participate because I, I actually have a life besides being a Taylor Swift fan ... It was really sad when *Lover* came out. I didn't get to like fully listen to the album, I think for like 3 or 4 days. Yeah, because I was, I had like, I don't, I don't know what it was. It was like a huge, like a 40% assignment due, and work. And so like, I didn't have an hour to like sit down and listen to the album. And, um, I had to like, just like not look at anything [laughs].

Similarly, James – a university student – discussed the difficulty of balancing his desire to participate within the Taylor Swift fan community with the reality of his responsibilities. When asked how much time he spent participating, he replied,

A lot less than I would like to ... I don't spend a lot of time on it, but mostly because I can't, I guess ... like with everything that I do here, um, I have to prioritise. So like interacting with, with fans and everything is like part of like my, my free time. I don't really have a lot of that here. Like while I'm at school and everything, so not, I mean, usually less than an hour a week. I would say half hour every week. Ideally, you know, I want to do more, sometimes I have done more, but not a lot. Not a lot of time unfortunately.

In saying fandom participation is part of his “free time”, James emphasises the way fandom functions as a leisure pursuit. James was constrained by the responsibilities of his college studies, as indicated by his saying he “want[s] to do more” and his use of the word “unfortunately” when explaining the amount of free time he had. James also discussed the competing priorities for his free time:

When I do have free time, like my first instinct is to like watch TV or like hanging out with my roommates or something and not really go on social media. Um, so like, yeah, it's because, you know, I'm doing a lot of things here and I'm busy but at

the same time it's kind of because I don't really like going on social media a lot. Um, if I had more free time, obviously, you know, I go on Tumblr and stuff. Cause when I do, when I am on social media, I'm either on like my personal Instagram or like my Tumblr.

Again, he emphasises how being “busy” impacted the way he was able to participate within the fandom community. While James did not necessarily *prioritise* his fandom participation, we should not understand this as a lack of interest in Swift or her fandom. Rather, it further demonstrates the negotiations and sacrifice one must undertake to balance various life commitments and participation in their fandom community. In facing these competing priorities, choosing to focus on the longer term life commitments of education and employment over participating in the Taylor Swift fandom does not make James *less* of a fan but rather reflects the reality of adulthood for many individuals. Making judgements on an individual's level of passion for an object of fandom or their commitment to a fandom community therefore should not consider any single factor, such as investment of time or resources, but rather must contextualise their participation within their wider personal circumstances.

4.2.3 Caring responsibilities

The final potential constraint to fandom participation explored was family commitments, including but not limited to caring and household responsibilities. When asked if such responsibilities had impacted their fandom participation, 49.8% (n=150) of *Supernatural* fans and 40.2% (n=113) of Taylor Swift fans answered yes. To help explore the types of care that participants may be undertaking, the survey also asked whether respondents had children. Of Taylor Swift fans who completed the survey, 96.7% (n=273) responded that they did not have children in comparison to 70.1% (n=211) of *Supernatural* respondents. No participants from the Taylor Swift survey answered that they had more than two children, while 5.3% (n=16) of *Supernatural* participants said they had three, 1.7% (n=5) said they had four, and 1.3% (n=4) responded they had five or more. Despite the higher number of children reported by survey participants from the *Supernatural* fandom, there was no correlation between having children and reporting fandom participation being restricted by family and/or caring responsibilities.

During her interview, Jo explained,

I'm single, you know, I don't, I'm not married, no kids ... I mean, there's really nobody to be responsible for, you know, it's not the only time it messes with my work situation is when it's the convention. And then, you know, I make sure that I schedule time off for that. So it's not, it's not kind of gonna be any restrictions or anything like that.

In emphasising that there's "nobody to be responsible for", Jo indicates an awareness of the impact family and caring responsibilities can have on one's fandom participation and her privilege in being able to participate without needing to take such constraints into account. In contrast to Jo, Charlie detailed the significant impact her familial responsibilities had on her ability to participate within the *Supernatural* fandom. She explained,

My husband's got limited ability due to a car accident 11 years ago. Uh, so it's a lot of work for him to solo our son. He will do it. But I've got to go, "Hmm, how badly do I want to meet these, these actors, or this line-up" as opposed to how much stress will put on hubby.

This quote details the constraint negotiation process Charlie must undergo before she could participate in the way she desired. Again, it is not that Charlie did not *want* to participate, but rather that her circumstances impacted the opportunities she was able to access. Her identity as a wife and mother remained a greater priority than her identity as a fan. Searle and Jackson (1985, p. 245) note that "family commitments [are] a major obstacle for women" when it comes to the ability to participate in leisure pursuits, and it is therefore an important factor to keep in mind when considering who is or is not participating in fandom communities, as well as the rate and form this participation takes.

4.3 Constraint negotiations

The preceding sections demonstrated a number of the most common constraints fans face to their fandom participation. However, while such constraints may prevent some fans from participating, it is important for us to also consider the motivations of fans who continually negotiate these constraints to persist in their participation. To do this, it is beneficial to return to the concept of a leisure career (Stebbins 2014). To Stebbins (2014, pp. 11–12), a leisure career comprises "a mix of rewards offsetting costs as experienced in the central activity" with these costs being something "each participant must confront in some way" throughout their journey.

Stebbins (2014, p. 12) refers to “disappointments” as a key form experienced through leisure participation, and within fandom communities, we can understand these as the primary cost faced by those who encounter constraints to their participation. While Stebbins’s (2014, p. 12) additional categories of “dislikes” and “tensions” also apply at times to fandom pursuits, it is the *disappointment* faced by those who cannot listen, watch, attend, or purchase in the way that they wish that most impacts fans in their pursuit of a fandom leisure career. However, Stebbins (2014) emphasises that *rewards* experienced by participants are the key to ongoing participation in leisure careers. He notes leisure careers “frame and [are] framed by the never-ending search for certain personal and social rewards” (Stebbins 2014, p. 39). Stebbins (2014, p. 9) explains durable benefits” may include “self-development, self-enrichment, self-expression, regeneration or renewal of self, feelings of accomplishment, enhancement of self-image, social interaction and belongingness”. All these potential benefits can be found within fandom communities, where participation is often frequently tied to the construction of identity (Lee & Scott 2009, p. 138). Stebbins (2014, p. 9) notes, “Participants in serious leisure tend to *identify* strongly with their chosen pursuits”, and this was reflected throughout the interviews. When participants were asked what being a fan meant to them, concepts of identity and belonging were heavily drawn upon, especially by members of the *Supernatural* fandom. Jo explained,

It’s just, it’s so hard to sometimes describe it. You know, you can’t just say, “Oh I’m a fan of a TV show that’s about scary things and two brothers that fight” because it’s so much, it’s become so much more than that. It’s become a part of like making a difference in the world with the different charities that we help and you know, learning to finally accept yourself. It’s, it’s almost like it, I can only describe it as like finally coming home. Like it’s, it’s, it’s comfort. It’s finding your comfort and being yourself.

Similarly, Charlie said,

It’s beyond just, you know, enjoying it and wanting it as background noise. It’s, it’s finding a connection with the TV show or the movie or the book series or whatever it is, and finding connection with the characters or the storyline or something and sharing that connection with others. Be it family members, friends, um, an online community or whatever. It’s finding a passion for something and sharing it and, you

know, yeah ... It's just about enjoying the connections and enjoying the, the community and enjoying the show.

When Donna was asked what being a *Supernatural* fan meant to her, she told a significantly more personal story about the impact of the fandom on her life. She said,

Mmm, short version is lifesaving. I'm one of these people who has dealt with depression and anxiety, like pretty much my whole life ... I had just gone through a breakup of a very long relationship. Um, and it wasn't a good relationship in the years following, I've figured out that it was actually an abusive relationship that I was in. So it was taking me a really long time to come to terms with everything that had happened. Um, and you know, once I got into fandom and I started meeting people and everything, I was feeling a lot better. And then I had this crash and I just really, really sunk really down low. Um, and I was preparing to do something very drastic. Um, and I was actually on a smoke break from work. I was sitting in my car and I'd pulled out my phone and then I was just kind of like randomly scrolling. And at the same time I was thinking about going home and doing that drastic thing and then Jared's first Always Keep Fighting campaign notification came up on my phone. It was very freaky and I just started sobbing, sitting there in my car and I didn't even look at the description of what it was. I just saw the shirt that said "always keep fighting". And I just essentially I promised Jared that I wouldn't right there.

The meaning Donna assigns to both Jared Padalecki and the experience of being a *Supernatural* fan in this quote demonstrates motivation for continued participation, despite other constraints that may be present. While Crawford, Jackson and Godbey (1991, p. 311) refer to mental health struggles as potential "intrapersonal" constraints to leisure participation, it can be seen that, at least for Donna, her belonging to the fandom community served as a way through her period of depression and encouraged continued participation.

Interview participants from the Taylor Swift fandom also discussed the meaning found through their participation in the fandom community. James described his participation as "a huge part of [his] identity", explaining,

I think part of it for me too is college ... I mean they say it's like a period of self-discovery ... for me it is like this is something that's part of my identity and I'm like, I'm proud of it. And I think ... I've gotten like a hell of a lot more confident,

um, in recent years. So I bring my full self, my full like true self to everything that I do and everybody I interact with. Um, so being, like part of the fandom is just being, being my full self, um, you know, people, people judge me for this all the time, like hardcore, but like I don't care. Um, so I think it means a lot to me as well in the sense that like, I, like I don't care what other people think of me sort of thing. Um, you know, and um, in regards to my identity too, I think it kind of shows how I am as a person ... And I think it's just also really cool to be passionate about something, um, and someone ... I guess it's hard to put into words like it means to me like just having something that you're really passionate about and being able to relate, um, to somebody that means a lot to you, even if you haven't met them. I mean, think about it. It's crazy. Like a lot of us haven't met this person and we're like so passionate about them ... I think that's really cool. Um, and you know, it also means to me just like being able to feel songs and relate to music and relate to somebody's life and kinda like go feel like you're going through something with them ... And being able to be fully myself with this means a lot to me. Um, and just like, it's fun ... it's really fun.

Here, James's participation in the Taylor Swift fandom is framed as intertwined with his sense of self and search for meaning in life (Spracklen 2015, p. 94). Even though his ability to participate was often constrained by the responsibilities of work and study, the personal "rewards" he experienced through identifying as a fan of Swift were sufficient to sustain his ongoing participation and identification as a member of her fandom community (Stebbins 2014). Such identity construction is described by Bouwer and van Leeuwen (2013 p. 593) as a function of liquid leisure in which "many of the best stories that form our sense of self are connected to leisure activities". Rebekah also explained the meaning being a Taylor Swift fan had in her life, noting that one of the reasons she wished to meet Swift was to

be able to tell her like what a big part of my life she's been. 'Cause there's really nothing else that I've like followed for as long or have been like so devoted to for as long.

Stebbins (2014, p. 39) explains the "essence" of a leisure career is "the temporal continuity of the activities associated with it", and this can be seen through Rebekah's reflection on the length of her "devotion" to Swift and the ongoing importance of this to her overall life and identity (Harrington & Bielby 2010a, 2010b, 2018).

These reflections provide a snapshot of some of the motivations for fans to negotiate the constraints to their participation. The “personal rewards” outlined by Stebbins (2014, p. 10) – especially those tied to identity and belonging – are a significant factor in the willingness of fans to continue their participation in fandom communities despite the hurdles they encounter. However, these are not the only motivations for continued participation, and the following two chapters explore the additional motivating roles of celebrity approval and engagement, and social connections and the development of status, in greater depth.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter framed celebrity fandom participation as a leisure pursuit subject to a range of structural constraints. This position has been used by those working in the sociology of sport for a number of decades, and this project has simply realigned celebrity fandom participation as an equally worthy form of sociological exploration. Drawing on Stebbins’s (2014) concept of a “leisure career”, this chapter argued that when fans are motivated to continuously seek knowledge about and attention from a celebrity object of fandom, it reflects the underlying principle of leisure career participation in which individuals are “driven by a desire to get better at [a] chosen leisure ... activity” (Stebbins 2014, p. 1). Data from surveys and interviews with members of the Taylor Swift and *Supernatural* fandoms was used to argue that the participation methods used by fans to seek this knowledge and attention represent affirmational rather than transformative fandom practices. This means that celebrity fans are less likely to participate in the creation of fan works such as fan fiction and fan art, challenging the traditional focus of fan studies.

After outlining these forms of affirmational participation, this chapter explored how the participation of fans may be constrained by responsibilities related to employment, education, caring, or a combination of all three. It was argued that these constraints mean participation markers, such as time commitments or participatory output, cannot be used to determine levels of interest in or dedication to an object of fandom. However, such constraints do not prevent all fans from participating. This chapter returned to the concept of the leisure career to explore how fans draw on the “rewards” of identity construction and feelings of belonging made available to them through fandom participation as motivation to negotiate the constraints faced, potentially allowing for continued participation.

Framing celebrity fandom participation as a leisure pursuit allows us to consider how fans negotiate participation as part of their everyday lives. Rather than assuming access to participation is equally available to all fans, this framing allows us to challenge dominant media narratives that align loyalty and passion with time and money spent without the consideration of additional factors (Champion 2022; Dear 2023; Evans 2018; Graham & Boulton 2022; Hann 2017). The following chapter builds on this discussion of constraints and constraint negotiation by exploring the impact of commodified fandom communities on fandom engagement, as well as the ways celebrity objects of fandom court specific kinds of (paid) participation with the lure of approval and interaction.

Chapter 5. Patterns of fan consumption

While the previous chapter examined participation in celebrity fandom communities and the impact of employment, education, and family commitments, this chapter turns to the role of money and economic constraints to fandom participation. In doing this, it addresses the second research question:

RQ2. How do fans negotiate participation within commodified fandom spaces?

Broadly, this chapter explores the idea of “sanctioned” participation, looking at how fans are asked to play within the metaphorical lines and why they do – or do not – agree to do so. At the heart of this experience, this chapter argues, is the desire for approval from the celebrity object of fandom itself. While this desire may often coexist with forms of transformative participation, it is the (imagined) relationship with the celebrity that constitutes the primary purpose of community membership. However, as celebrity consumption exists within the wider capitalist cultural landscape, this chapter examines the unequal access to celebrity approval within fandom communities. Fans must both produce and consume in “approved” ways to gain visibility and status within their fandom community, reflecting what Booth (2015b, para. 1.3) describes as “a neoliberal turn in fandom”. To Booth (2015b, para. 1.3) such a turn,

places cultural value on so-called right and wrong ways to be a fan, extols the individual over the community, promotes fandom as a capitalist enterprise, and polices and disciplines particular ways of expressing fannish enthusiasm.

This chapter, then, focuses on how this shapes fan participation practices. It first looks at the forms of participation specifically tied to monetary exchange, focusing on merchandise, events, and access to the object of fandom. It then explores the ways such modes of participation are courted by industry and celebrities, with a focus on the ways celebrities construct illusions of intimacy as part of their business strategies. However, this chapter ultimately argues that despite being industry-curated practices designed to make money from fans – and therefore frequently critiqued by wider fan studies literature – loyalty to the fandom object and the associated commodified activities are often the impetus for fandom participation, thus creating a purpose for fans, allowing them to continue their “leisure career” (Stebbins 2014).

5.1 The commodified landscape

Chapter 4 outlined the ways participation in celebrity-centric fandom communities functions as affirmational rather than transformative. These affirmational practices follow rules laid out by celebrity objects of fandom and are often commodified. As these forms of participation are encouraged by the objects of fandom, a cycle is initiated in which fans who participate in these ways are given approval, thus creating motivation for the behaviours to continue and spread across fandom communities. However, as they are commodified, such participation is subject to economic constraints, meaning they – and, in turn, the approval from the object of fandom – are not equally accessible to all fans. The following sections explore the three key commodified forms of celebrity fandom participation: merchandise, events, and fan–celebrity interaction. Through this exploration, it is shown that fans seek positive engagement from their objects of fandom by participating in ways that gain them attention; however, they must also negotiate the economic constraints that accompany these forms of consumption. These are not equitable spaces and therefore should not be used as a marker of fandom loyalty and dedication. However, just as we saw with the nonmonetary constraints in Chapter 4, when seeking the approval of the celebrity fandom object is the impetus for participation, fans are willing to undergo significant sacrifice and constraint negotiation for it to occur (Lee & Scott 2009; Stebbins 2009).

It is rare for work examining commodified fandom practices to focus on lived fan perspectives (Wohlfeil 2018, p. 1), and as such, it was important for this project to speak to members of fandom communities to gain insight into their habits, experiences, and opinions rather than simply applying theoretical analysis to observed behaviours (Stebbins 2009, p. 19). To do this, survey questions asked fans a number of questions about the ways they spent money as part of their fandom participation. The first of these questions asked participants to disclose whether they had missed out on a fandom experience because of financial constraints. More than half the respondents to each survey indicated they had, with “yes” answers accounting for 86.4% (n=260) of responses in the *Supernatural* survey and 68.3% (n=193) in the Taylor Swift survey. The significantly higher percentage from the *Supernatural* fandom can be accounted for through the variation in spending opportunities available to each of the fandom communities. Traditionally, there have generally been fewer opportunities for fans of Taylor Swift to spend money on their fandom participation, as tours occur far less frequently than fan conventions. While tours are not the only way fans can

spend money on their fandom participation in music fandoms, they are the most resource-consuming and therefore the most likely to be reported as being subject to external constraints. This initial insight into the impact of economic constraints on fandom participation demonstrates the significance of these barriers. It is easy to understand why the mechanisms behind these methods of participation are often described as exploitative; however, the fact remains that fans choose to continue participating within these structures. This can be understood as reflecting a neoliberal reality of fandom participation in which “fans take critically pragmatic views of these processes, as being excessive yet unstoppable components of the commercial” landscapes of their fandom objects (Numerato & Giulianotti 2018, p. 340).

Survey participants were also asked the maximum they would be willing to spend on a single fandom experience (as discussed in Section 3.2.1.1, unless otherwise specified, all amounts referenced are in USD). Of the Taylor Swift fans, 67.2% (n=190) indicated they were not willing to spend more than \$600, while 68.4% (n=206) of *Supernatural* fans indicated a willingness to spend over \$500. At the upper ends of the scale, 44.2% (n=133) of *Supernatural* fans said they would spend over \$1,000, while 18.1% (n=51) of Taylor Swift fans said the same. The difference in these percentages can again be related back to the opportunities to spend money within each fandom. As is explored later in this chapter, the cost of attending a *Supernatural* fan convention can easily range into thousands of dollars, and as such fans, are aware of the investment required to participate in this way. In contrast, the opportunities to attend and the costs of attending concerts are far more nebulous, with fans unaware of when they will occur and how much they will charge. A fan may say they are only willing to spend a certain amount of money on a concert ticket, but faced with the choice between spending more money than anticipated or missing out on the event, many will spend the additional funds.

As well as their willingness to spend, participants were also asked to disclose the amount they *actually* spent on their fandom in an average (pre-COVID) year. Those from the Taylor Swift fandom were asked to consider this as a year in which Taylor released music and was touring. A total of 28.2% (n=85) of *Supernatural* fans and 22.1% (n=62) of Taylor Swift fans said they spent less than \$100, while 28.6% (n=86) of *Supernatural* fans and 13.5% (n=38) of Taylor Swift fans said they spent over \$1,000. Additionally, 6% (n=18) of *Supernatural* fans and 0.4% (n=1) of Taylor Swift fans revealed they spent over \$5,000 in an average year. To

break down this spending, individuals were also asked to select the objects they spent money on as part of their fandom engagement. Of the Taylor Swift participants, 96.1% (n=271) said they purchased her albums, and 58.5% (n=176) of *Supernatural* fans said they bought DVDs of the series. Additionally, 81.6% (n=230) of Taylor Swift fans said they bought concert tickets, with 9.6% (n=27) saying they purchased VIP options where available. Of the *Supernatural* fans, 54.8% (n=165) said they purchased convention tickets, with 15.6% (n=47) indicating they purchased VIP tickets.

While some of the amounts being reported by fans may seem high, when fandom participation is framed as a leisure activity, the spending of money becomes normalised. While not all leisure pursuits cost money, a significant portion do (Stebbins 2009, pp. 2–3). When looking more broadly at recreational expenditure, as of 2022, the average Australian household spends \$3,150 per year [USD, converted from AUD] on entertainment-based recreation (Robins, Dell & Johnson 2022, p. 4), with wider data suggesting an average weekly spend of \$147 (\$7,680 annually; Wallis 2022). If celebrity fandom is the key leisure pursuit, an average annual spend of under \$500 is well within the normative range of leisure expenditure.

This can also be seen when examining statistics on wider fandom expenditure. While very little academic data has been collected regarding the spending habits of fans, various market research organisations have collated data on fandom spending. It is useful to compare the data collected for this project to these sources to paint an overview of the wider commodified fandom field.

- According to research undertaken by Nine Entertainment (cited in Pash 2020, para. 3), an average (media) fan in Australia spends \$632 USD (currency converted from AUD) per year on their fandom community.
- Finance Buzz (Koebert 2023) determined the average NFL fan spends \$289.94 USD per year (not including game tickets), with some spending upwards of \$609.35 USD.
- Research into the English Premier League indicated that an average fan who attends games will spend \$2,612 USD (currency converted from GBP) per year (Bailey 2019).
- Research into Asian K-Pop fandom revealed fans could spend up to \$1,422 USD a year if they bought all merchandise and albums available and attended at least one concert (Romualdez n.d.).

However, when looking at this data, it is important to note that the type of fandom being discussed significantly impacts the ways fans are asked to spend. As in academia, sports fans are more heavily studied than media and music fans as their spending habits are more consistent and quantifiable due to the frequency of in-season games. In contrast, a musician might only tour once every year (or far less frequently, especially in a post-COVID world), and unless film and television fans attend conventions, the lack of an “event” cost decreases the capacity for potential fandom spend. Additionally, it is important to note – as reflected in the survey questions – actual spend and potential spend are two separate categories to consider. A fan may currently spend \$100 a year on merchandise but be willing to spend \$1,000 in the right situation.

Money and its associated constraints were key conversational topics throughout the interviews. During my conversation with Ellen, we discussed the overall impact of money on the *Supernatural* fandom community. She explained, “It’s an unfortunate thing, but I think it’s ... I mean money’s always gonna divide in everything, in all parts of the life. So it’s, it’s here too”. In connecting fandom structures to those of wider society, Ellen demonstrates the importance of understanding the way these communities function as more than just places of entertainment and escapism. This restructuring of fandom expenses within a broader societal context was echoed by Mary who explained,

It’s difficult and it really sucks when people who are such fans of the show and such, you know, they really admire these actors that they can’t access it. Um, but by the same token, it’s not like it’s like lifesaving medication ... I think that conventions to an extent should be able to charge what they like, going to the convention is a privilege, not a necessity ... it’s something you, you save up for and you want it, it’s kind of a waste of money, but it’s, if it’s something that’s important to you, then it’s worth wasting. And if you have the means to do it, it’s worth doing. So it’s like buying a luxury sports car [laughs] ... it’s not a necessity.

Likewise, Ellen added, “It’s one of those things where like, this is a luxury item”, and such a framing demonstrates an awareness that while such methods of participation are not essential to participation, they elevate both an individual’s experience and their status within the community (Booth 2015b, para. 1.3). However, Ellen also noted her frustration at the negotiations she must undertake to participate in the fandom without breaking her budget, saying,

If I had my way and I had a gajillion dollars, I would just keep going to things all the time. But, um, you know, real-life bills and all that. So I can't also, I mean, just, um, like I said, like I wanted to go see what Ruth [Connell] was doing, but it's, you know, to do that, let me change my shift at work and then I have to fight traffic up to LA ... It's sometimes I'm like, ah, it's not, I can't deal with that.

In contrast, when asked if she felt she'd ever had to make sacrifices to participate in her fandom community, Donna explained,

Umm, the only thing close to that would be, um, like kind of going into debt to be able to go to a convention. I don't consider that a sacrifice really. That's, you know, I just, I, I want to go to this convention so badly that I'm willing to, you know, have this bill hanging over my head to be able to do it, you know? And it was totally worth it to me [laughs]. I am doing it again.

This comment by Donna echoes Stebbins (2014, p. 105) who explains that for those embarking on a leisure career, “the price of ... ‘treasures’ may be barely affordable, but for them sentiment overrides economics”. To Donna, the benefits of attending a fan convention outweighed the fact she must go into financial debt to make it happen. This also reflects the findings of Lee and Scott (2009, p. 152) who outlined that fans with significant attachment to, and involvement with, their celebrity fandom were more likely to negotiate encountered constraints. Donna had to find a way to attend the convention, and in saying “it was totally worth it”, she demonstrates that the importance of constraint negotiation increases the more something means to the fan (Stebbins 2014). However, this is not to say that Ellen's decision to miss out on events because of the structural constraints she faced means she is less committed to her fandom participation. While entry-level modes of fandom participation are low cost in terms of both time and money commitment, the further into one's fandom “career” one becomes, the more investment is required (Stebbins 2020, p. 44). It costs nothing to stream an album, and a minimal amount for a streaming service subscription to view a television series, but the price of event attendance can range into quadruple digits, even before the associated travel costs are considered. Thus, as a fan moves from casual to more committed involvement, the more constraints they will potentially encounter (Stebbins 2014, pp. 105–106). The constraint negotiation Ellen entered into in which she picked and chose the events she could realistically attend and the forms her participation could take reflects the reality of many celebrity fans. No two fans share identical circumstances, and so

while Donna was able to go into debt to attend a fan convention, other fans may not have this option or be willing to take such a step.

5.1.1 Fandom merchandise

Merchandise is one of the most recognisable forms of commodified fandom practice. Santo (2018, p. 329) argues that merchandise is a key factor in “the reconstitution of fandom as a lifestyle category rather than a communal experience”; however, others such as Moor (2007, p. 135) instead emphasise the ways such items can act as “sources of sociability and belonging”. Attitudes towards merchandise and its role in fandom communities vary (both within and outside the communities), often depending on the object of fandom and context (consider a sporting jersey versus a science fiction collectable versus a t-shirt with a pop star’s face). However, in general, merchandise is understood to be an important way fans display their fandom affiliations and present themselves as members of the fan community within their everyday lives. As Woo (2014, para. 1.1) argues, “Fandom is ... objectified in material practices and artifacts”. Exploring the role of merchandise within the Taylor Swift and *Supernatural* fandom communities allows us to gain a deeper understanding of how fans engage with the brand landscapes and the role of what is often considered a means of industry “transform[ing] fans into walking promotional platforms” (Santo 2018, p. 332).

Survey participants were asked whether they purchased merchandise related to their fandoms. Eighty per cent (n=241) of *Supernatural* fans and 66% (n=186) of Taylor Swift fans said they purchased clothing as merchandise, and 72.4% (n=218) and 42.2% (n=120) of respondents, respectively, indicated they purchased other forms of merchandise (examples were not provided but could include items such as jewellery, figurines, phone accessories, home decor, etc.). Additionally, 57.3% (n=161) of Taylor fans and 61.1% (n=184) of *Supernatural* fans who took part in the surveys said that they had at some point purchased limited-edition merchandise, with a majority of these respondents indicating they did so because the object was of interest to them. A total of 16.6% (n=50) of *Supernatural* fans and 17.8% (n=50) of Taylor Swift fans said their primary motivation was collecting memorabilia, with this behaviour echoing the more traditional forms of collecting discussed within fan studies literature. Collectables and memorabilia have been a primary focus of academic work on fans and merchandise (Geraghty 2014, 2018; Godwin 2015; Rehak 2014; Woo 2014). This behaviour is typically connected to more traditional science fiction fandom communities and arguably more aligned with affirmational male fans (obsession_inc 2009; Scott 2019). For

such fans, collecting is also frequently tied to the potential economic value of the objects (Geraghty 2018, p. 213). In the *Supernatural* fandom, Charlie distinguished between “collectables” and other forms of merchandise. She explained,

As for the merchandise and all that sort of stuff. Well yeah, that’s each to their own. I mean, we don’t buy a lot of merchandise sort of stuff. We’ll tend to buy DVDs. I’ve bought hubby a few different gifts and that sort of thing. But when we do buy merchandise it’s more collectable items, like the first blades and the Winchester gun and that sort of thing rather than the little figurines or little bits and pieces.

This quote shows the connection of merchandise to the series rather than the celebrity of the actors. Charlie’s focus is on key objects with important meaning to *Supernatural* itself, centring the role of the show in her fandom participation.

Official *Supernatural* merchandise is broadly generic to the series as a whole rather than any individual season or character. Historically, it has been available on the Warner Brothers’ website, with licensed products stocked at US outlet Hot Topic, and limited-edition merchandise sometimes made available at fan conventions. Additionally, cast members frequently collaborate with organisations to sell limited-edition merchandise to raise money for charitable partners. Organisations such as Represent and Stands work with celebrities to “collaborate with an artist (often a fan artist) to create a design that speaks to their personality, a popular role, and/or their charity of choice” (Stands n.d., para 1). On their “About us” page, Stands explains, “A portion of all proceeds go to charity, so with Stands, fans are empowered to actually use their fandom love to help benefit a cause that they and their faves care about” (Stands n.d., para. 2). The tagline of Represent is “Show The World What You Stand For” (Represent n.d.-a, para. 1), reflecting the connection between fandom and individual identity creation. While not specifically stated on their website homepage, short-term Represent campaigns are frequently connected to charities (Represent n.d.-b). This form of merchandise serves the dual purpose of allowing fans to support their celebrity objects of fandom while donating to a charitable cause, thus creating a layer of meaning and – potentially – a justification for the purchase. Additionally, such purchases increase the para-social connection between the fan and the celebrity, as the fan is not only supporting a charity, they are supporting a charity *important to the celebrity* (Hunting & Hinck 2017; Jeffreys & Xu 2017; Stever 2016; Xanthoudakis 2020).

Merchandise within the Taylor Swift fandom is all about Swift as a celebrity object. Betty noted this connection, saying,

I think that Taylor ... does ask her fans to spend a lot of money, but she merchandises everything about her life too. So at the same time it's like, well, if she can make money doing it, why not?

This concept of “merchandising ... her life” assists in creating a connection between the fan and celebrity, thus increasing the likelihood of their desire to purchase. Historically, Swift’s merchandise was themed around albums and tours. However, during COVID (and therefore a time without touring), Swift significantly increased the volume of her online merchandise offerings, releasing merchandise for – among other short-term collections – *folklore*, *evermore*, her “eras” collection, Valentine’s Day, *Fearless (Taylor’s version)*, *Red (Taylor’s version)*, *All too well* (the short film), a graduation collection, a second *evermore* collection to coincide with her Grammy nomination, and a Summer collection. All these merchandise ranges were supposedly available in very specific time windows, with countdown timers shown on the website; however, much of the merchandise continued to be available after the timers had run down, changing to “while supplies last”.

A significant amount of *folklore* and *evermore* merchandise could still be found in the store months after the initial timed sale. Betty discussed some of the issues limited-edition merchandise had caused within the fandom, explaining,

How they rolled out the Stella McCartney rollout for instance ... they said it was a flash sale, so like the items would change every 24 hours. Well, once they showed you all the items, then they, then they started selling them all. Basically they’re going to sell them all until they sell out. And I know people that didn’t get things because they didn’t want to pay for shipping. Or some people that did get things on separate days. So now they paid for shipping four times.

This tactic of time-limited releases encourages rapid spending, drawing on fans’ fear of missing out on a potentially rare item. While fans of Swift are not “collectors” in the way collecting is most frequently discussed within fan studies, many are “completionists”, wanting to make sure they obtain items from every collection. As is discussed later in this chapter, this behaviour is encouraged by Swift (or, more specifically, her marketing team)

who heavily promote each release and reward fans who share their purchases with highly sought-after attention.

Despite the abundance of merchandise available to purchase, Dorothea noted that she did not think the offerings were unaffordable, saying,

For merch, it depends. It depends on the, on the item for sure. But I mean, stuff isn't too overpriced on her site, I don't think. And a lot of stuff is like, is cheaper than I feel like it should be too ... But I think her, her sites, you know, with the prices is pretty good.

While these interviews occurred prior to the sharp increase in Swift's merchandise offerings, it demonstrates that fans do not feel (a) obliged to purchase and (b) like the items are priced to exploit them, potentially reflecting an understanding of fandom as existing within commodified, neoliberal culture (Numerato & Giulianotti 2018, p. 340). As an overall category, merchandise is not known for its affordability, and it is common for musicians to charge over \$100 for a sweatshirt. Regardless of their fandom, then, fans are aware that merchandise is an investment and one they consciously choose to undertake. Just as those who play recreational sport as a leisure pursuit are required to purchase uniforms and similar team accessories, we can understand that participating within fandom communities requires similar "branding" to demonstrate shared identity and belonging (Santo 2018, p. 332). Used as an identity marker, merchandise signals membership both to those outside the community and to those within it. While Santo (2018, p. 331) explains merchandise "can help fans establish their legitimacy within particular communities while also functioning as a status symbol that reinforces hierarchies and differences within that community", just 1.3% (n=4) of *Supernatural* fans and 1.4% (n=4) of Taylor Swift fans indicated gaining status was a primary motivation for the purchase of this merchandise. However, this question asked fans to indicate their *primary* motivation, and as such, we cannot discount intra-fandom status as an underlying factor in fans' purchasing behaviours. The role of fandom objects such as merchandise in the development and maintenance of intra-community status and hierarchies is explored in depth in Chapter 6.

5.1.2 Events

For fans of celebrities, proximity to their object of fandom is extremely important, with Ferris (2001, p. 26) explaining real-world encounters are "superior to media consumption". While

fan-related tourism has been the subject of academic attention within leisure studies (Green & Jones 2005; Reichenberger 2021; Reichenberger & Smith 2020), far less attention has been provided to other forms of celebrity fandom event attendance (exceptions include Fairclough-Isaacs 2015; Ferris 2001; Larsen & Zubernis 2013; Stever 2016; Zubernis & Larsen 2013). The following section explores the role of event attendance in the lives of *Supernatural* and Taylor Swift fans, arguing that while these play a central role in one's celebrity fandom experience, they are also a location where individuals must negotiate the most significant constraints to their continued participation.

The two primary forms of events for celebrity fans are concerts and fan conventions. Both these events are held on sporadic schedules that range from multiple times per week to having gaps of months or even years. Prior to COVID, Swift would tour on approximately a 2-year cycle following the release of an album. This tour would usually go around the world; however, cities, states, and countries are inevitably left out. Similarly, while occurring on a more regular basis, fan conventions primarily occur in key cities in North America. Thus, regardless of the frequency or form of event, there is no guarantee fans will be able to attend with logistical ease. With this in mind, survey participants were asked to consider their realistic willingness to travel to a fandom event. While these results must be taken with a grain of salt as willingness does not always equal action, they do provide insight into the ways fans consider their participation boundaries. When asked whether they would be willing to travel to another city in their state, 96.8% (n=273) of Taylor Swift fans and 91.4% (n=275) of *Supernatural* fans responded that they would. These numbers dropped to 84.3% (n=238) and 77.7% (n=234), respectively, when considering an interstate trip, and when it came to international travel, 28.5% (n=80) of Taylor Swift fans and 38.9% (n=117) of *Supernatural* fans indicated a willingness to go to such lengths for a fandom event. The flipped difference in these final results can be at least partially explained by the vastly more international nature of a concert tour, by which an artist is more likely to visit an individual's country.

Travelling to attend events is a well-established leisure behaviour, with Getz (2008, p. 416) proposing the concept of an "event leisure career", something he argues may manifest "in a progression from local to national and ultimately an international scale of travel". This builds on work by Green and Jones (2005) who frame sports tourism as a form of serious leisure. Lamont, Kennelly and Wilson (2012, pp. 1073–1076) also discuss the role of constraints within a sport-related event leisure career, noting that participants must negotiate a significant

range of “competing priorities” that impact their ability to travel for events. Such competing priorities were reflected throughout the interviews, where participants discussed a number of difficulties they faced in attending events related to their fandom.

Of the 13 interview participants across the two fandoms, 10 individuals were living in the United States. Inez was American but currently lived in New Zealand, while Mary and Charlie were both Australian, meaning they faced more significant restrictions to their event attendance due to the much lower frequency of events in the southern hemisphere. Before COVID, Mary’s fandom participation thus included international travel to attend *Supernatural* fan conventions. As there is only one dedicated *Supernatural* convention in Australia that Jared and Jenson do not always attend (Carroll 2017), Mary prioritised this travel to maximise her ability to interact with the celebrity objects of her fandom. She explained,

So, I try to, um, I try to go to like a couple back to back. So if there’s one in like Toronto one week and then like Chicago, the next I’ll go to Toronto and then stop over and like to see some friends somewhere for a couple of days or a week and then go to the next one. So [I] try to line them up.

This willingness to travel to another country demonstrates the importance of the event experience to Mary’s fandom participation and provides insight into the constraints she must negotiate to participate in the way she desired. Mary strategically scheduled her trips to maximise her event experience, which minimised the overall travel and cost required as part of this endeavour.

Similarly, Inez described some of the additional costs that came with being a fan of Taylor outside of North America, explaining,

Living in New Zealand, it’s like, you know, I can’t really afford to spend over a hundred dollars just to like get free shipping. Really. Like for one sweatshirt ... And yeah, with the concerts ... that’s why I didn’t go to 1989 because that was when I moved to New Zealand ... and she only came to Australia.

She added,

But a lot of the people that I am involved with in the New Zealand fandom did go to Australia for the 1989 concerts and, um, you know, they definitely like, may

possibly be elevated for that, you know, like, oh, I've been to, you know, some people I've been to X amount of concerts, I've seen Taylor sort of 29 times or whatever. Uh, but like, you know, it's hard for a lot of people who can't afford that ... we have some people in our group who have never been to a Taylor Swift concert and like, you know, that's not a problem. I don't consider them any less of a fan.

Inez claiming that individuals who travel overseas to attend concerts “may possibly be elevated” in the eyes of others within the Taylor Swift fandom echoes Green and Jones (2005, p. 177) who argue that “tourism experiences ... also serve as powerful signifiers of career attainment ... signalling one's status firstly as an insider, and secondly, one's status within the subculture”. However, Inez adding that she did not consider those who had never attended a concert, let alone travelled internationally for one, to be “less of a fan” demonstrates an understanding within fandom communities that such participation was more complicated than simply loving the fandom object more than others. Inez continued,

I do see ... how you think, you know, you kind of think those like thoughts in the back of your mind ... you're kind of like, “Wow, this person is like a super fan”. But at the same time, you know that they're not more of a fan. They just have more money and more opportunities.

Such quotes begin to present a more nuanced exploration of leisure participation behaviours by celebrity fans than that offered by Lee and Scott (2009, pp. 149–151) who argue that the more connected a fan feels to their celebrity object of fandom, the more likely they are to participate in constraint negotiation strategies.

The difficulty of negotiating constraints in event participation was discussed by a number of participants. Despite living in the United States, Dorothea discussed the potential constraints of travelling to see Swift in concert. She shared the process of attending a concert during a previous tour, explaining,

It was like a whole weekend and it was in Houston. We live in San Antonio. So like we had to drive there, we stayed at like a family's friend house, so like that was free, but some people have to pay for hotels or for more expensive travel. Um, and yeah, and I got like some of the fairly cheapest tickets and I know, that um, some of

those, like the tickets like down in the front by the stage were like thousands of dollars.

James also recounted an experience in which he faced constraints related to travelling to see Swift. He explained he had made plans to fly across the country to see her perform a set at a charity concert; however, after purchasing flights, he said,

I took a second look of my, like my bank account and I did the math. I was like, if I do this in like 3 months' time, I'm not going to have enough money to pay for rent. So, um, I got my money back from the flight that I paid for and I'm no longer going. So I guess for, for my current finances, financial situation, the We Can Survive concert did have a limit for me.

When discussing constraints to attending concerts, conversation with Dorothea also turned to Lover Fest, the Taylor Swift tour that had been announced just prior to the time the interviews took place in mid-2019 (before being cancelled in early 2020 following the beginning of COVID). She explained,

I know there has definitely been a lot of like ... some fans being like upset or feeling bad about it because there's only like two US shows at least for this year ... That's definitely created a lot of, only the people that can afford to like fly there and get those tickets for that like one night like can go. And I, I've definitely noticed, especially on like the subreddit that there have been a lot of people that are sad about that or upset about that because they're like, I can't go. Like, it's only in these two states. Like I can't drive there, I can't fly there.

Stanfill (2019, pp. 87–89) argues that the costs associated with attending an event, including transport and accommodation, should be considered as part of the overall price of participation. Considering these costs as part of the participation experience rather than leaving them unspoken allows us to understand a wider range of constraints faced by fans when participating in celebrity fandom communities. A fan does not simply “go” to a concert or fan convention, and engaging with the wider literature around event- and tourism-related leisure constraints allows us to gain a deeper understanding of why fans may be unable to participate in particular ways, especially those we may consider “key” to their fandom.

Despite the potential constraints, each participant from the Taylor Swift fandom discussed the centrality of concert attendance at various points of their fandom journey, especially as it related to their spending habits. Abigail said,

I paid like, a lot of money for the tour. Um, I, I mean it's obviously expensive. As I mentioned before, I'm a big fan of Taylor particularly, but I'm also a big fan of pop music generally, so I go and see big shows and they're always expensive. So it's not like her prices were out of line with other people.

Rebekah described her budget for buying tickets, stating,

I don't even look really, um, at the ones that close [to the stage] cause I, I won't spend that much money on the concert ticket even for her. I think a hundred dollars is my max. ... I might just be making this up, but I want to say like, or it is my belief that if someone had a really close ticket and resold it for \$2,000 [USD], that people would buy it, you know, so I know that it's ridiculous.

While Rebekah said this \$2,000 price tag might be her "making [something] up", in discussing a hypothetical maximum spend for a future tour, James – who had never been to a concert – said,

I think for me, um, a concert ticket on the floor, if it's over, this might sound ridiculous if it's, if it's over, \$2,000 [USD], I'm not doing it. If it's less than \$2,000, I probably, which, which, you know, is that good? Who knows? [Laughs].

Unlike at a convention where fans are able to meet the celebrity guests one-on-one, concerts have tens of thousands of attendees watching a stage. Interview participants spoke to the difficulty of balancing a desire to be close to Swift with the reality of ticket affordability. Betty – who was unable to attend the Reputation tour – said that watching the Netflix documentary of the concert gave her conflicted feelings. She explained,

I was like, oh, I really wish I had money to see this, this concert. But at the same time, not really because one, I've, I've seen her in concert, and two ... those concerts are so big that they're not really that personal.

Meanwhile, Dorothea explained the overall negotiation involved for fans in selecting concert tickets, saying,

I got like some of the fairly cheapest tickets and I know, that um, some of those, like the tickets like down in the front by the stage were like thousands of dollars. Um, and then again there's like people that are going to feel like, well I, if I can't pay for like those seats, like what am I just like sitting in the back?

This comment reflects the pressure fans feel to not only participate, but participate in a desired way. It is not enough to *be* at the concert; fans must meet expectations of proximity and status.

5.1.2.1 Conventions

While Taylor Swift fans attend concerts to gain proximity to their celebrity object of fandom, fans of *Supernatural* are able to get much closer by attending fan conventions. For many celebrity fans, face-to-face interaction with the object of their fandom is a central motivator for fandom participation (Ferris 2001, p. 26). As Ferris (2001, p. 28) argues, meeting a celebrity in a face-to-face encounter “provides something closer to an authentic interactional encounter than does merely viewing an actor portraying a character on-screen” (Ferris 2001, p. 28). Fan conventions are broadly considered to be the most common location for fans to engage in face-to-face interaction. Multiple forms of potential interaction between fans and the celebrity guests are on offer at these events, ranging from autographs and photographs through to long-form small-group meet and greets. A general entry ticket to a convention will not give you one-on-one interaction with a celebrity; however, it does give you the opportunity to see the celebrities on stage during question-and-answer panels and to purchase meet and greets at an additional cost (Booth 2016; Carroll 2017). At most fan conventions, different tiers of tickets are offered, with higher tiered tickets including celebrity interactions in their price (Booth 2016, pp. 45–46), although Creation Entertainment (n.d.) emphasise that even their highest tiered ticket requires photographs to be purchased at an additional cost.

The forms of engagement at fan conventions fit within what Ferris (2001, p. 33) deems “pre-staged encounters”. Such encounters are officially organised and run either for-profit in which fans pay to meet the celebrity or as part of wider marketing activities in which the meet and greet is connected to a book or album signing or similar promotional event. However, while fans are able to meet celebrities at such events, fan conventions and similar forms of prestaged celebrity encounters do not allow social interaction as we generally understand it. Instead, interactions are tightly controlled, with significant rules, security, and

time limits in place (Booth 2016; Carroll 2017; Ferris 2001; Hills 2015a; Hills & Williams 2005). Such restrictions are in place to ensure the celebrity maintains control of the encounter; they will engage with fans, but only on their own terms. Despite these restrictions, when proximity motivates fandom participation, fans are willing to play by the rules established by those in power so that they can achieve their ultimate goals of interacting with their celebrity objects of fandom.

As noted, *Supernatural* fans have significantly more opportunities to meet the objects of their fandom than fans of Taylor Swift. In the United States and Canada, Creation Entertainment run official *Supernatural* fan conventions, with fans across the two countries having over a dozen opportunities to meet the actors each year. While most fans will not actually go to all these (this is not to say that some will not attend multiple; as indicated in responses to the survey and interviews, many do), the simple fact that you can buy a ticket to meet the cast puts the role of interaction on a different, more tangible level to its place in the Taylor Swift fandom where this is not possible. Of the *Supernatural* survey participants, 55.8% (n=168) indicated they had met at least one of the actors from the show, and all interviewees had attended at least one convention, with all but Charlie having met the “main” cast (Jared Padalecki, Jensen Ackles, and Misha Collins). Ellen and Mary indicated they had been to the most conventions, with Mary – an Australian – saying she had been to “six or seven” international events, while Ellen said that at the peak of her convention attendance, she had been to “six in a year”. This notion of repeated attendance reflects the importance of these events to fans’ overall fandom experience. Fans are motivated to continuously seek proximity to their celebrity objects of fandom; a single encounter is insufficient to satisfy their desires. Jo shared that when attending fan conventions, she gets “as many photo ops as [she] possibly can”. Clarifying how many “as many as she can” was, Jo said in recent years it had been “at least 10, if not more”. When asked whether these photo ops were spread across all celebrity attendees, Jo said the majority were with Jared, as “each time [she had] met him ... in the past 2 years [she] had ... multiple photo ops with him”. The act of purchasing multiple interactions with a celebrity guest is a step further than just attending multiple events: it narrows the key motivator for attendance to the engagement with their object of fandom. While the series may have been the initial introduction to the fandom, it is the celebrities who drive continued participation.

While photographs and autographs are the primary manners in which fans engage with celebrities at fan conventions, they are not the only form of interaction that occurs. Ellen shared that at Creation conventions, she bought Gold-level tickets and often purchased the VIP add-on. When asked what the difference between a Gold and a VIP ticket was, Ellen explained,

So the gold ticket gets you in the first set of rows and you get your autographs of Jared and Jensen ... and Misha ... and then a number of other people. And then VIP is something you put on top of that and it goes by auction and with VIP you get a room to hang out in. And that's where everyone who's attending the con comes and visits your group for 10 minutes and then you get front of the line, everything except for Q&A at the panels and sometimes a table backstage.

Ellen also shared that the convention ran an auction system where fans were able to bid on further VIP experiences, usually in the form of extended small-group meet and greets. She described that these auctions happened "a few weeks before" the event and that the auction gave fans the chance to purchase a variety of options, including,

VIP ... and the 30-minute meet and greet with Jared, one with Jensen, [and] now they're doing the 45-minute adventure meet and greet with Misha, the 30-minute meet and greet with Misha ... then whoever else is at the show, they'll have 45-minute meet and greets ... [It's] also sometimes the special stuff, it's like the Loudon Swain acoustic jam will be auction rather than a set price ticket that you can just buy like the pyjama parties, like a set price ... it's usually like 10 to 20 slots per thing that they're auctioning.

When asked how much a VIP ticket cost, Ellen explained that due to the nature of the auction system, the price fluctuated. She said,

It should, when it's, when the prices are nice and the auction goes well, it should be like around \$1,500 to \$1,900 [USD] is, is usually, um, it's gone up as high as like \$4,000 or so. Yes, um in Vegas and in Hawaii, umm. And then, yeah ... it fluctuates. It's weird. Sometimes it goes for really cheap. There was one that went for like \$800 and that then it'll go like I said, \$4,000 in another city ... I don't think a VIP is worth \$4,000 ... I don't think it's worth \$2,000, but you know, it's an auction, so whatever it is.

Attending fan conventions requires a significant investment from fans (Lamond 2020, p. 39), and a number of interviewees shared the amount of money they spent on their attendance. Despite previously saying she did not think a VIP ticket was worth \$2,000, Ellen shared that she had once paid that much for a ticket, saying she “thinks” the most she ever paid was “\$2,222 ... it was all twos”. During the interview, Mary pointed out the wall where she displayed the photos from her convention meet and greets. While gesturing to the wall, she joked, “I never want to add up the actual value of that. I think I will cry”. Donna explained her budget for convention attendance had shifted over time:

The first one I spent probably about \$2,000 [USD]. This one, um, I’ve scaled back quite a bit and it’s probably around \$1,200 ... so like I think \$2,000 is my max. Like that was, that was me saying oh I’m going to go all out and you know, everything that I want to do with this one convention. Like I was convinced that I’d never be able to go to another one. So I wanted to do this one, you know, so that \$2,000 was a lot for me and I’m glad I did it, but it’s like, oh my God, how did I spend all that money?

Donna had previously mentioned going into debt to finance her convention attendance; however, as she noted, she remained “glad [she] did it”. This was a feeling shared by Jo who discussed the way she negotiated the role of convention attendance in her wider life. She explained,

It’s kind of my one vacation for the whole year, so I’ll save up money all year long and it’s, it’s my vacation so I’m going to go gold and I’m going to, you know, stay at the hotel where the convention’s at and you know, get as many ops photo ops as I possibly can. To me, it’s worth it.

This desire for fans such as Donna and Jo to seek celebrity engagement even if it involved sacrifice reflects the centrality of these interactions to their participation within the *Supernatural* fandom community. As previously noted, this behaviour demonstrates that the fandom is about *more* than a television series. These fans are not content to sit at home and watch a television show, nor are they satisfied with simply engaging with other fans or undertaking transformative content production. Seeking celebrity *is* their hobby, and thus fans are willing to negotiate the constraints they encounter as part of their participation to meet their goals. This reflects the costs associated with undertaking leisure careers discussed

by Stebbins (2014), as well as findings by Lee and Scott (2009, pp. 150–151) who discuss the positive relationship between interest in a celebrity and involvement in constraint negotiation.

One such way this is managed is through the construction of meaning from the interactions fans have with their celebrity objects of fandom. Donna admitted that she thought conventions were “way too expensive” but described the conventions as a place of “acceptance” where meeting the actors was “validating” as “they’re so nice and ... so genuine”. Jody acknowledged that while she did not personally enjoy attending fan conventions, she understood why other fans did, stating,

I mean, I get wanting to meet ... the person who plays your favourite character ... sometimes people ... the characters mean a lot to them. ... There are people who ... really connect with the character ... and then there’s a lot of people who see *Supernatural* as kind of a family.

Continuing this theme of fan admiration of the celebrity guests, Mary also highlighted the significance of meeting the cast, saying,

These are people you really admire and you look up to and you can kind of exist in that orbit for a little bit and almost gain a little bit of that positivity and influence and take it back into your life.

Ellen further emphasised the character of the actors, saying,

They give so much and they have so much heart and they want good for themselves, good for the people around them. And like, that includes us. ... Like they lift each other up and us.

Ellen continued sharing what motivated her to keep seeking interactions with the *Supernatural* cast, contrasting her experiences with times she had met other actors in similar settings:

Well at first I just wanted to be like, like anyone else that I’ve watched or whatever. Oh, I would like to meet them and if it’s ever happened, it happens one time. And I’m like, that’s cool. I met so and so like I’ve met Nathan Fillion at Comic-Con, I went in the line and got autographs and, done. And that’s it. These guys, it’s like different because it feels like they’re giving so much of themselves and their heart and they’re so accessible that I want to keep coming back to that.

In describing the *Supernatural* actors as “different” to other celebrities with whom she had engaged, Ellen demonstrates that it was not the allure of celebrity itself that made these interactions special but rather the specific individual and the para-social connection she had formed with them. Similarly, when asked what she liked about meeting the celebrity guests, Charlie emphasised the role of “making a connection ... maybe not a friendship but the chance for that moment to just be there and chatting with them”. This desire to share an authentic connection with the celebrity object of fandom echoes the results of my previous research in which attendees at a *Supernatural* fan convention were found to engage in processes of negotiation and imagination to transform their interactions into something more meaningful than a fleeting chance to say hello (Carroll 2017, pp. 59–60). Charlie went on to explain that her enjoyment of making these connections was the reason she sought “platinum passes” for the Australian conventions she attended. She said that these platinum passes gave fans a “Friday night meet and greet” where fans had the opportunity to “have a chat with them and make a little bit of a connection” before the larger general events of the weekend. Charlie expanded that having made that connection on the Friday night, when fans then had photographs with the celebrity during the event,

The photo is ... much more of a meaningful photo rather than a like, “Hey yeah, put my arm around you and smile” sort of thing. They were a lot more willing to play with you.

This comment from Charlie further reflects the desire from fans for *authentic* engagement with the celebrities they are meeting. However, the disconnect between what fans desire from a celebrity engagement and the reality of the experience was discussed by Jody who referenced non-Creation fan conventions when she said,

I like cons where fans can go up and talk to the actors without feeling like I have to give you \$200 just for 2 minutes of your time, you know?

As Jody here notes, in reality, these interactions are transactions in which the celebrity is obliged to speak to the fan (Carroll 2017, pp. 55–56). Rather than being understood as the kind of interaction one has with a friend, these interactions are better framed as akin to those within the service industry. Baym (2015, p. 16; 2018) coined the phrase “relational labour” to refer to “regular, ongoing communication with audiences over time to build social relationships that foster paid work”. She explained (Baym 2015, p. 16),

Relationships built through relational labor can entail all the complex rewards and costs of personal relationships independent of any money that comes from them. At the same time, the connections built through relational labor are always tied to earning money, differentiating it from affective labor.

In Baym's conceptualisation, the individual *must* participate in this labour not only to retain their audience, but to continue to build it. This concept, then, exists within the sphere of the economy of attention: the more attention an individual receives, the more likely they are to continue receiving attention (Franck 2019). We can see relational labour in practice via the actors from *Supernatural* who earn a significant portion of their income through appearances at fan conventions. Unlike Padalecki, Ackles, and Collins, these actors were not main characters on the show, instead playing supporting roles, in many cases, only for a handful of episodes. These individuals now attend up to 20 fan conventions a year, constituting a significant percentage of their income (Speight 2014; R Speight, personal correspondence, 7 May 2017). These actors are reliant upon ongoing engagement with fans to maintain their relevance and, in turn, livelihoods. As part of this relational labour, these celebrities are more "accessible" to fans than those with bigger "star power". One of the ways this occurs in practice is the "tiered" pricing structure of the various forms of interaction at fan conventions, with bigger stars – usually those who play the main characters in a series or film – charging more than those who play smaller roles. That is not to say that those who play the smaller roles are necessarily less popular than the main cast; rather, in many cases, their lower price makes them more appealing to fans who want the experience of meeting a celebrity guest but who may not be able to afford the higher price of the "main" stars. Mary spoke to this concept, sharing her experiences meeting the cast at various *Supernatural* fan conventions over her time within the fandom:

So Jared and Jensen, I've probably met four or five times. As you get kind of more into fandom, you kind of realise like the time you get to spend with them in terms of photo ops, uh, it's very rushed. So like you can't, you can't do some of the more like funny, jokey photo ops that you want to do. Um, so you kind of start leaning towards some of the, you know, still amazing and funny and charming people, but like the less popular at the convention and, uh, that's kind of what I did. So I probably have like 30 photos with Loudon Swain, uh, as opposed to like my four or five for Jared and Jensen.

These comments by Mary reflect the negotiations fans undertake when attending these types of fandom events to maximise the return on their investment. She understood that the smaller celebrities were able to provide a more personalised experience and, seeking this more authentic interaction, chose to prioritise engagement with them over those with higher celebrity status. This furthers the statements made by Charlie and Jody in which authentic connection was acknowledged as a primary goal of celebrity interaction.

Despite rationalising the value of fan conventions via the concept of connection, all the interview participants from the *Supernatural* fandom held strong opinions about the forms of interactions the events provided. Jody had the strongest of these opinions, not holding back in sharing her belief that the Creation conventions “really raped the fans” by making them “feel like they have to pay for every single interaction” and that they “always make [her] angry”. Jody emphasised the disconnect between wanting to enjoy conventions but being disappointed by their reality. She said,

I really want to go. I really want to have a good time. Everything is so cool. You know, I want to meet these people, I want to do the pyjama party and then I would spend money and go to them and be like, I hate this place. This is fucked. I hate the way they make me feel. ... I just have to remind myself that every time ... they advertise 'cause I'm like, “Oh that'd be so fun to see my friends”, and then I think, “Oh yeah. What it really means is sitting in a crappy chair you know, not really being able to talk to the actors”.

Similarly, Jo discussed the difficulties faced by many fans wishing to attend *Supernatural* fan conventions. She said,

They're [Creation] making it harder and harder for folks to come ... Um, the people that have met the guys the most because they've gone to so many conventions, not just creation cons but other cons. JIBCon [a *Supernatural* convention held in Italy], like all over the world, they've gone the different cons. Um, they've got the money so they're going to go and so Creation's making it more and more difficult for fans. So it's, it's a bit frustrating.

During their interviews, Jody and Donna both discussed the ways industry strove to commodify all aspects of fandom life. Jody explained,

I think, you know, people realised how much money they could make off of fandom ... I think there's so many more conventions now too. So I think like all the media companies know about it and know it's a huge gold mine.

The use of the term “gold mine” by Jody when discussing how industry viewed fandom reflects the exploitative nature of the relationship between the two. In this relationship, industry does not care about the core interests of fans; rather, they are aware of their desire for proximity to their objects of fandom and their willingness to make sacrifices to achieve that proximity. Similarly, Donna reflected on the cost of attending *Supernatural* fan conventions, saying,

They're far too expensive. ... You know, I think Creation kind of has ... latched onto our fandom and saw it as a cash cow and they just keep raising the prices and raising the prices. And I mean, you know, \$400 for a photo with Jared and Jensen is just kind of bonkers, ridiculous. But I'll pay for it. So they keep charging that, so, yeah. And you're not going to get everybody in the fandom to not buy them because they're too expensive to get them to lower the prices. So it's, it's far too expensive.

Donna's description of conventions as “a cash cow” echoes Jody's use of the term “gold mine”; however, her response also provides insight into why fans decide to keep participating. While there is a similarity here in the language used by Donna and the domestication metaphor applied by Stanfill (2019), Donna remained fully aware of the choices available to her in this situation. When she admitted the cost of a photo with Jared and Jensen was “bonkers” but not something that would prevent her from taking part, she was reflecting the economic reality of commodified fandom spaces. This echoes Mary and Ellen's earlier assertions that fandom experiences were akin to luxury items rather than necessities. As Donna explained, they are “not going to get everybody in the fandom to not buy them”, echoing the basic economic principle of supply and demand. If Donna wanted to meet the actors, she must pay what was being asked; otherwise, her only option was to sit back and watch other fans take her place (Booth 2016, pp. 48–49).

5.2 Rewarding fan behaviour: industry encouragement to play within the lines

Engagement with a celebrity is, by its very nature, a limited opportunity. Whether one can purchase an engagement in the form of a meet and greet or virtual interaction or needs to be chosen through a process of luck and/or labour, the engagement serves as a marker of status within fandom communities. The celebrity industry is aware of this and often increases the value of such engagements, with official accounts sharing images and stories of those “lucky” enough to interact with the celebrity object of fandom. By considering the role of both lovebor (Stanfill 2019) and brandom (Guschwan 2012) in celebrity fandom communities, this section moves from the ability of *Supernatural* fans to purchase opportunities for celebrity interaction to the Taylor Swift fandom where such interaction is offered only as a reward for “acceptable” forms of participation.

5.2.1 The friendship illusion

The relationship between fans and celebrities is a carefully curated illusion. Celebrities need fans to believe in the potential for reciprocation for fans to continue seeking their attention; however, fans are equally as willing to buy into this curation for their engagements to have meaning. Just as *Supernatural* fans focus on the validation they experience when meeting the cast at fan conventions, so fans of Taylor Swift engage in processes of imagination and negotiation to develop a connection with her image. Swift has built her career on this illusion of authenticity; she wants her fans to believe everything they see from her is real. This “performed intimacy, authenticity and access” turned Swift into “a consumable persona” (Marwick & boyd 2011a, p. 140), the creation of which can be traced to the earliest moments of her career. Swift was 16 years old when she released her self-titled album that was filled with songs about young love and heartbreak. Chittenden (2013, pp. 186–187) explains that “the intensely personal nature of her songs” makes her “popular with many ... who [can] relate to her”. Through her music, Swift depicts herself as a figure upon whom her fans can project their own experiences, especially those tied to the process of growing up (Kennedy 2014, p. 226; Théberge 2021, p. 1). This is something Betty reflected upon, explaining,

I definitely feel that I’ve grown up with her. I mean, if I were my age now when *Fearless* came out, I think it would have been less relatable. And yeah, like I was

young too, or younger than her ... I know a lot of people are like, they're the same age as her, so they're going through these exact same experiences. But for me, I think it's more of like, this is what I have to look forward to or this, this is like what it's going to be like.

Similarly, Inez discussed the connection she felt to Taylor as a teenager, saying,

In high school, um, I was taking these college classes and I took a poetry course and I took a creative writing class ... before [any] Taylor stuff came out. And so when Taylor did come out, I was like, "Holy crap. Has she been reading my diary?" Because there were a lot of things like, um, especially that song "Tim McGraw" where I was, um, like I'd literally written a story a year before about my ex-boyfriend and how we would just go driving in his truck and like get stuck in the middle of nowhere. Like, it was crazy, like that parallel. So to me, yeah, like we definitely had a lot of similarities and I think that really helped ... she was definitely like the right time for me.

These constructed similarities increase the connection fans feel with Swift, allowing stronger ties to develop than those individuals may experience with celebrity objects of fandom who do not emphasise these life stages.

In addition to the relatability of her music, Swift *actively* presents herself as a friend to and supporter of her fans. James explained,

A lot of people think that Taylor Swift really does care about them and she probably does and um, they feel like a personal connection to her ... [and] a lot of the music that she writes, um, if you've ever watched an interview with her, she will say, I am first and foremost a songwriter and secondly, a singer, performer. Um, and I think her writing and her songs resonate with a lot of people and, um, she just touched so many people's lives. Like I see people, you know, comment and tweet all the time like Taylor Swift literally saved my life, so like to meet the person that you believe literally saved your life. Like that. That's insane. How could life be any better than that?

James's mention here that he believes Taylor "probably does" care about her fans is not simply referencing the nebulous way all celebrities "care" for their supporters but instead a legitimate belief that Swift cares on an individual, personal level. In her interactions with

fans, Swift has developed a reputation for taking personalised interaction further than almost any celebrity before – or after – her. While most celebrity meet and greets are over in less than 30 seconds and held in a neutral location, Swift often invites chosen fans into her home for long-form group interaction. Swift is known for using social media to learn information about the fans she interacts with (something fans refer to as “Tay-lurking”) and using this knowledge to create moments of intimacy with her fans (Ehrlich 2015). Swift’s fan engagement strategy is so unique and tied to her best friend persona that it arguably could not be replicated by any other celebrity. In inviting fans into her personal space, Swift collapses the usually strict distance between the public and the private in the celebrity sphere. While it is unlikely her home as presented to fans is actually how she inhabits it on a day-to-day basis, the very act of opening any personal space to fans alludes that she views them on the same level as her *actual* friends. Additionally, these interactions are known as “secret sessions”, a title that reinforces the exclusivity and status for fans. While fans are aware that they happen, and before COVID were aware of an approximate schedule, the knowledge that – technically – a fan could receive a message inviting them to meet Swift at any time is a key tactic for maintaining consistent loyalty.

Celebrities and their teams are well aware of the importance of fan engagement, and Taylor Nation – Swift’s marketing team – leverage their awareness of fans’ desire to be noticed in sophisticated ways. Taylor Nation exists as Swift’s fan engagement proxy. While Swift has limited public social media use (especially post-2016 hiatus), Taylor Nation is not only extremely active on social media, but is also constantly engaging with fans. For fans, a social media engagement from Swift is considered the holy grail; however, being noticed by Taylor Nation is the next best thing. However, to be recognised, fans must behave in particular, courted ways. Rebekah described some of the observations she had made regarding the ways fans were noticed by Taylor on social media. She explained,

I’ve noticed that Taylor Swift isn’t on Tumblr looking at or reblogging or liking things that aren’t about her. So I definitely think it is a marketing strategy and a way to get closer to fans.

This observation reflects the fact that Swift, ultimately, is rewarding fans who undertake affective labour with opportunities for engagement. By handpicking fans from social media, she reinforces that fans must undertake unpaid marketing labour on her behalf in the hopes of being deemed a good enough fan – or a hard enough worker – and have their work

“compensated” through interaction. These rewards encourage fans to “act as co-marketers and salespeople” (Guschwan 2012, p. 20), with the visibility of their passion leveraged by Swift’s brand. The labour – or “lovebor” (Stanfill 2019) – these fans are undertaking comes in a variety of forms, with the common thread being, as Rebekah noted, that Swift must be the centre of the content. Additionally, when viewing content shared by Taylor Nation, one can see that one of the most popular forms of fan content is broadcasting emotional responses. Fans upload videos and photographs of themselves crying, screaming, and celebrating, tagging both Taylor Swift and Taylor Nation in the hope that their reaction will be noticed (Taylor Nation 2022a; 2022b; 2022c). This is the ultimate form of lovebor, which Stanfill (2019, p. 151) describes as “the work of loving the object of fandom and showing that love”, however also exists in direct contrast to claims by Booth (2015b, para. 1.4) that “Neoliberal fandom teaches us to devalue public affect”. While Booth (2015b, para. 1.4) argues “Emotional fandom is supposed to be hidden”, in sharing these reactions, Taylor Nation is reinforcing what constitutes approved forms of behaviour and participation and the ways fans should engage to be rewarded. This, then, begins to demonstrate the different forms neoliberal fandom can take depending on the fandom object. These modes of participation and reward were reflected upon by Rebekah, who in considering her own participation noted,

But because I’m not like, like throwing myself online and begging for attention and I’m just sort of doing my thing. Like, yeah, definitely like very pretty engaged in the fandom, but not anything that’s really self-promotional ... I don’t really see why I would be noticed by her.

This belief that she did not have a chance of being noticed by Swift because she was not “begging for attention” demonstrates the way this attitude of acceptable participation via performance trickles through the fandom, ending in resignation by fans who do not – whether by choice or other circumstance – participate in these ways.

5.2.2 Controlling fan behaviour

Maintaining an audience has always been the central aspect of celebrity itself, and this is more significant than ever in the social-media-centric modern economy of attention (Franck 2019). Without fans, celebrities cease to be, and as such, celebrities must engage in ongoing labour to sustain their fanbase. Unlike the musicians discussed in Baym’s (2015) initial

framing of relational labour, or the actors who must engage with fans at *Supernatural* conventions, the forms of interaction undertaken by Swift do not neatly fit this framework. While the interactions represent a form of relational labour, she does not *need* to meet her fans to make money and maintain her career. Should Swift decide to never engage with her fans again – something many celebrities do – her career would not be impacted in the same way as smaller musicians, such as those discussed by Baym (2015; 2018). However, as discussed in Section 5.2.1, the relational labour she chooses to undertake assists in building her reputation as a benevolent friend to her fans. Baym (2018, p. 176) argues, “relationships between musicians and audiences are inherently utilitarian for musicians”, and for Swift, the utility derived is the maintenance of her “authentic” image as a “best friend” to her fans. Thus, while not *economically* essential, it is central to her marketable persona. However, the lack of economic stakes combined with her perceived level of celebrity means that Swift need only infrequently communicate with her fans as each interaction holds significant value. Rather than “regular, ongoing communication” with their audiences, when Swift – and other celebrities of her calibre – engage with their audience in a direct way, it is more akin to a reward than a relationship. Instead of being in a form of debt to the audience, Swift holds all the power in the equation. The interactions reflect less a legitimate relationship and more a form of behavioural control. Such a strategy is a clear example of brandom, with Swift and her team carefully “cultivat[ing] ... [the] labor and loyalty” of their fans (Guschwan 2012, p. 26), as well as reflecting the “polic[ing] and disciplin[ing]” of fan behaviours emphasised by Booth (2015b, para. 1.3) as a marker of neoliberal fandom culture. One of the ways Swift prevents fan resistance is through the implementation of strict rules that fans must follow, not only after they are chosen for an interaction, but to even remain in the running for a future opportunity. The most significant of these rules is a cone of silence: individuals are only allowed to share specific details at specific times after the event has occurred, with the threat of being blacklisted from future engagements held over their heads. Betty explained this concept, saying that Taylor Nation is

very like, secretive about it ... Like [you can't] tell someone that you're going [or] tell someone where the location is because then they have to cancel it and rehaul it. And that actually happened this year. Um, they had to move the secret session, like they had to change cities because someone found out the location where they were going to pick them up and stuff.

Additionally, while celebrated by fans as a way for Swift to seem closer to them, the very concept of Tay-lurking functions as a form of panoptic control. Fans curate their social media presence under the impression that Swift could be observing their output at any given time, and depending on how their behaviour is perceived, they may be rewarded or punished. Betty explained this process, saying, “It’s really like you don’t want to do anything that will upset them”, reflecting the power held by Swift and her team. With the fear of being blacklisted from meeting Swift seemingly hanging over their heads, fans ensure their behaviour always fits the unwritten rules. They must constantly be seen to be performing lovebor: emoting, discussing, and, most importantly, supporting Swift. This concept of support was one of the most significant themes that emerged through both the survey and the interviews. During the survey, fans were asked to select from a list of provided options what they believed to be the most important trait of a dedicated fan of Taylor Swift, with a majority (35.9%; n=101) of respondents selecting “always has a positive attitude towards Taylor”. In a separate question, fans were asked to write a description of what they believed made someone a dedicated fan, and 41.5% (n=117) of survey respondents referenced supporting Taylor in their answers. Below is a selection of these messages, demonstrating the centrality of this concept to fandom attitudes:

Someone who has been a loyal fan and support Taylor through the different moments in her career.

Supports everything she does, doesn’t judge her decisions but trusts her and her artistic desires and goals, keeps up with her releases and makes an effort to understand the meaning behind each song, enjoys her music more than any other artist, appreciates her writing abilities and impact she has had on pop music, believes she is the greatest writer and performer of all time.

Supporting her and defending her when other people spew misinformed offensive opinions.

Showing up always in any way they can.

Continuously supporting Taylor, purchasing her merch, and going to several concerts per tour.

Someone who supports Taylor no matter what.

Supporting her at her toughest time.

Someone who supports her despite whatever criticism.

Unconditional support for Taylor, the growth of her career, and the overall wellbeing of the fandom.

Loving and supporting her throughout her career. And defending her when people have the wrong impression about something she's done.

The urge to defend her if people offend her. The persistence of supporting someone who doesn't know you.

Supporting her, buying various types of merch, listening to and loving all of her music, encouraging others to love it too.

Standing by her no matter what.

These themes of support – especially when framed as unconditional or as persisting through times when others may give up – demonstrate the importance of Swift as an individual to her fans. It is less her *music* that they are interested in and more her role as an imagined friend. She does not exist on a pedestal above and away from their lives but rather is a figure that they need to actively be there for in the same way that they may support a friend or family member. As one respondent noted, it is in “the persistence of supporting someone who doesn't know you” – notably not someone *you* don't know – that the most dedicated fandom lies. While the performance of this support is likely exaggerated on social media in the ultimate quest for attention, we cannot ignore the real and valid connection and feelings behind the displayed lovebor.

5.2.3 Rewarding fan spending

In addition to the attention gained from lovebor, one of the most significant forms of participation rewarded by Swift and her team is the purchasing of merchandise. The Taylor Nation Twitter account will respond to, engage with, and share messages from fans who provide proof of purchase in the form of screenshotted check-out confirmations or pictures of the items taken after receipt. This reflects Gilbert's (2018, p. 327) argument that such “rewards ... are predicated on the fan's role as consumer”. Discussing sports teams,

Guschwan (2012, p. 21) argues, “Understanding the team as brand gives insight into how teams cultivate and manage the strong feelings of attachment that many consumers have”. Applying this framework to celebrity fan management strategies allows us to develop a deeper understanding of how the celebrity object of fandom is not so much an individual as they are a business. As fans of Taylor Swift become more entrenched in their interest in her as a celebrity, they are exposed to multiple layers of participation potential. They can listen to her music, but as they watch her interviews and learn more about her as a person, a desire for connection grows. And when they learn that there is an avenue to meet her, that *if* they buy the merchandise and *if* they tweet about it at the right moment, there is the slightest potential that they may be noticed by Taylor Nation and, in turn, by Swift herself, they are all too willing to do so, further reflecting the place of fandom within a neoliberal celebrity culture. This journey is representative of the stages of a leisure career in which after interest is developed, the journey to learn more and discover the ultimate goal – in this case, meeting Swift – takes place, followed by a commitment to undertaking “the utmost pursuit of it” (Stebbins 2014, pp. 40–41). The emphasis in this situation is ultimately on the concepts of *if* and *potential*, as any celebrity attention on social media is significantly based on luck (Chin 2018, p. 251). However, much like those who regularly participate in the lottery, fans are willing to pay to be in with the chance of receiving the ultimate jackpot. In framing the Taylor Swift fandom as a *brandom* in which purchase is framed as a road to reward and interaction, we can see that fans are trained as consumers; however, we should pause before assuming this is against their will.

Swift is known for releasing multiple physical versions of her albums to encourage repeat purchasing and collecting from her fans. At the time the interviews took place, Swift had just released *Lover* that came in four different versions. Rebekah discussed this release and the tactics behind it, explaining,

I think their marketing or whatever it is that they’re doing, just their, their business plans are so clever because the thing about the *Lover* release is that it’s not new music on different albums. It’s just the new diaries. And even I, I was like, “That’s so stupid. I’m only going to get one come on”. And the day of I was like, “I can’t help it. I need them all”. And I was like, “I can’t afford that. What am I doing?! This is so ridiculous”. Like I totally see right through it and I buy into it. Um, but I, I do think there is something to be said and for them promoting people who’ve bought tons and tons and even Taylor posting on her, her accounts, not just the Taylor

Nation but like singling people out, reposting their photos. Um, I think it's brilliant and sort of evil [laughs].

When Rebekah says, "I see right through it and I buy into it", she is reflecting the fact that even when fans are aware of what Swift is doing, they still want to participate. This begins to negate the claims by Stanfill (2019, p. 11) who argues fans often "do not ... fully understand" the ways their participatory practices are shaped by industry. The question of black-and-white exploitation of fans is complicated through not only the realisation that fans are happy to be willing participants, but these forms of participation can indeed be central to their fandom experience. While Rebekah jokingly refers to Swift's marketing tactics as "sort of evil", she is acknowledging that there is excess at play but that Swift has a deep understanding of the consumption practices of her fans. Swift is aware that many of her fans are willing to purchase whatever she puts in front of them and leverages this by releasing – arguably – excessive amounts of merchandise. The year following the release of *Lover* and its four versions, she released *folklore* with eight separate editions of the physical album and eight separate editions of the vinyl in celebration of the fact this was her eighth album (these editions were separate in design only, with the actual musical content remaining consistent across the board). However, as Rebekah shows, Swift does not *force* her fans to purchase these albums and merchandise but rather creates an environment in which the process of purchasing becomes a part of the overall fandom experience. Just as listening to an album or attending a concert can help fans feel closer to their object of fandom, so too can purchasing merchandise, especially when there is even the slightest chance that doing so can bring them the ultimate reward: attention from their favourite celebrity.

5.3 Conclusion

This chapter addressed the question "How do fans negotiate participation within commodified fandom spaces?" It was argued that for many fans, the desire for approval from, and interaction with, their favourite celebrity is a primary motivation for fandom participation. What this desire looks like in practice was explored via the concept of industry-courted and sanctioned forms of participation within neoliberal fandom spaces (Booth 2015b). By demonstrating the ways fans negotiate the various constraints they face to achieve their ultimate goal of meeting – or attempting to meet – their celebrity object of fandom, this chapter continued to frame fandom participation as less a transformative space in which fans

counter industry practices and more a leisure pursuit in which sacrifice and economic commitment are accepted as necessary parts of the journey.

The chapter first explored the overall commodified fandom landscape, analysing both the actual amounts fans spend on their participation, as well as the amounts they would be willing to spend. This data was placed within the context of existing data on population-level entertainment leisure expenditure and market research into various forms of annual fan spend and shown to reflect average leisure behaviour. Fan spending was broken down into the categories of merchandise, events, and celebrity interaction, with a focus given to the ways fans negotiate the economic constraints they encounter when participating in these ways. It was shown that the importance of fandom to individual identity and feelings of belonging contributed to the motivation for fans to negotiate these constraints. However, participants also emphasised that being unable to overcome the constraints did not reflect on someone's loyalty to the object of fandom. While fans discussed what they perceived to be the excessive amounts charged by industry to participate in celebrity fandom communities, they were also clear that participation was not essential or something they were being unwillingly forced into, reflecting an awareness of the "unstoppable" nature of consumption within fandom spaces (Numerato & Giulianotti 2018, p. 340). Finally, this chapter explored the concept of celebrity-courted fan behaviour. It examined the way Taylor Swift frames herself as a friend to her fans and uses the lure of attention to encourage participation through the purchase of merchandise and online displays of lovebor (Stanfill 2019). It was argued that Taylor Swift's fandom is arguably more of a *brandom* in which fans are controlled and "cultivated" as ideal consumers (Guschwan 2012, p. 26). However, it was shown the desire for fans to engage with Swift meant that even when fans were aware of this control, they were willing to continue participating in the hope of being given attention.

With the role of celebrity engagement within these communities now established, the next chapter turns to the role of these interactions on intra-fandom social networks.

Chapter 6. Fandom friendships and hierarchies

The previous chapter explored the ways fans participate and consume within commodified fandom spaces. This chapter builds on this to explore the impact of these practices on the social structures of fandom communities. When discussing fandom communities, it is typical for emphasis to be given to the first word in the phrase; we discuss *fandoms* and leave the *communities* as a taken-for-granted side concept. When “communities” are discussed, it is often interchangeably with the word “cultures” (Hills 2017a; Hellekson & Gray 2011), in which overall groupings are examined on a macro scale, rather than on the micro level of individual social lives. It is these social connections, however, that allow us to more fully understand how fans participate within fandom spaces. Thus, giving focus to the ways fans engage with each other and the weight given to this engagement as part of their overall fandom experience can allow us to develop a greater understanding of how fandom communities function as *communities*. Bourdaa (2018, p. 392) describes community as “primordial” for fans as “a place where they can find people who understand their passion and who will share it with them”. However, the way individuals share their fandom experiences varies significantly, both across – and within – fandom communities, something that is rarely explored in existing literature where individual case studies are the norm. Exploring the formation of social structures in both the *Supernatural* and Taylor Swift fandom communities allows us to observe whether these structures are as homogenous as we are often led to believe or whether greater nuance is required when considering their role within fandom spaces. As outlined in the two preceding chapters, the role of celebrity and the place of transformative participation differs dramatically between these two communities, and as such, it makes sense that their social landscapes would reflect this. As noted by Bourdaa (2018), the relationships present within fandom communities are built around a shared love for a common object of fandom, with this love responsible for the ways the communities are shaped and maintained. In addition to the para-social relationship fans experience with celebrities, these connections also serve as a basis for fans to connect with others within the fandom space, creating what Hills (2015a) describes as “multisocial interaction”. In multisocial interactions, “para-social interactions are displayed and shared between fans instead of merely working to fantasize a dyadic communion of the individual fan and specific celebrity” (Hills 2015a, p. 479), with the celebrity, therefore, serving as a glue to the fandom friendship. However, this is complicated when, as outlined in Chapter 5,

the illusion of a realised social connection is leveraged by celebrities, and fandom participation becomes less of a place to bond and more of a space to seek attention. Thus, while some individuals are motivated to participate in fandom communities by the notion of community itself, building on data presented in Chapters 4 and 5, this chapter seeks to further our understanding of the nature of community in fandoms bound by industry norms. To do this, it asks two questions:

RQ3. How does community function within commodified fandom spaces?

RQ4. What is the relationship between ideal consumers and intra-fandom hierarchies?

In answering these questions, fandom spaces are first positioned as imagined communities (Anderson 2016) in which a shared connection to an object of fandom creates common identities and social bonds. The concept of “multisocial interaction” (Hills 2015a) is introduced to examine the interwoven relationship between intra-fandom friendship and engagement with the object of fandom and the ways these priorities can differ between fans and across time. However, as community belonging is impacted by an individual’s ability to participate, Fine and van den Scott’s (2011) “wispy community” framework is applied to demonstrate the varying levels of commitment to community within fandoms and the ways connections are leveraged across varying types of participation. This then builds to an examination of intra-fandom hierarchies, exploring their structure from the perspective of the fans involved. The concept of attention capital is used to explain the impact of celebrity interaction on the creation of fandom status and hierarchies, with Franck (2019, p. 12) arguing, “proximity to celebrity makes a little celebrity”. Such hierarchies are connected to the behaviours encouraged by industry in which commitment to following the “rules” of participation creates status systems. However, as not all fans have the ability – or the desire – to participate in these ways, hierarchies are not universal. Ultimately, this chapter argues that for fans who choose to participate within the official industry-approved fandom boundaries, status and hierarchies are an inherent part of the experience. In framing fandom as a leisure activity, we can see that while some fans do deliberately participate in a quest for popularity, others “opt out” of this quest and seek stronger ties of friendship, and yet others still simply engage with those who share in their hobby (Fine & van den Scott 2011, p. 1321). However, within this process, fans must negotiate the reality that a focus on building a network of strong ties frequently exists in conflict with the acceptance by the object of fandom gained via approved methods of consumptive participation.

6.1 Wispy fandom communities

The concept of community is arguably the most significant sociological aspect of fan studies (van Krieken 2019a, p. 107). Just as in wider sociology, we use the term “community” to refer to the collection of individuals who share a common space, whether that be physical or virtual (Bruhn 2011). In the context of fandom spaces, communities are formed via bonds individuals share with their objects of fandom. These, in turn, connect them to others across the globe who share similar bonds, allowing them to feel as though they inhabit the same space. It is thus undeniable that fandoms exist as imagined communities in which fans believe in a shared identity despite that they “will never know most of their fellow members” (Anderson 2016, p. 6). The naming conventions of fandom communities further strengthen this; just as nations come together under a shared title, so too do fandoms use collective nouns to foster a sense of belonging. That is why, regardless of where they physically are in the world, fans of Taylor Swift identify with the label “Swiftie”, just as fans of the K-Pop group BTS identify as “ARMY” or fans of Doctor Who “Whovians”. These labels are not always officially recognised or promoted by the object of fandom but nonetheless create a shared identity for fans to claim (Hills 2015a, pp. 477–478; Peyron 2018; Tarvin 2021).

While this basic structure of connection remains broadly consistent across all types of fandoms, it is imperative to remember that the nature of the object of fandom inherently changes the specific ways these communities are formed. As examined in Chapter 4, when a fandom develops around a textual object such as a television series or film, fans engage in transformative modes of participation separate from the official object itself. Such communities, Bourdaa (2018, p. 392) explains, can be

considered as both an interpretative community (Radway 1984), in the sense that fans will decode together the meanings of the narrative, and as a social community, in the sense that fans share a social bond.

However, when a celebrity is the object of fandom, community formation takes a different shape. The para-social relationship between a fan and their favourite celebrity is the impetus for participation in celebrity fandom communities. While this relationship is imagined, it plays a very real role in the overall social structure of the fandom community. Observing the ways community is structured and functions in the *Supernatural* and Taylor Swift fandoms provides insight into the impact of the celebrity object of fandom on the development of these

spaces. Within these communities, the network of fan social ties is intersected by the celebrity, with all fan–fan connections – at least initially – being formed around their existence. This is especially true for celebrity-centric fandom communities in which seeking engagement with the celebrity is a primary motivation for participation. Hills (2015a, p. 471) describes this phenomenon as “multi-social” in which “a concentrated emotional focus on a particular celebrity can ... provide a kind of fan-cultural ‘glue’ binding fan communities together”. Similarly, van Krieken (2019a, p. 105) describes these relationships as functioning “as social cement and a basis for community formation”. Framing relationships within fandom communities as multisocial allows us to understand how fans can desire engagement and interaction with the object of their fandom, while developing significant social bonds with others who share this same goal. This concept was reflected upon by Donna, who explained the ways her fandom friendships have been shaped by the connection she feels to Jared Padalecki. She said,

I tend to put a lot of it on Jared, but it’s, it really is the community that did that because once I, you know, got into the Always Keep Fighting and everything, then I started connecting with other people and that support system, you know, kind of held me up while I was working to get through all of that. So it’s really an amazing thing to me ... with the show ending, I have no fear that I’m still going to have this community. You know, a lot of people are very upset and you know, think that everything’s just going to go away and all of this stuff and the connections that I’ve made with people, the friendships that I’ve made, I know those aren’t going to go away ... And even if you know, the conventions stop or whatever, that community is still going to be there.

Similarly, Ellen described how for her, conventions were a mix of engaging with the actors and catching up with friends she had not seen in a while. She explained,

For Burcon [convention in Burbank, CA], oh, like yes. All right. I haven’t seen Misha in a while. That’s going to be great. And um, Osric I haven’t seen Osric in forever. Um, so I’m excited about that, but then I’m also excited like, oh, okay, I didn’t see Tasha in a while and I think Olivia is going to be there and it’s like and and and. And then it’s like, I’m sure there’s people that I know from other cons that maybe I don’t keep in touch with all the time. Um, but when I see them at events or cons, I was like, oh yeah. And then it’s like, “Oh my God, you’re here. This is

awesome!” Yeah. Oh, so many people. All that’s on my mind sometimes, but yeah, so it’s both.

Jo also discussed the intersection of friendship and passion for the show at conventions, explaining that she loved

getting to talk to the people, not just about *Supernatural* but about anything ... Um, when you do build a bond with somebody and actually seeing them or finally meeting them for the first time. It’s just nice. It’s just nice to get it in a way and just feel okay about loving a show this much.

This validation of feelings for an object of fandom was also reflected upon by Inez, who emphasised the importance of extended community within the Taylor Swift fandom, saying,

I think that is one of the reasons to be open about the fact that you are a Taylor Swift fan online as, because for the most part the fans are really good and the fans are really supportive of other fans ... I think that is one good thing that I, I didn’t really realise before being exposed to the worldwide community is that, you know, especially I guess too, coming from it in 2019, like if you like Taylor Swift, you kinda just have to own it because yeah. If you know, people are either going to like you or dislike you for that and people will make judgements on you. So if you’re open about it, you can find the other people and they’re generally you know, pretty kind and supportive.

Hills (2015a, p. 464) refers to this as the “shared fan-cultural performance and validation of para-sociality” in which meaning and belonging are created through the experience of bonding with other fans over the imagined celebrity relationship. The role of these bonds varies between both individual fans and overall fandom communities based on established structures and norms. Van Krieken (2019a, p. 102) explains fan–celebrity engagement can either be the “primary” or “secondary” aim of celebrity fandom participation. These, then, are not fixed positions but rather a spectrum that can move according to changing circumstances and opportunities. This was reflected upon by Mary in her discussion of “lobby-con”. The concept of lobby-con was brought up by multiple participants in the *Supernatural* interviews, and Mary explained it as being where fans “just hang out in the lobby [of the fan convention] and see friends”. Mary discussed how celebrity engagement had broadly shifted from being a primary motivator for her fandom participation to a secondary one. She noted,

So I had met the actors a few times, but it was also my priority became seeing those friends that I'd made as opposed to seeing these actors who were lovely and polite and like you have amazing stories and experiences with, but you didn't form like as strong a connection as you could with you know, someone you're rooming with for 5 days and the six of you cram into like a two-bedroom room.

However, she continued, she personally did not *just* lobby-con as ultimately, she “wants to be able to go and have [the] experiences” of engaging with the celebrity guests. Thus, even though Mary herself described friendship as being her “priority” within the fandom, she could not let go of the desire to continue meeting the celebrities. In understanding Mary's ongoing fandom participation as part of an overall leisure career, we can see that the ultimate goal will remain seeking this celebrity engagement, with the connections with other fans reflecting the “rewards” Stebbins (2014, pp. 10–11) argues “attract and hold” participants to their leisure activity. Stebbins (2014, pp. 10–11) outlines that “social attraction” and “contribution to the maintenance and development of the group” are two key “social rewards” (or what we can understand as motivations for participation) in the development of a leisure career. This is not necessarily the same as friendship (although it can be) but rather includes “associating with other ... participants ... [and] participating in the social world of the activity” (Stebbins 2014, p. 10), regardless of the extent of this association.

This shifting role of friendship throughout the fandom experience was present in the survey and interview responses from Taylor Swift fans. When asked if she had made friends within the fandom, Abigail responded,

Me personally, not really. Like there are a couple of people who I'll message, you know, on those forums and we know each other's names and vaguely who we are and you know we're friendly with each other. But I haven't made proper friendships.

Similarly, asked about the role of friendship within the Taylor Swift fandom community, Rebekah said she “definitely” believed it was an important part of the fandom. However, interestingly, she then discussed experiences that were not her own. She said,

I especially [think] this like highest tier that I've put in my brain. I think a lot of them are all friends and they all like meet up because now they all either live in LA

or New York. Um, not all of them, but a lot of them. Um, and so I know they are all really, really close.

Rebekah continued by referring to “the girl”, singular, that she was friends with within the fandom. She noted that she did not “ever talk to her about Taylor Swift really” but rather they discussed fandom gossip or “reach out about [their] personal lives”. Thus, while significant connections are possible, it is important to acknowledge that community is not the same as friendship and that individuals within a fandom space can be connected without sharing a significant relationship or bond. As Anderson (2016, p. 35) notes, within imagined communities, individuals are

well aware that the ceremony [they] perform is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence [they are] confident, yet of whose identity [they have] not the slightest notion.

This “ceremony” being “performed” within the imagined communities of fandom is the very act of participation itself: fans simultaneously watch, listen, share, celebrate, and enjoy their objects of fandom while aware of, but distanced from, others doing the same. When connections do occur, they are welcomed; however, fans know that they belong to a community even when they are not participating in a specific social circle. This, in many ways, reflects what Fine and van den Scott (2011, p. 1321) deem “wispy communities”, a term used to describe a form of imagined community that is “limited in time and space” and in which belonging has “the potential of being displaced by other more insistent identities”. To Fine and van den Scott (2011, p. 1320), such communities are often found at “an intersection of individuals, cultural identity, and leisure worlds” in which “participants ... tak[e] up membership for a finite period of time with a bounded group that shares common interests”. The membership and identity construction is no less valid than that experienced by those for whom it plays a more significant role; however, it “is neither continuing nor insistent and exists primarily in latent memory to be activated when appropriate” (Fine and van den Scott 2011, p. 1321). As discussed in Chapter 5, the cyclical nature of official content releases impacts the ways fans participate in fandom spaces, and so many fans engage, disengage, and re-engage along these timelines. Many of these wispy moments occur in commodified spaces: individuals bond over the process of making a purchase, attending an event, awaiting a release. Abigail, for instance, discussed going to a JB Hi-Fi store to purchase the deluxe edition of *Lover* on the day of its release. She explained that she “lined

up [and] there were like half a dozen of us or something waiting for that to come out because there were a very small amount of those albums”. As Fine and van den Scott (2011, p. 1320) explain, in that moment of shared fandom, Abigail and the other fans waiting to purchase the album had “become briefly, a wispy community: tight-knit, but quickly unraveling once they exit[ed]” the store. This phenomenon could also be seen through a story told by James about his time in New York during the release of *Lover*. He recounted,

So he [his new friend Alex] was in New York for release week, so he was going to GMA [Good Morning America] and I couldn't go. But what I did was I went at like 11:30 at night just to stand in line with everybody else. And I stayed there until four, and then went home, went to work and everything, which was really stupid [laughs].

Again, this experience of briefly coming together with a group of like-minded fans who share the aim of seeing Swift in person demonstrates a wispy community in action. Most fans in the line will not speak to each other, nor will they likely ever see each other again. Just like football fans who share moments of connection with their fellow fans seated around them at a match before returning home to focus on their individual connection to the team, these fans are briefly bonded by their shared passion. Fine and van den Scott (2011, p. 1321) argue that “what characterizes wispy communities is the assumption that the basic form of connection among participants is acquaintanceship (that is, weak ties)”. The contrast between weak and strong ties (Granovetter 1973) within fandom communities varies significantly both within, and between, specific groups and is broadly dependent on the overall aims of participation. As Fine and van den Scott (2011, p. 1321) note, “Considerable differences exist in how participants conceptualize their relationship with the groups in which they participate”. For such Taylor Swift fans – whose primary aim of participation is engagement with Swift herself – these brief encounters with other fans are simply physically experienced proof that they are not alone in their fandom rather than any great friendship-building experience. These themes were further evidenced when, compared to the *Supernatural* fandom, discussions of friendship in the Taylor Swift fandom produced considerably more variable results. When survey participants were asked what the most significant aspect of their fandom was, 41.9% (n=126) of *Supernatural* fans indicated it was friendship formation. In contrast, just 21.7% (n=61) of Taylor Swift fans selected this option. This demonstrates the significant difference in the roles that friendship often plays within these two communities and begins to provide insight into the nonhomogeneous nature of community across fandom spaces. As van Krieken (2019a, pp. 102–103) argues, fandom built around celebrity engagement can often be

“private and individual”, in which the experience is as much about identity formation and self-expression as it is any particular community participation. As explored in Chapter 5, for many fans of Taylor Swift, a connection to Swift often began with her being seen as a guide to growing up. This reflects what van Krieken (2019a, p. 105) describes as “the emotional incorporation of the performer into the process of self-formation”, and while, as he notes, this is often connected to an overall fan community, this is not necessarily always the case. However, this is not to say that friendship is not a key part of the participation experience for any Taylor Swift fan. As one of three interview participants who classified themselves as having friends from within the Taylor Swift fandom, Inez discussed the mix of online and real-world friendships in her New Zealand-based fandom participation. She shared,

So New Zealand has our own, we have our own Facebook group, um, that came out of the Swift Life [short-lived fan app created by Swift] because the Swift Life was demoed in New Zealand. So New Zealand got it before the rest of the world did. And so we had sort of built like this little close-knit community in the app and then when it went worldwide, it was just like chaos ... So we then sort of moved our little community to Facebook and we have like a hundred and something people that’s in the, like the Swift Life, New Zealand Facebook group ... I’ve definitely, yeah, I’ve made some friends out of it. We’ve had some meetups in Wellington, which has just been really cool because umm you know, we’re quite, we’re all quite different people, but we just have this one random thing in common that we like Taylor Swift ... And yeah, we just have meetups. We have like group messages, and you know, it’s just like, you know, any normal friend that you meet on the internet.

Similarly, James discussed both social media and real-world encounters as facilitating friendship within his fandom participation. He explained,

So on, on Tumblr, there are a few people that I just messaged, you know, a good amount that kind of just like started talking to me on there and I’ve made a few friends that way. Um, one of them I talk to every day. In person? A few but not until this summer because ... I worked with the New York Mets over the summer, so I was in New York ... Um, I had met a guy named Alex at a Mets game, believe it or not, he was wearing a Reputation shirt. So I was like, well shit, I gotta go talk to this guy. So like I did and we just talked about, you know, Taylor Swift for like 45 minutes ... when I met Alex, he introduced me to a few others, um, that he was

there with. Um, so I would say like in person, like actual friends, like five, six, um, and then like online a few more. Not a lot. Yeah, definitely, definitely something I would like.

These experiences highlight that friendships ultimately occur on an individual level rather than there being any one experience we can claim as universal to either a particular fandom community or fandom communities as a broader phenomenon.

6.1.1 “Family don’t end with blood”⁶: close friendships in fandom communities

While fan conventions are also a form of wispy community (and, in fact, one of the examples provided by Fine and van den Scott), the ways *Supernatural* research participants discussed the enduring nature of both their identity as a fan and their intra-fandom friendships reflect the more significant role of such community gatherings in their lives. The *Supernatural* fandom community is known as the *Supernatural* “family” (often stylised as SPN Family/SPN Fam), with interview participants all speaking to the centrality of this concept. When asked to define what the *Supernatural* family meant, Donna explained,

Well, for me personally, it’s the, the idea that family doesn’t end with blood, you know, that line from the show. It’s, you know, I have people who I can turn to in a time of need in a time of joy, who are sometimes closer to me than my actual family. It’s just the, the friendships and the bonds that we’ve created are so tight. Like they’re, we’re, it’s just family, you know, it’s, it’s people that you can’t imagine your life without.

Similarly, Ellen described the fandom by saying, “It’s friendship. It’s family”. While the initial inspiration for this framing comes – as Donna noted – from the show itself, its ongoing use and relevance to the fandom represents the importance of community to many fans. This reflects a point made by van Krieken (2019a, p. 103) who, while not discussing the *Supernatural* fandom, explained, “The relationship with a celebrity ... can often constitute an important basis for real-life social interaction ... that fans will often describe ... as their

⁶ Manners & Kripke 2008

family”. However, Jo and Mary both discussed the fact that “family” did not necessarily mean tight-knit friendships. Jo noted,

My mom has said this for years, you know, or certain, you know, she loves all of her family. She loves all of her family no matter what. She just sometimes doesn’t like some of their ways. And I mean that’s, that’s what family is. I mean, that’s what we are. We don’t like the drama, but we love everybody and want to help everybody.

This was echoed by Mary, who said,

It’s like any family, there’s going to be people you don’t like and you’re going to have that one uncle who’s like really annoying. But you know you’ve got to stick with him because he’s always going to be there. And it’s like, it’s a really accurate representation ’cause there are people that you love and there are people that you know, you basically drop everything for and then there are people that you just, you don’t get along with, but you know they’re not bad people. And then there are people who you’re like completely morally opposed to, but you also see like some of the good they do. It’s really good way of like kind of seeing the black like less than, than the black and white or the shades of grey within people. And family’s just really accurate because that’s kind of what a family is. It’s not, it’s not, you love each other unconditionally and that’s it. It’s like, yeah, you love each other, but like sometimes you’re fucking annoying [laughs]. So I think that was a very accurate representation, I guess.

While Jody noted that she considered herself a “cousin” in the *Supernatural* family rather than a central member, she emphasised the importance of friendship and community to her overall fandom experience. She said,

I have so many friends in fandom ... I’d say a good 80% of my friendships are, you know, through fandom one way or another ... a lot of people I’ve met through online fandom have been like, you know, “Oh, sure, you can stay at my house since you’re in Texas”. And it’s like immediately we feel like we’re, we’ve known each other forever.

Mary also discussed what community within the fandom meant to her, explaining,

I've made a lot of amazing friends from it as well, which I think is like the really big takeaway. It's, it's a place you can go and just kind of be, uh, earnestly and honestly yourself.

The strength of these statements ultimately reflects the importance of friendship to the overall experience of participating within the fandom, with these connections also representative of traditional depictions of fandom social spaces (Bourdaa 2018; Chadborn, Edwards & Reysen 2017; Phillips 2011). To these fans, the network of like-minded individuals they had built was a key motivator for their continued participation, relegating celebrity engagement to “secondary” status. This was further demonstrated by Ellen who explained that she

keep[s] ... coming back for the entire family ... and that experience and having that, “Oh my God, the world isn't horrible”. 'Cause we've got hundreds of people and we're all together and we're all having a good time and it's happy. And we like each other.

However, in applying a leisure career framework, we can see that even when celebrity engagement becomes a “secondary” motivation for continued participation within the fandom space, it does not change the fact that seeking this celebrity interaction is, ultimately, the overarching leisure pursuit being undertaken. As Stebbins (2014, p. 118) notes, as leisure careers progress, individuals become “deeply immersed in the surrounding social world”, with the social rewards on offer being as important to continued participation as the “personal” rewards – that is, the individual achievements that come with participation in the leisure pursuit (Stebbins 2014, p. 10). Thus, as it was the desire for engagement with the celebrity objects of fandom that drew fans to these forms of participation in the first place, rather than a quest for community, the network of fellow fans they met and engaged with through fan conventions represented part of the social world of their leisure pursuit rather than being the key phenomenon in and of itself.

6.2 Celebrity attention

In seeking engagement with the celebrity object of fandom, fans are ultimately trying to gain one thing: attention. The ultimate desire is to both be noticed by the celebrity and to have other fans notice – and reward – this noticing. This, then, reflects the economy of attention and attention capital (Franck 2019). To Franck (2019, p. 9), celebrity is “the status of being a major earner of attention”; however, it is not just celebrity as it is typically understood that

benefits from the accumulation of attention. As Franck (2019, p. 12) argues, “Mere proximity to celebrity makes a little celebrity”, and thus, it becomes helpful for us to expand our application of the concept to our understanding of fans and intra-fandom social structures. In explaining the economy of attention, Franck (2019, p. 12) describes “an accounting system ... which quotes ... the social share price of individual attention”, in which the value of attention received is impacted by whom the attention is coming from. When fans seek engagement with a celebrity and then either have this play out on social media or return to social media to share the encounter, the economy of attention comes into play.

As explored in Chapter 5, fans undertake various forms of labour in an attempt to gain the attention of their celebrity object of fandom. While this has the potential to be rewarded by the celebrity, it also impacts the nature of the fandom itself. Interview participants from the Taylor Swift fandom discussed the impact of fans attempting to gain Swift’s attention on the social structures of the community. Discussing Tumblr fandom, Rebekah explained,

I know a lot of people have like within the fandom have said that Taylor joining Tumblr has ruined the Tumblr fandom because everyone, um, because they know that’s where she is most engaged with fans online, that they reblog themselves over and over and over.

Abigail noted the difference between users on platforms where Taylor has a presence and those such as Reddit where she does not, saying,

Because they [Reddit users] think the other groups are sort of immature about it [participation practices]. That they feel like they’re owed time with Taylor because well, or that they’re like particularly obsessive, or desperately trying to get Taylor’s attention all the time, you know.

Rebekah also explained, “If she [Taylor] has like reblogged you or something, people will like spam you with messages to try to get that attention”. Franck (2019, p. 13) outlines, “One may work one’s way up in the economy of attention just by persistently keeping at the heels of those who are better off, just by being constantly seen in their vicinity”, and when individuals – as Rebekah explained – “spam” those who have been noticed by Swift, they are enacting this persistence. These fans hope that by continuously engaging with those already on Swift’s radar (however briefly that may have been), they too will gain that attention and move further up in the eyes of the fandom. This was also mentioned by Inez, who said,

And so people will follow [fans who have engaged with Taylor] because they want to be noticed by Taylor. So they're like, "Oh, if this person is followed by Taylor, then if I follow them, maybe they'll retweet something of mine. And then Taylor Swift will see the thing that I tweeted".

This idea of following based on attention received from a celebrity was explored in a question from the survey in which individuals were asked whether they were more likely to follow another fan on social media if they knew they had interacted with the celebrity object of fandom. There was a significant difference in responses between the two fandoms, with 36.9% (n=104) of Taylor Swift fans noting it would make a difference to their following decisions, 16.9% higher than in the *Supernatural* fandom. As explored in Chapter 5, it is likely this can be explained by the different layers of access to the celebrity object of fandom between the two case study communities, wherein engagement with Swift has a higher value to fans due to its scarcity.

Rebekah further discussed this phenomenon in her interview, explaining,

If someone meets Taylor, I think they get a huge wave of followers. And when I have followed people who've recently met Taylor, it's because I want to see when they like, I want to hear the details of that, you know?

This was also reflected upon by Inez, who said,

So I follow a lot of people on Twitter that ... I found out about from the, like the *Lover* secret sessions. Um, so I started following a lot of people who went to the secret sessions. umm because obviously they must be you know, tweeting something about Taylor Swift if that's how they got invited to meet her.

Dorothea also expanded on these themes and when discussing "popular" fans noted,

... or ... Taylor has followed them or that they've met her, um, or that they've been to a secret session or they've been to all these concerts and they can, like, maybe it's so they can share something about their experience with her and that's what other people want to know and want to hear about and like want to aspire to or like dream about. So like knowing someone else or following someone that has had those experiences, they can feel closer to that or like they can feel like they can learn about or get information about it, that kind of thing.

This demonstrates the economy of attention in action: as Franck (2019, p. 12) argues, “Our esteem for another person depends to no small degree on the attention income this person receives from third parties”. When fans are noticed by Taylor, their status within the fandom immediately increases. As Rebekah reflected, she followed these fans because she wanted to hear the details of what meeting Taylor was like; if she could not get the attention from Taylor herself, she wanted to at least gain proximity to those who had been noticed.

The ability for fans to discover the individuals who have received this attention is not passive or accidental. As discussed by Inez, the fans who have engaged with Swift leverage this connection to both maintain and increase their share of attention capital within the broader fandom community. She explained, “A lot of people will put like in their bio like noticed by Taylor two times. Taylor liked my tweet, Taylor Nation reblogged me”.

Dorothea also expanded on this concept, explaining,

I know that there definitely are [fans] that are really big and that people follow a lot. I know that there’s a lot of like, like on Tumblr that Taylor Swift like followed someone. Like they always have like that, “Oh, I was followed on this date” and like make it really big so that like everyone knows like, “Oh, she followed me” and so you can like go and like see, oh, like this is like a big person and like that kind of thing ... I think it just comes from like the really popular accounts. Like how there’s like famous fans almost in a way.

This echoes what Chin (2018, p. 251) argues in her discussion of social capital in online fandom communities where she notes fans value

being able to ... capture the attention of the producer or celebrity that will warrant a like, retweet, or response that will then elevate the status of the fan in the eyes of others who share and use that social media space.

While Chin refers to social and subcultural capital throughout her chapter, it is clear that within this context, attention capital is more accurately what is being discussed. Van Krieken (2019b, p. 5) notes Franck’s distinction between social and attention capital in which attention capital reflects a “currency” that is “quantifiable and measurable”, unlike Bourdieu’s social capital that refers to the “means of securing the surplus value of social distinction”. Chin (2018, p. 244) emphasises that “social media in fandom is still driven by

the notions of presence and influence, demonstrated through the number of likes, retweets, reblogs, and shares”, which begins to show what van Krieken (2019a, p. 56) notes is the “self-reinforcing and self-reproducing dynamic” of attention that “is an essential component of how Twitter and Facebook function”. Social media, then, allows fans to both seek the attention of their celebrity objects of fandom and capitalise on any attention received via the broadcast and display of proof of interaction within their fandom community. This is especially relevant in the case of the Taylor Swift fandom where a direct line exists between being noticed on social media and the potential for real-world engagement.

While celebrity engagement within the *Supernatural* fandom is not based on social media attention, fans often use social media as a tool to display the “trophies” from their in-person interactions. A real-world meet and greet does not require social media, but social media allows for the proof of the interaction to be shared. It is not enough for the interaction to have taken place; others must be made aware of it. The concept of “trophies” is a common theme within the literature on fan–celebrity meet and greets, with Hills (2015a, p. 466) referring to them as “a felt connection ... given tangible materiality”. Hoebink, Reijnders and Waysdorf (2014, para. 1.4) argue that “fandom and collecting are interwoven phenomena”, adding, “surrounding oneself with objects that refer to the cultural icons one loves is one of the ways fandom is performed”. While, traditionally, discussions of collecting within fan studies refer to memorabilia from television shows and films (Geraghty 2014, 2018; Hoebink, Reijnders and Waysdorf 2014), we can also conceptualise real-world fan engagement with celebrities through this lens. When fans repeatedly seek to meet their celebrity object of fandom, they are collecting both the experiences and the trophies – or “souvenirs” (Ferris 2001) – that come from the interaction. Ferris (2001, p. 28) refers to fans “displaying” these items, with van Krieken (2019a, p. 102) also discussing fans “accumulating ... celebrity artefacts”. Such practices were referenced by the *Supernatural* fans throughout the interviews as they discussed the photographs and autographs they brought home from fan conventions. Mary and Donna both referenced their photo “walls” on which they displayed framed images, with Mary also showing the photo albums she kept additional photos and autographs in. These collections existed in Mary’s and Donna’s personal, physical worlds, reflecting the importance of the memories to their everyday lives. This reflects what Stebbins (2014, p. 10) describes as “cherished experiences” in which the leisure participant finds “personal enrichment” via the goals achieved through their leisure pursuit.

However, in addition to these personal displays, participants also discussed the practices of sharing with the wider community in online fandom spaces. Donna, for instance, noted that she believed there were likely two motivations for fans who uploaded their pictures on social media:

I think part of it is sharing the excitement, sharing the joy, meeting your fave, you know, and there's probably some like competition, like there's some people who will buy like eight and 10 photo ops with Jared and Jensen ... I think there's some people who were like, you know, "Look at me because I've got to spend all this time with them" and you know, it's kinda like a one-uppance kind of thing. Like that's the impression that I get. For the most part in my circle of friends, it's, it's purely a you know, "Oh my God, this happened. I'm so excited. Share this with me" kind of thing.

While within the broader literature, the term trophy is used within the context of receiving a physical object via participation, it is important for us to also align the term with its meaning in terms of competition and victory. As attention is an inherently limited phenomenon, proof of being the focus of the celebrity for even the briefest moment is considered an achievement. When seeking celebrity attention is the aim of one's fandom participation, the existence of other fans is arguably irrelevant. The fan wants to be *known* by the celebrity, to receive their attention, more than they may wish to participate in broader community structures. As Franck (2019, p. 8) notes, "What, ultimately, equals the enchantment sparked off by the delighted attention we receive from those by whom we are ourselves enchanted?".

6.3 Fandom hierarchies

In exploring the ways fans broadcast proof of attention received from the celebrity objects of their fandom – whether it be through the sharing of a photo from a convention meet and greet or adding the date of a Twitter like to their bio – it becomes important for us to also more explicitly consider the role of social hierarchies within fandom communities and the ways fans engage with them. As much as fandoms are a community consisting of social structures providing members with experiences of identity and belonging, they are also inherently hierarchical (Baym 2018; Edlom & Karlsson 2021a, 2021b; Hills 2002; MacDonald 1998; McCudden 2011). While those such as MacDonald (1998, p. 136) outline that many "fans do not explicitly recognise hierarchies" due to the focus on fandom spaces being places of

“equality, tolerance, and community”, it is undeniable that hierarchies not only exist, but that they are “important on many levels” (MacDonald 1998, p. 138). However, as McCudden (2011, p. 8) notes, the existing limited work on fandom hierarchies tends “to focus on only one community or a collection of groups all devoted to the same object”, which means we have little data exploring the phenomenon as a whole. Additionally, most of the work undertaken on fandom hierarchies to date has focused on knowledge-based hierarchies, with little attention paid to the role of consumption and/or celebrity interaction in their creation (MacDonald 1998; Edlom & Karlsson 2021b). However, such hierarchies are extremely significant for fans as they are the result of participation sanctioned by the object of fandom. In being sanctioned, this participation provides a form of legitimacy to the hierarchies that does not exist within those constructed within what Geraghty (2018, p. 214) describes as “fan create[d] ... boundaries”. While the celebrity may not outwardly and specifically rank individual fans, the behaviour and language used by both the celebrity and their wider marketing teams implicitly sort fans into categories of worth. Any official use of terms such as “our most loyal”, “biggest”, or “most dedicated” fans in reference to consumptive behaviours contributes to the construction of ranks of valued fan attributes that are then internalised by fans and frequently reproduced within the fandom communities. This was demonstrated when Ellen described an encounter she had in the VIP room at her very first convention, where she explained,

One of the women I was in VIP with, um, really like took me under her wing and like, “Let me explain how all these things work. I don’t know how you managed to figure out that you should have a gold ticket and VIP and all of that your first con, but let me explain everything and introduce you to people”.

In describing Gold and VIP tickets as something fans “should” have, this fan was echoing the idea of the ideal fan as an ideal consumer. It is not enough to just watch the show or attend the event with a general ticket: real fans “know” that you need to buy the top tier to maximise your engagement with the celebrity guests. Santo (2018, p. 332) argues that fandom “participation is contingent on a kind of competitive popularity ... evidenced [through] marketing”, and this encapsulates the role of industry influence on the creation of intra-fandom hierarchies. This idea of “competitive popularity” is also reflected in Larsen’s (2018, para. 5) use of the term “affective hoarding” to refer to the “monopolising [of] chances for affect or affectively charged physical objects with a conscious aim to lessen the experience of other fans”. While Larsen (2018, para. 10) cautions that “judging another fan’s actions as

conscious or unconscious requires careful treading”, especially as it pertains to the claim that fans are deliberately taking experiences from other fans, it is undeniable that when fans not only attend multiple conventions but, as Ellen described, have “eight [or] 10 photo ops”, they are “monopolising” the opportunities for celebrity engagement for their own gain. At each fan convention, there are a limited number of “tokens” available for fans to purchase that provide the opportunity for a photo with an actor (Creation Entertainment, n.d.). The more tokens an individual fan purchases, the fewer tokens there are available for other fans. While fan conventions generally have rules in place specifying the maximum number of tokens a fan can purchase at any one event (Creation conventions generally limits seven photos per celebrity per person), fans who seek as much face time as possible with the celebrity guests may purchase up to this limit, while also purchasing across multiple types of photo (e.g. a photo with Jensen by himself, and then a photo with Jared and Jensen, and a photo with Jared, Jensen, and Misha).

The impact of this behaviour on the creation of intra-fandom hierarchies was discussed by interview participants. Jody explained,

There’s definitely a hierarchy. Yeah. I mean, you know, you have the fans who go to every convention, you know, like Meg,⁷ I love Meg. Meg’s awesome, but she goes to like pretty much every convention, you know, she covers them and she’s always like, in like the second row, she has her specific seat. Um, you know, she knows all the actors ... And you know, then the actors recognise [her] and stuff.

Ellen also discussed the role of celebrity engagement in the creation of hierarchies, saying,

I think it’s to do with perceived access to whoever the fave is or whatever ... I think ... what it is ... is that, um, they, have the access, ’cause there’s, there’s one who’s, she’s probably up in the forties now with how many conventions she attends. A lot of people know her, and she’s been able to do a number of things outside of conventions that are pretty cool. And there’s been a number of times where, um, where one of the actors, will do an aside to her, they’ll mention her name, kind of a thing at a panel or something like that. So. Umm. I think there’s like a jealousy,

⁷ Name has been changed.

because you know, someone can see like, “Oh my fave knows them. They don’t know my name”.

This was echoed by Jo, who explained that when it came to the creation of fandom status,

a lot of it is, “Oh, I’ve been to this many conventions” or “I’ve met the guys this many times”, or “I’ve hung out with them this many times”. Umm. You know ... it’s all about, it’s to me, it’s not about quality, it’s about quantity. See, how many times have I hung out with them and do they know me enough to where they know my name.

These quotes reveal the value assigned to “being known” by celebrities and the ways attention from a celebrity “becomes a source of [attention] income for oneself” (Franck 2019, p. 12) and thus increases the status of the individual fan in question (Edlom & Karlsson 2021a, p. 25).

When asked if she, therefore, thought meeting the cast was important to overall fandom participation, Jo said,

There’s a part of me that used to think ... I wasn’t much of a fan because I hadn’t met them so many times, but ... Is it a necessity? Is it a requirement? Partially, I don’t think so, but it seems to be like most people that are a part of the fandom feel like it is.

While Jo said she believed “most people” felt like you had to meet the actors to fit into the fandom, 87.4% (n=263) of *Supernatural* fans who completed the survey said they did not believe fans who had met the actors multiple times were more dedicated than fans who had not met them or had met them only once. Similarly, 66.1% (n=199) of respondents said they did not assume someone who had met the actors was necessarily a dedicated fan. Relatedly, when discussing the role of convention attendance within the fandom, Mary said, “I don’t think [it’s] essential, but I think [attending] definitely help[s]”. Most fans surveyed agreed with Mary, with 92.4% (n=278) of respondents indicating they did not believe they needed to attend a fan convention to be considered a dedicated fan. It is important to note, however, that these results could be read as an example of what Osborne and Coombs (2013) call “performative...fandom”. While their focus is specifically on sports fandom, the focus given to the “flexibility and fluidity” (Osborne & Coombs 2013, p. 678) of fandom identities is applicable outside of just the sporting realm. Osborne and Coombs (2013, p. 678) emphasise

that when engaging in fandom practices, “role performances are negotiable”, with individuals “constantly engag[ing] in negotiation with ourselves and others to determine which roles will be prioritized and how we will perform them”. This data, then, can be understood as representative of this idea. Both Jo and Mary justified their responses by emphasising that they *personally* don’t believe attendance or celebrity engagement is necessary, but noting that others in the fandom might, thus distancing themselves from what could be seen as harsh judgements of certain fan actions. Osborne and Coombs (2013, p. 678) argue performances of fandom identity are always “informed by context”, and thus the individuals answering the survey question may be concerned with how their answers will be perceived, especially without the ability to further explain their points of view.

Jody discussed the existence of BNFs in the celebrity side of the *Supernatural* fandom, saying,

A lot of the people who are the Big Name Fans, um, I don’t know if they have the money but they spend the money that way by going to the cons and getting all the photographs and posting all the photographs. ... Like that’s just ... I think for most people that’s, there’s no way they could do that. So I could see them, a lot of other people being really bitter about the fact that you get to be, you know, one of the inner circle. But I don’t think being a big fan is necessarily part of the inner circle. It just looks like that from the photographs.

Historically, the term Big Name Fan has referred to individuals who become well known within transformative fandom spaces (Hills 2006; Mullens 2005). These fans may be known for writing particularly popular fan fiction, organising fan events, running fan groups, or potentially for having been in the fandom for a significant period (MacDonald 1998). Others refer to Big Name Fans as “Superfans” (Edlom & Karlsson 2021a, 2021b), “fan celebrities” (Chin 2018), or “subcultural celebrities” (Hills 2006); however, regardless of the term used, the premise remains the same: these are the fans who sit at the top of the social hierarchies present within fandom communities.

However, when asked about these hierarchies within their fandoms, while all interviewees agreed that they existed, the extent to which they were a recognised part of participants’ own experiences varied. Jody discussed this spectrum of engagement with hierarchies that fans could fall on:

I think ... there's a hierarchy 'cause they have direct access to like the writers, the producers, the actors, you know, and then you have the people who don't, and then you have the people who don't care, people [who] really do care and are pissed the other people have access. I'm somewhere in the middle there.

This question of whether fans engage with hierarchies is important to consider and is a theme that emerged when survey participants were asked to explain what they believed would make someone their object of fandom's most "dedicated" fan. These open-text responses were thematically coded, with the top ten codes from each fandom shown in Figures 1 and 2 (a full list of codes is provided in Appendix E).

Figure 1. "Dedicated fan" open text coding: *Supernatural*

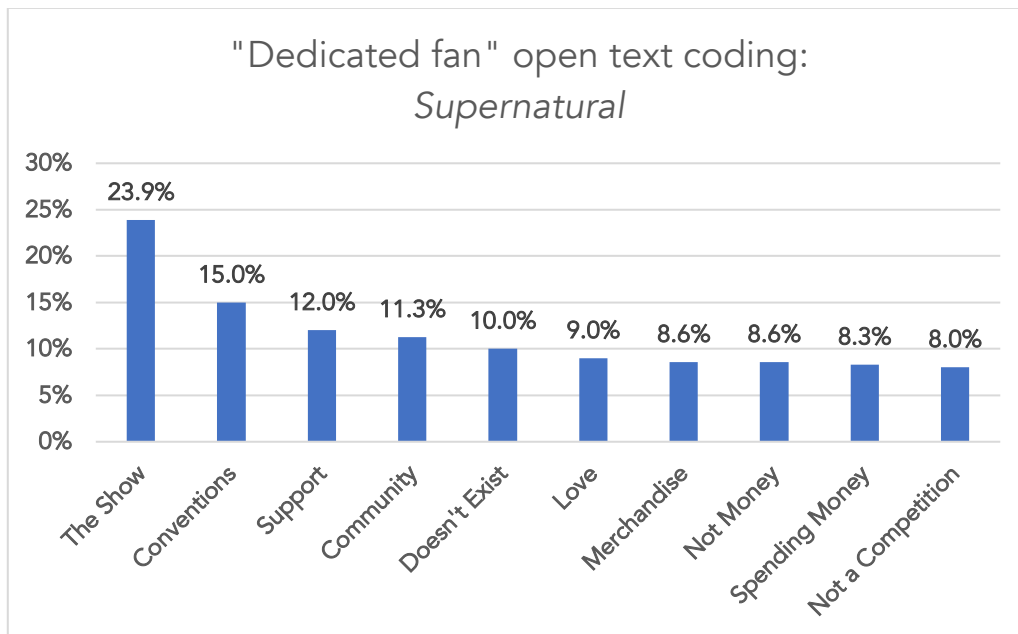
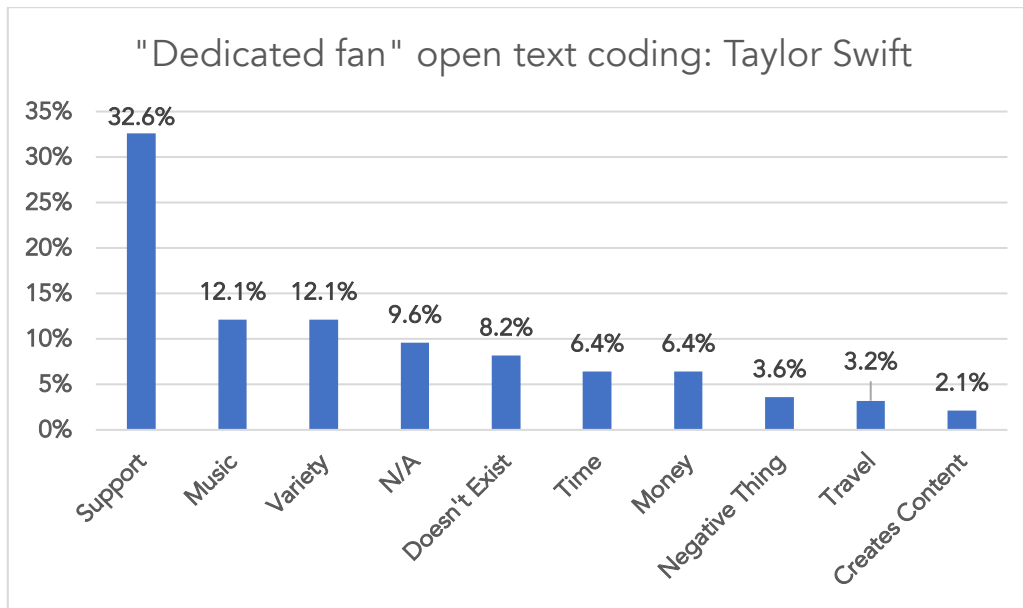


Figure 2. "Dedicated fan" open text coding: Taylor Swift



Of the *Supernatural* fans, 17.9% (n=54) responded that they either did not believe the concept of a “most dedicated fan” existed (n=30) or that fandom was not a competition (n=24), with an additional 8.6% (n=26) responding that the concept had nothing to do with the spending of money. Among the participants in the Taylor Swift survey, 8.16% (n=23) answered they did not believe in the concept of a most dedicated fan, while an additional 9.57% (n=27) responded with a variation of “N/A”, which we can also align with those who did not necessarily believe in the concept. When analysing responses from the fans who indicated they did not like considering fandom as hierarchical, three key themes emerged:

- a. The respondent dislikes gatekeeping/the concept of hierarchies.
- b. The concept of a “most dedicated” fan privileges particular groups in an unfair way.
- c. All fans should be considered equal.

A selection of these responses is included in Table 3.

Table 3. Open text responses: Disliking hierarchies

<i>Supernatural</i>	Taylor Swift
Dislike gatekeeping/hierarchies	

<i>Supernatural</i>	Taylor Swift
Ranking is silly. This should be for fun.	It shouldn't be a competition.
I think if you try to put a value on experiences you create a hierarchy that is honestly unnecessary. If you like the show and watch it regularly then you are a dedicated fan. It really doesn't have to be a contest.	"Most dedicated" is not a fair phrase because if you're a fan, you're dedicated. Being a fan is not a contest. It doesn't matter how much you spend or how much merch you buy or if you get any interaction from TS or any of her official accounts ... if you like Taylor and support her, you're a fan.
A dedicated fan is a dangerous thing. I think we're all dedicated if we've watched the show.	I don't. I'm not into gatekeeping.
There is no such thing and i think that if anyone believes they are the most 'dedicated fan' it can create a very bad mental space for them. Just be relaxed and calm and enjoy your fan experiences without ruining it for others.	I don't think about taylor's fans and specific actions or behavior as constituting some kind of hierarchy. someone doing what they can within their means and abilities makes a dedicated fan and nothing comes to mind that would automatically make someone the "most dedicated."
If you enjoy the show and consider yourself a fan, there's no thing or attitude that would make you "the most dedicated fan". It's not a contest, we're all fans no matter how much time or money you spend on the show.	"Dedicated" is nonsense [sic]. Love her, criticise her, listen to her stuff, what's the difference?
Privileges certain fans in an unfair way	
The fandom should not be in competition with each other. Just because one person can spend more time or money does not make them better or more dedicated than others.	I don't think it has any form of "measurement". For example, fans who consume merchandise or get to purchase "better" concert seats are not necessarily more dedicated fans than those who just listen and appreciate her music.

<i>Supernatural</i>	Taylor Swift
<p>Unfair question. From the outside, my level of dedication/involvement might seem less than someone else's, but given my current level of health (anxiety and physical impairment) and my finances, I am as involved and as dedicated as I can be. Love and appreciation are how I measure my dedication.</p>	
<p>I don't believe it is any one thing or any one person. There are so many amazing fans that make this family up. Just because some spend more or go to more conventions that doesn't make them more dedicated.</p>	
<p>It's my personal belief that fandom is for everyone; if you enjoy the show, you're a fan. I don't like when certain factions of fandom get hung up on what makes a particular person the "biggest fan"; not everybody has access to the same tools or opportunities as others to express their love. Some people can afford to spend thousands on merch and convention tickets, but that doesn't make them bigger fans than people who can't. Some people have the tools and skills to produce fan content (art, fics, vids) but that doesn't make them bigger fans than people who can't. I genuinely believe that the biggest fans of the show are the people who love the show, are dedicated to watching it, and genuinely enjoy discussing it with fellow fans.</p>	
<p>All fans are equal</p>	
<p>I think we all are, in our own ways. I'm not trying to be cheeky, but our family is known for its passion and dedication. I don't think there's a way to rank us.</p>	<p>Honestly i don't believe in "the top fan" if someone supports Taylor, and their intentions are for the best then they're a dedicated fan.</p>

<i>Supernatural</i>	Taylor Swift
There is no litmus test. A fan is a fan.	What would make someone Taylor's most dedicated fan, is them just showing their appreciation through and through. This can be anywhere. Not everyone can have social media, or the attention on such, showing love for music is enough. Numbers don't define you in a fandom.
I believe there a "most dedicated" fan is how dedicated we in our own ways, I have tons of merchandise, gotten likes and replies from the actors and crew members, but that doesn't make me any more special than any other fans who don't. As long as you love them your way then it shouldn't matter at least to me how dedicated you are.	I don't think anyone is more dedicated by anyone else, as long as they enjoy her music and support her by listening to her art that makes them just as much a fan as anyone else.
I don't [sic] think anyone can be. People show dedication in different ways. You can be 100% dedicated and never purchase anything, never interact with anyone.	There's no definition, we all love and support the same person we just do it differently.
We are all dedicated fans in our own ways. If you watch every episode or only catch a few. It's the fact that you watch and have loved the show/characters. That you can speak kindly to other fans and enjoy together. Being a dedicated fan is a way of living not how much, or on what, you spend.	I believe someone believing they are a dedicated fan of Taylor's makes them a dedicated fan. There a millions of definitions all which are important. Stating just one, is judging all those other major Taylor swift fans who different from that opinion.

These responses demonstrate the fact that hierarchies are not universally accepted as part of fandom spaces and stress the importance of individual experience and forms of participation. They can also be understood as further reflecting performative fandom, in which the specific context of the research environment shapes the way in which the participating fans seek to be perceived (Osborne & Coombs 2013, p. 678), potentially altering the opinions they are willing to share. Ultimately, however, the recognition of any particular hierarchy depends on what it is an individual fan values as part of their participation. If a fan is focused on the creation of fan works and has no interest in celebrity engagement, then any hierarchy created

based on the attention capital received through such interactions will have little meaning. But vice versa, to fans who value celebrity engagement, a hierarchy based on the popularity of fan works will be just as irrelevant to their individual experiences. However, regardless of whether an individual fan agrees with the concept of hierarchies and the valuation of certain fans above others for the ways they are able to participate, it is undeniable that these are woven into the fabric of celebrity-centric fandom communities (Edlom & Karlsson 2021b) and are – importantly – noted by the celebrity object of fandom. As explored throughout Chapter 5, fans are rewarded for participating in industry-sanctioned ways, and when this “reward” comes in the form of attention, increased status is the inevitable outcome. For fans, then, whose motivation for participation is to seek approval and attention from these celebrities, their experience within the fandom community is inherently hierarchical, and the only way to opt out completely is to exit – or what Stebbins (2014, pp. 73–74) refers to as “abandoning” – the leisure pursuit.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter addressed two questions:

RQ2. How does community function within commodified fandom spaces?

RQ3. What is the relationship between ideal consumers and intra-fandom hierarchies?

It first explored the role of celebrity in celebrity-centric fandom communities, arguing that the para-social relationships fans have with their objects of fandom alter the way friendships are formed. For many fans – especially those who seek celebrity as a leisure career – friendship is a secondary motivation for participation, with the primary motivation being celebrity engagement. In this framing, friendships between fans reflect the “social rewards” that Stebbins (2014, pp. 10–11) argues “attract and hold” participants to the overarching leisure pursuit. Additionally, the concept of wispy communities (Fine & van den Scott 2011) was used to explain the brief connections made between fans when encountering others in real-world spaces. It was argued that these moments do not represent friendship but do allow fans to feel a sense of belonging and shared identity for specific periods of time. Interview participants from the Taylor Swift fandom explained they had not necessarily made friends within their fandom but still felt as if they belonged to a broader community. Moving from wispy communities to deeper friendships, the use of the term “family” in the *Supernatural*

fandom was then explored. While fans described strong and long-lasting connections to others in the community, this chapter argued that these ultimately remained secondary to the overarching pursuit of celebrity engagement.

Having established the role of friendship in these spaces, this chapter then examined celebrity attention and intra-fandom hierarchies. The concept of attention capital (Franck 2019) was used to analyse the ways fans seek celebrity engagement and then display proof of this engagement on social media. It was argued that the ensuing status and attention they receive from other fans is responsible for the creation of intra-fandom hierarchies, which hold significant weight as they are implicitly sanctioned by the celebrity object of fandom. Regardless of whether fans paid for these interactions directly, or indirectly via the forms of participation explored in Chapter 5, the attention they receive is a result of their consumptive behaviour. While not all fans choose to participate in these ways, or necessarily agree with the existence of hierarchies, the direct link between participating within commodified industry bounds and fandom status is undeniable and deserving of further attention.

Chapter 7. Checking out (a conclusion)

The inspiration for this thesis began with a question: why is nobody discussing the *cost* of fandom participation? Or, more accurately, why is this cost so consistently framed as something only a *real* or *dedicated* fan is willing to make sacrifices to achieve? Since this question first entered my mind, its relevance has only grown: fandom participation has not escaped the post-pandemic price increases that have hit the cost of living more broadly, and this, combined with the growth in popularity of many fandom objects due to pandemic lockdown consumption, has continued to impact access (Kornhaber 2022; Spits 2022; White-Sax 2022). This is best exemplified through the Taylor Swift ticket sale saga outlined in the preface to this thesis; however, it is far from the only example. The rise in popularity of Formula 1 thanks to the pandemic viewing of *Drive to survive* saw tickets to the 2023 Australian Grand Prix sell out in an unprecedented 4 hours (Spits 2022) and general admission tickets to the Austin Grand Prix increase in price to \$475 USD (Circuit of the Americas 2022). Additionally, celebrities from a wide range of industries seeking to earn additional income through merchandise sales saw more t-shirts and track pants than ever before being sold for double, triple, and quadruple what they would cost in a regular store (Adamczyk 2022; Elan 2021; Palus 2022; Rathore 2022). These examples are just scratching the surface of the ever-increasing constraints to accessing “official” commodified fandom spaces where fans are consistently asked to pay to play.

While one could simply dismiss this as the realities of supply and demand, if we do not drill down and explore the experiences of those participating in these spaces, we miss out on understanding a significant aspect of our cultural landscape. Fandom participation is no longer the niche activity it was when Henry Jenkins and his contemporaries first began in-depth academic exploration in the early 1990s. Therefore, it is vital to ensure our discussions remain relevant to reflect the reality of fandom as it is, not as it was. With this in mind, this research project has allowed an expansion of the ways we understand how fans participate in these increasingly commodified spaces. By examining how celebrity fans produce, consume, spend, and socialise, I have argued that the transformative forms of fandom participation frequently discussed within fan studies are not as universally applicable as is often implied. While this project focuses on two specific case studies, the themes it addresses are relevant to all forms of fandom community where a celebrity object of fandom is present. Moving the

focus from transformative fan practices to an attention-centred leisure framework in which fans choose to participate within industry lines allows us to reconsider the realities of fan experiences.

The following sections of this chapter provide a summary of the research findings before discussing the project's contribution to celebrity studies, fan studies, and sociology more broadly, outlining the limitations of the project and presenting future opportunities to build on the findings and data.

7.1 Findings

In exploring the lived experiences of fans in commodified celebrity fandom communities, this study expands the ways we approach the sociological study of fans and fandom communities. By drawing on theories and methodologies traditionally used in the sociology of sport, as well as those from media and cultural studies, the results of this research allow us to understand the participatory behaviours of fans of celebrities more significantly.

A qualitative dominant mixed-methodological approach (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie & Turner 2007) was undertaken to collect primary data via anonymous online surveys and semistructured interviews with fans of Taylor Swift and the television series *Supernatural*. Using a symbolic interactionist approach (Blumer 1986) to emphasise the voices and experiences of the research participants, these surveys and interviews addressed a range of topics to explore how fans navigate commodified fandom spaces, as well as the concept of “dedicated” fandom. Once the surveys and interviews were completed, the collected data was analysed using statistical software (Qualtrics; NVivo) and hand coding. A primarily inductive – but blended – coding method (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard 2019, p. 264) was used when analysing the interview transcripts and open-ended survey questions, building on anticipated themes from the research questions as well as the survey questions and interview guide. The findings from this data analysis resulted in three key arguments in response to the four research questions. These arguments and their significance are outlined next.

RQ1. How does a leisure framework change our understanding of celebrity fandom participation?

Argument 1. Rather than taking fandom participation as a given, framing it as a leisure pursuit in which fans are subject to structural constraints allows us to understand who can

participate and who may be left out. It also assists in validating affirmational forms of participation in which fans seek information about and interaction with a celebrity rather than engaging in transformative practices. This challenges narratives of certain forms of participation equalling certain levels of dedication or “real” fandom.

A key aim of was to develop an understanding of how fandom participation is shaped by factors outside of one’s interest in the object of fandom. In addition to considering *how* fans participate in their chosen fandom communities, it is important to consider *who* is participating and what may be stopping others from taking part. This was why I sought to explore these questions of access through the application of a leisure framework.

This conceptual framework allowed for an exploration of the structural constraints (potentially) faced by fans, identifying ways things can impact individuals’ participation in fandom communities outside their direct control. The first stage in this was to identify the amount of time individuals devoted to their fandom participation, especially as this is an area rarely explored in the existing literature. Analysis of survey data revealed 48.2% of *Supernatural* fans and 33.8% of Taylor Swift fans consumed fandom content daily. As well as this difference in daily participation, there was also a significant difference between the two fandoms regarding the amount of time per day spent on fandom participation. Of the Taylor Swift fans, 59.1% spent *under* an hour per day on fandom participation. In comparison, 68.5% of *Supernatural* fans spent *over* an hour, with 10% spending over 5 hours per day on fandom-related activities.

With most work in the fan studies field focusing on the production and consumption of fan works such as fan fiction, fan art, and cosplay, I wanted to explore how fans engage with such practices in celebrity-centric fandom communities. Significant distinctions emerged between the ways fans of Taylor Swift and fans of *Supernatural* engaged with the production and consumption of fan works. For example, when asked whether they produced fan works, there was a 30.4% difference between the two fandoms, with just 17.4% of Taylor Swift fans indicating they participated in this way. This difference was made even more apparent when it came to questions specifically about fan fiction, where there was a 32.9% difference between those from each fandom who said writing fanfic formed part of their participation and a 65% difference between those who said they read fanfic. In contrast, Taylor Swift fans noted they were far more likely to consume – and, to a certain extent, produce – update accounts, reporting on news related to their celebrity object of fandom. It can be seen, then,

that such celebrity fans are more likely to engage in affirmational fandom practices, engaging with celebrities and their surrounding industries rather than producing their own creations. This demonstrates a need to expand how we discuss participation in fandom communities rather than falling back on the assumption that all fans participate in the same transformative ways. Similarly, this challenges the assumption that one must participate in a certain way to be considered a member of a fandom.

To further challenge this assumption, the potential constraints faced by fans in their participation were explored. To begin, 63.5% of *Supernatural* fans and 60.1% of Taylor Swift fans said work responsibilities had constrained their involvement. Forty-five per cent of Taylor Swift fans indicated they were currently studying, as did 23.6% of *Supernatural* fans, with many of these individuals also engaging in paid employment, compounding the constraints faced. Finally, 49.8% of *Supernatural* fans and 40.2% of Taylor Swift fans said caring responsibilities had impacted their fandom participation. These results demonstrate that participating in fandom communities is not simply a matter of desire but should be understood as a hobby one participates in where possible, requiring navigation of constraints and the potential necessity of sacrifices.

However, it was not enough to solely identify these constraints: in using a symbolic interactionist perspective, it was important to consider “descriptive accounts from the actors of how they see the objects [and] how they have acted towards the objects in a variety of different situations” (Blumer 1983, pp. 50–51). Thus, hearing from participants was central to understanding the motivations behind how they negotiated constraints to maintain participation or sacrifice an experience. It became apparent that there was no correlation between the level of dedication or passion one has for a celebrity object of fandom and how they participate. While this may seem an obvious observation, it has not received any significant scholarly attention and counters dominant mainstream narratives aligning levels of fandom with the amount and type of participation (Benedictus 2011; Chua 2021; Holt 2020; Schulman 2018, 2019). However, in framing fandom participation as a leisure pursuit in a similar vein to social sport and recreational club membership, we can begin to challenge the belief that certain forms of behaviour are expected – or required – for an individual to be considered a “real” fan.

Thus, in exploring the structural constraints individuals face to participation, my study challenges the notion of fandom participation as something easily accessible to all fans should they just have a certain level of passion for their object of fandom.

RQ2. How do fans negotiate participation within commodified fandom spaces?

Argument 2. When it comes to celebrity-centric fandom communities, fans are asked to participate in particular “approved” ways. Unlike in transformative communities where fans deliberately counter official industry expectations, celebrity fans frequently follow the rules to obtain the “rewards” offered by their object of fandom. This challenges narratives in which fans are “forced” into exploitative participation by industry that only seeks to make money.

While Chapter 4 addressed nonmonetary constraints to fandom participation, Chapter 5 examined how fans navigate increasingly commodified fandom landscapes. Data collected via surveys and interviews demonstrated these financial constraints play a significant role in shaping how fans are able to participate. Survey data revealed 86.4% of *Supernatural* fans and 68.3% of Taylor Swift fans had missed out on a fandom experience because of money, indicating that despite the ongoing hesitancy of fan studies to discuss consumption, it is a necessary conversation for the field to have.

A significant percentage of the existing literature focuses on how fans participate via the production and consumption of fan works. I have expanded this focus to consider how fans participate in ways “sanctioned” by their object of fandom. The data obtained through this research demonstrates that for many individuals, fandom participation is not about transforming source materials but rather playing within the lines constructed by industry. This form of participation is especially relevant in the case of celebrity fandom communities where fans are frequently offered rewards – usually in the form of attention and engagement – when participating in approved ways; however, this approved participation often comes with a price tag. This was demonstrated in the case studies, where Taylor Swift and her team publicly interacted with fans who purchased significant amounts of merchandise and where the actors in *Supernatural* were only available to meet at notoriously expensive fan conventions.

Participants described the centrality of this celebrity attention and engagement to their fandom experience, as well as their willingness to follow the implicit rules and spend money if it increased their chances of interacting with the objects of their fandom. Many fans said

they were willing to spend significant amounts of money on their fandom activities, with 44.2% of *Supernatural* survey participants indicating they would be willing to spend over \$1,000 for a fandom experience. In her interview, Donna admitted to spending over \$2,000 on a single *Supernatural* fan convention, which put her into debt – however, she justified this as the meaning gained via the event was worth more than any price tag. Other interview subjects echoed this, discussing their conscious choice to participate within the commodified bounds set by their celebrity objects of fandom as something they were willing to do as the benefits gained outweighed the – in this case literal – costs. Understanding the negotiations fans undertake to make these financial investments into their chosen fandom activities is vital for us to develop a holistic picture of the fandom landscape. Using a symbolic interactionism framework allowed the voices of the fans participating in this research to be prioritised, challenging narratives of industry exploitation (Stanfill 2019). This is not to say that these practices are not inherently exploitative but rather that we as academics should not assign such labels without considering how the practices are understood and engaged with by those who are actually participating. As noted by Mary and Ellen, it is not essential for fans to spend money to participate, and such behaviour should be viewed in the same way as purchasing any luxury item or expensive hobby.

While celebrities deliberately encourage paid participation, my research has shown that fans do not necessarily view this as exploitative, or, in the least, as exploitative enough to outweigh the potential benefits gained from engaging in these courted forms of participation. In many ways this reflects the neoliberal culture of fandom wherein fan behaviour may be “police[d]” (Booth 2015b, para. 1.3), but is ultimately viewed by fans through a “critically pragmatic” lens in which a culture of consumption is seen as inevitable (Numerato & Giulianotti 2018, p. 340). More than an inevitability, however, the lure of the potential for reward sees fans consciously choosing to invest in their personal fandom participation in the hope of being able to achieve their goal of attention from the objects of their fandom – ultimately reflecting the neoliberal value of the “individual over the community” (Booth 2015b, para. 1.3). The lack of previous exploration of this topic demonstrates the need for fan studies to expand what it considers to be legitimate forms of fandom participation, with these findings emphasising the richness of data available in the study of celebrity fandom communities.

RQ3 and RQ4. How does community function within commodified fandom spaces? What is the relationship between ideal consumers and intra-fandom hierarchies?

Argument 3. Fandom communities are not cohesive social spaces where all fans seek connection but rather contain hierarchies frequently tied to the attention they receive from the celebrity objects of fandom. Considering fandoms as “wispy communities” (Fine & Van Den Scott 2011) allows us to consider participation experiences that may be overlooked when focusing solely on narratives of friendship.

Chapter 6 moved from exploring the participatory behaviours of fans to considering how these behaviours impact the social structures within their communities. Surprisingly little attention has been given to social experiences within fandom communities, something this thesis seeks to address. By considering fandoms as not just imagined communities (Anderson 2016) but wispy communities (Fine & Van Den Scott 2011), my findings demonstrate that while many individuals self-identify as members of a fandom community, their belonging has “the potential of being displaced by other more insistent identities” (Fine & Van Den Scott 2011, p. 1321). This is not to say that these individuals are *less* of fans than those whose identity revolves around the fandom but rather that social experiences within these communities are not homogenous, meaning that discussions require nuance and consideration of individual experiences. The use of a symbolic interactionist approach allowed the individuals participating in this research to explain their fandom social connections in their own words, allowing some fans to describe lifelong, deep friendships and others to explain they did not feel they had made friends within their fandom community and yet still felt as though they belonged.

Building on the data presented in Chapter 5, I argue that social connections are often secondary motivations for fandom participation, with the primary motivation being the seeking of attention from their celebrity objects of fandom. This desire for attention complicates traditional understandings of social relationships within fandom communities in which fans bond over shared interpretations or creations. This was especially true for fans in the Taylor Swift fandom who reported lower rates of strong friendships and higher rates of intra-fandom hierarchies. There are several ways hierarchies are constructed within fandom communities (MacDonald 1998), and while these are broadly underexplored, examination of the role of celebrity attention and engagement in creating these hierarchies is virtually nonexistent (Edlom & Karlsson 2020b; MacDonald 1998). Thus, this was the form of

hierarchy explored by this research, with results demonstrating hierarchies are created when individuals are known to have interacted with the objects of their fandom. The economy of attention (Franck 2019, p.12) was introduced as a way to understand these hierarchies, where attention from a celebrity “becomes a source of [attention] income for oneself”. Interview participants discussed the ways fans display “proof” of their interactions with celebrities on social media and how they are often influenced to follow these individuals in the hope of one day receiving the attention themselves. This behaviour was discussed as a more prominent aspect of the Taylor Swift fandom, as receiving attention from Taylor – or her team – was a relatively rare occurrence with significant value within the community. While it was easier for fans to meet the actors from *Supernatural*, interview participants revealed hierarchies were created when fans became “known” by the actors, such as having their name remembered in a meet and greet or receiving other forms of special attention.

The findings of this research make a significant contribution to the ways the social structures of fandom communities are understood. It expands the discussion of hierarchies from “big name fans” linked to knowledge and production to the role of attention in celebrity fandom communities, shifting focus to the ways industry can shape modes of participation and the forms of connections developed by fans. This account gives space to fans whose participation may not fit traditional models of fandom participation but whose hierarchical positions are seemingly “validated” by the celebrity objects of fandom as they are recognised for behaving in “approved” ways.

7.2 Research contributions and limitations

7.2.1 Contributions

This thesis makes a number of key contributions to the existing literature surrounding fandom and celebrity culture, expanding our understanding of how fans participate and consume. The three most significant of these contributions – exploring lived experiences of fan consumption, furthering the marriage of fan studies and celebrity studies, and moving from a sociology of sports fans to a sociology of all fans – are outlined in the following sections.

7.2.1.1 Contribution 1. From the mouths of fans: experiences of consumption

Research into fans and fandom communities is not new; however, it remains a niche area of study with many aspects left underexplored. One of my key aims, then, was to contribute to the expansion of the field by addressing some of these less common areas of investigation. Most significantly, this included exploring how fans engage in economic consumption as part of their fandom participation, with an emphasis given to how the fans themselves experience this. Historically, when fan studies scholars have discussed consumption, fans and their behaviours are spoken *of*, but not *to*. This is in part because – as outlined in Chapter 3 – fan studies does not have a strong methodological history (Click & Scott 2018, p. 7; Evans & Stasi 2014), and thus, the use of qualitative research methodologies such as surveys and interviews are rare. Therefore, in prioritising the voices of fans, my research contributes to both the expansion of the field’s use of primary qualitative data and the ways fans are used as a subject. This allows for an increasingly sociological perspective to be applied to the study of fans and fandom communities, demonstrating their societal relevance and the benefits of further research. This is especially important for a topic such as consumption where actions and meaning are difficult to interpret through observation alone.

7.2.1.2 Contribution 2. The marriage of celebrity and fan studies

I have deliberately positioned this project at the intersection of celebrity studies and fan studies to demonstrate the theoretical strength that can be gained when these two fields work together. As explored in Chapters 1 and 2, celebrity studies and fan studies have long existed in parallel, despite the fact that fans and celebrities exist in a cyclical relationship. While fan engagement with the broader entertainment industry has been the subject of academic attention, the division between the fields of celebrity and fan studies means that there has been little research into the specifics of fan engagement with the *celebrity* industry (for examples of work that does exist at this intersection, see: Baym 2018; Bennett 2014a; Dare-Edwards 2014; Duffett 2014a; Ferris 2001; Ferris & Harris 2011; Hills 2015a; Horton & Wohl 1956; Kehrberg 2015; Rojek 2016; Schickel 2000; Stever 2016; Stever & Hughes 2013; Turner 2014; van Krieken 2019a; Wohlfeil 2018). Thus, in approaching celebrities and fans as something to be considered in tandem rather than as two separate objects, my study allows for a more holistic examination of the ways celebrity fandom functions as a phenomenon.

7.2.1.3 Contribution 3. From the sociology of sports fans to a sociology of all fans

My thesis contributes to the broader sociological study of fans by expanding the discipline's narrow focus on sports fans to fans of celebrities more broadly. As noted in Chapters 1 and 2, despite that there is no inherent difference between fans of sports and fans of other forms of celebrity, sociology has long restricted its attention to the former. In outlining the sociological relevance of celebrity fandom, I have demonstrated that there is much to be learned from fans of all fandom objects, not just those connected to sporting organisations. Additionally, this project expands the inherently gendered prioritisation of sports fans over fans of celebrities within sociology. While female sports fans – and, to an extent, fans of female sports teams – are often studied within the sociology of sport (Pope 2011, 2013, 2017) in ignoring celebrity fandom, the discipline contributes to the society-wide implicit acceptance of male fan activities and simultaneous dismissal of those undertaken by female fans. By demonstrating that the theories used to analyse sports fans are just as relevant and applicable to celebrity fans, I show that there is space for, and value in, further sociological exploration of celebrity fandom communities.

7.2.2 Limitations

No research can claim to be universal, nor without shortcomings, and as such, there are several limitations to consider when considering the results presented within this thesis. While limitations related to the methodology of this project were outlined in Chapter 3, the following section outlines the two most significant limitations to the project as a whole.

7.2.2.1 Limitation 1. Case studies

The most significant limitation of this project is one that plagues all research using a case study methodology: the fact that findings are specific to the chosen communities being investigated. However, while the data presented in this thesis speaks to fan experiences in the Taylor Swift and *Supernatural* fandom communities, the overarching themes are relevant to celebrity fandom communities more broadly. Additionally, the decision to use a comparative case study methodology featuring two distinct forms of fandom community was consciously made to ensure a wide range of data could be collected, increasing the applicability of findings in comparison to a single case study approach. That being said, further research is

required to assess the exact ways these themes exist in other fandom communities and to determine if any of the presented findings are unique to these particular case studies and, if so, why this may be.

7.2.2.2 Limitation 2. Data collection and COVID-19

This project began in 2018, in a pre-pandemic world, before we knew what would come in early 2020. The collected data, therefore, is a relic of not just a different time but a time we can never fully return to. While many of the changes experienced in both the Taylor Swift and *Supernatural* fandoms were outlined in Chapter 3, it is important to once again note that both the fandom communities studied, and the objects of fandom themselves, have undergone significant shifts from the time the data was collected in the first half of 2019. While it is still early days, work examining the impact of COVID on fandom is beginning to emerge. Since late 2020, articles addressing event attendance (Alberto & Tringali 2022; Lee & Kao 2023; Radmann & Karlén 2022), celebrity and social media (Feder 2020; Ouvrein, Vandebosch & De Backer 2023; Tirino, Bifulco & Castellano 2022), and experiences of community (Kim 2021; Knipe 2022) have been published, as well as a book by Christina Beck titled *Celebrity in the time of COVID: Fandom and the influence of pandemic messaging*. Such work is starting to address many of the questions regarding fandom and the pandemic left unanswered in this project due to the limitations of data collection and analysis. However, that is not to say that there is a limit to the applicability of its findings. While the world around us has irrevocably changed in many ways, as noted earlier in this chapter, fandom has remained a constant, with its relevance expanding in the lives of both fans and of the public. And despite the pandemic not being over, the entertainment industry is incessant in its attempt to return to normal. Fan conventions are back. Taylor Swift is once again touring. Cancelled games and sporting playoff bubbles are now a distant memory. Fans are once again able to actively seek celebrity engagement away from their computer screen. Ultimately, all research exists as a snapshot of the time at which it was undertaken. While a number of significant changes have occurred over the past 3 years, in many ways we have circled back around to a fandom landscape where the findings of this research are more relevant than they perhaps were in 2020 and 2021.

7.3 Future research directions

Celebrity fandom has long been underexplored within academia, with focus instead given to transformative, textual fandoms and those connected to sporting organisations. However, as demonstrated throughout this thesis, exploring celebrity fandom communities provides valuable insight into many significant aspects of our society. This includes the relationship between individuals and the entertainment industry, the role of the attention capital in fandom communities, and fandom as a legitimised leisure pursuit. Continued exploration of these themes would assist in the ongoing development of the intersection of the scholarly community and the entertainment industry, as well as broadening the overall scope of the field, which has remained largely stagnant for a number of years.

As noted in the limitations section of this chapter, the data presented in this thesis was collected before the outbreak of the COVID pandemic. Thus, a significant opportunity for future research is to readdress the questions and themes of this research in the context of a post-pandemic fandom landscape. As discussed in Chapter 3, COVID significantly impacted the output of both *Supernatural* and Taylor Swift. Exploration of how fans navigated their participation during this period and its aftermath, as well as how fans interacted with celebrities more broadly during this period, would be a valuable addition to the findings of this project.

However, the impact of COVID on celebrity engagement is just one direction future research could take. Additional potential avenues include the following.

A specific application of the serious leisure perspective to fandom participation. As noted in Chapter 2, while using aspects of the serious leisure perspective (Stebbins 2020), this project was not a direct application of the framework to fandom participation, as this would require the application of specific scales, becoming an entire project in and of itself (Akyıldız Munusturlar & Argan 2016; Gould et al. 2008; Jones 2000). While this was outside the scope of this research, it is a valuable area for future investigation. This project demonstrates the relevance of a “leisure career” (Stebbins 2014) to celebrity fandom participation, and further application of the serious leisure perspective would allow for a deeper exploration of how fans navigate their desire to engage with celebrity objects of fandom as part of their everyday lives.

Broader application of a leisure framework in the study of fandom communities. In this thesis I have explored participation in two fandom communities using a leisure framework to examine the potential constraints fans face and how they navigate these. While this allowed for valuable data to be obtained, further engagement with a leisure-based approach to the study of fandom participation is also called for. Deeper investigation into individual constraints and the impact these have on fandom participation would be a beneficial expansion to the findings of this research. Similarly, applying a leisure-based constraints negotiation framework to a wider range of fandom communities would allow for a more robust understanding of fandom participation practices as an overall phenomenon to be developed.

Additionally, while I have gained significant insights by framing fandom participation as a leisure pursuit, specific exploration of how this participation fits into the broader leisure lives of fans requires further investigation. Understanding how fans prioritise their fandom participation and whether this impacts their willingness to negotiate potential constraints would be a valuable addition to the findings of this research, as well as to our understanding of fandom participation more broadly. There currently exists little data on the intersection of fandom participation with other hobbies and general activities undertaken by individuals, and population level data such as that tracked by the Australian Bureau of Statistics and similar organisations are not specific enough to draw any real insights. While the occasional research study by industry organisations such as Nine Entertainment (Pash 2020) and We Are Social touch on entertainment leisure behaviours, the emphasis is on the marketing potential of said behaviours rather than on the experiences of the fans involved. Thus, building on this project's findings to further explore fandom's role in individuals' leisure lives would be a beneficial direction for future research.

Qualitative research exploring the use of social media to seek status. My research demonstrates that social media is a key location for the development of attention and status within fandom communities. Future qualitative research exploring this phenomenon in greater depth would be extremely beneficial for our understanding of how attention capital functions within fandom communities. For example, speaking to fans with significant followings on social media about the ways they developed these audiences and their relationships with other members of their fandom would allow for the development of greater insight into status creation and maintenance. Similarly, discussions with fans regarding how

they choose who to follow within their fandom community and why would allow for deeper exploration into topics such as the role of proximity to the object of fandom in the construction of one's fandom social spheres.

7.4 Concluding a conclusion

As I finalise this thesis, my Spotify Wrapped 2022 results reveal that Taylor Swift is once again my most frequently played artist. However, my ranking among her global listenership slipped from its high of the top 0.5% in 2021 to *merely* the top 1% in 2022. While such rankings are simply marketing tactics by the tech industry to encourage ongoing use of their products, conversations observed on social media demonstrated that fans were both taking pride in their result and seeking to locate the *top* fans who were seemingly the most dedicated to their fandom object. The ways fans and fandom behaviours are commodified, ranked, and valued are constant features of the entertainment industry, as well as fandom communities themselves. This thesis introduces the scholarly value of exploring these themes, demonstrating how these behaviours are important – yet frequently overlooked – parts of celebrity fandom participation, and thus of the everyday life of a significant proportion of society.

Fandom is frequently discussed as a homogenous phenomenon in which being a fan is something that looks and acts a certain way. However, as I have demonstrated throughout this project, this could not be further from the truth. The visibility of particular fandom behaviours and objects does not equate to universality or relevance for study. This thesis opens a particular door to the study of celebrity fandom that it is hoped future researchers will choose to walk through to continue the exploration of the topics addressed.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Survey Questions

Supernatural

What year did you become a fan of *Supernatural*?

- 2005
 - 2006
 - 2007
 - 2008
 - 2009
 - 2010
 - 2011
 - 2012
 - 2013
 - 2014
 - 2015
 - 2016
 - 2017
 - 2018
 - 2019
-

How did you discover *Supernatural*?

- Through a friend
 - Television/Netflix
 - Magazine/Website
 - Saw people discussing online
 - Stumbled upon
 - Other _____
-

How long after becoming a fan did you join an online fan community?

- Immediately
 - After a few weeks
 - After a few months
 - After a year or longer
-

What platforms do you use to communicate with other fans? (select all that apply)

- Facebook
 - Twitter
 - Tumblr
 - Instagram
 - WhatsApp
 - Discord
 - Slack
 - LiveJournal
 - FanFiction portals (Ao3, Wattpad, ff.net, etc.)
 - Other _____
-

What platform do you **primarily** use to communicate with other fans?

- Facebook
 - Twitter
 - Tumblr
 - Instagram
 - WhatsApp
 - Discord
 - Slack
 - LiveJournal
 - FanFiction portals (Ao3, Wattpad, ff.net, etc.)
 - Other _____
-

Do you have social media accounts specifically tied to your participation in the *Supernatural* fandom? (i.e. separate to or instead of a personal account)

- Yes
- No

How do you find other fans to connect with online?

- Hashtags
 - Popular posts
 - Keyword searches
 - Mutual friends
 - Commenting in groups
 - Other _____
-

Have you ever met up with fans from online in person?

- No
 - Yes, once
 - Yes, multiple times
 - Yes, frequently
-

Do you follow "official" accounts on social media (e.g. Actors, directors, network)?

- Yes, all
 - Yes, some
 - No
-

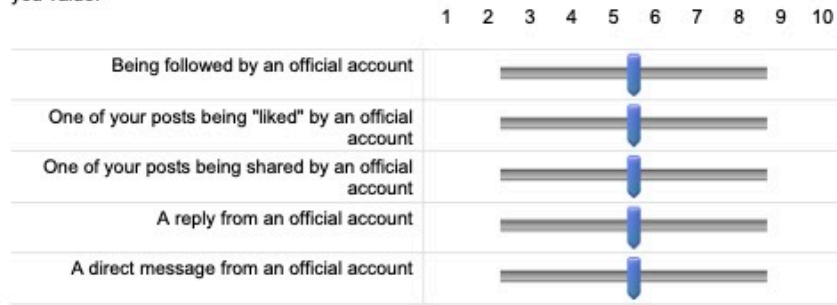
What makes you want to follow another fan? (Select all that apply)

- They have a lot of existing followers
 - Quality of posts
 - They've met the actors
 - They seem nice
 - They create content
 - I have friends who follow them
 - Shoutout from an official source
-

Are you more likely to follow someone if you know they have interacted with an actor from the show?

- Yes
- No

On a scale of 1-10, with 1 being "not at all" and 10 being "more than anything", how much do you value:



Do you produce content? (e.g. fic, fan art, update accounts, etc.)

- Yes
- No

Display This Question:

If Do you produce content? (e.g. fic, fan art, update accounts, etc.) = Yes

What sort of content do you produce? (Select all that apply)

- Fan Fic
- Fan Art
- Manips/Edits
- Curate Update Accounts
- Other _____

What sort of fan content do you consume? (Select all that apply)

- Fan Fic
- Fan Art
- Update Accounts
- Fan Vids
- Other _____

How frequently do you consume fan content?

- Daily
 - Multiple times per week
 - Once per week
 - Multiple times per month
 - Monthly
 - Less frequently
-

Where do you **primarily** consume fan content?

- Facebook
 - Twitter
 - Tumblr
 - Instagram
 - Youtube
 - Archive Of Our Own
 - Wattpad
 - LiveJournal
 - Other (Please Specify) _____
-

When new "official" content is actively being released (i.e. a new series is airing; a media tour is occurring; major convention appearances are accessible via social media), does your consumption/interaction increase?

- Yes
 - No
-

Approximately how much time would you spend **per day** on fandom related online activities?

- Less than half an hour
 - 0.5-1hr
 - 1hr-2hrs
 - 2hrs-5hrs
 - 5hrs +
-

In an average year, how much do you spend on being a fan of *Supernatural*? Include all related travel expenses in your estimate. Please answer in your home currency.

- Less than 100
- 100-249
- 250-499
- 500-999
- 1000-2499
- 2500-4999
- 5000+

Please select all fandom related things you spend money on:

- DVD
 - Merchandise (Clothing)
 - Merchandise (Other)
 - Convention Tickets
 - VIP Convention Experiences
 - Other _____
-

Have you ever purchased multiple of the same fandom related item?

- Yes, Once
 - Yes, Frequently
 - No
-

Assume all seasons of *Supernatural* are available to stream online. Do you still purchase a physical copy of the DVDs?

- Yes
- No

Do you ever illegally stream new episodes?

- Yes
 - No
-

Have you ever purchased a limited edition merch option?

- Yes
 - No
-

What would primarily motivate you to purchase a limited edition item?

- I want the item
 - It shows I'm a dedicated fan
 - It sets me apart from other fans
 - I want to support the show
 - I want to collect memorabilia
 - Other _____
-

There is a fan convention with major actors in attendance, but it is not coming to your nearest city. Would you realistically be willing to travel:

	Yes	No
To another city in your state?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To a city in another state?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To another country?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

What is the most you would be willing to spend on a single fandom experience? (Please include travel/accommodation/etc. Answer in your home currency.)

- Less than 100
- 100-199
- 200-299
- 300-399
- 400-499
- 500-599
- 600-699
- 700-749
- 750-999
- 1000+

Please describe what you believe would make someone *Supernatural's* most dedicated fan:

Rank the following traits of a "dedicated" fan on a scale of 1-10:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Owens a lot of merchandise										
Has been a fan for a long time										
Is willing to travel to attend events										
Always has "VIP" tickets										
Creates lots of content										
Supports other fans										
Always has a positive attitude towards the series/actors										
Always has a positive attitude towards the fan community										
Has met the actors										
Other										

Which of the following is the **most** important trait of a dedicated fan. Select only one.

- Owns lots of merchandise
- Has been a fan for a long time
- Is willing to travel to attend events
- Always has "VIP" tickets
- Creates lots of content
- Supports other fans
- Always has a positive attitude towards the series/actors
- Always has a positive attitude towards the fan community
- Has met the actors
- Other _____

Have you ever had to miss out on a convention/fandom experience because of money?

- Yes
- No

Have work commitments ever restricted your participation in the *Supernatural* fan community?

- Yes
- No

Have family commitments ever restricted your participation in the *Supernatural* fandom?

- Yes
- No

Have you ever felt judged by other fans because...

	Yes	No	Not applicable
You don't create content	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
You didn't go to a convention?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
You haven't met any of the actors?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
You're a newer fan?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
You asked an obvious question about the series/fan community?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
You don't own merchandise	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
You don't travel to conventions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Do you assume someone who has met the actors from *Supernatural* must be a dedicated fan?

- Yes
- No

Do you think fans who have met the actors multiple times are more dedicated fans than those who have met them once or not at all?

- Yes
 - No
-

Have you ever met actors from *Supernatural*

- Yes, including Jared and/or Jensen
 - Yes, other actors
 - No
-

Do you think someone who has no interest in attending a convention can be considered a dedicated fan?

- Yes
 - No
-

Would you admire someone willing to sacrifice other things in order to purchase expensive tickets over someone who selects the cheaper option?

- Yes
 - No
-

What do you think the most significant part of *Supernatural* fandom is?

- Watching the show
 - Meeting the actors
 - Creating fan content
 - Consuming fan content
 - Friendship formation
 - Other _____
-

Age:

- 18-24
 - 25-29
 - 30-34
 - 35-39
 - 40+
-

Gender:

- Male
 - Female
 - Non-binary
 - Choose not to say
-

Marital Status:

- Single
 - Married
 - Divorced
 - Cohabiting with partner
 - Other
-

How many children do you have?

- None
 - 1
 - 2
 - 3
 - 4
 - 5+
-

Display This Question:

If How many children do you have? != None

What is the age of your youngest child?

- 0-5
 - 6-11
 - 12-15
 - 15-18
 - 18+
-

What is your home currency?

- AUD
 - USD
 - GBP
 - EUR
 - CAD
 - OTHER (Please Specify) _____
-

Annual Personal Income (please answer in your previously indicated home currency):

- Under 10K
 - 10K - 19K
 - 20K - 24K
 - 25K - 49K
 - 50K - 74K
 - 75K - 99K
 - 100K+
 - Choose Not To Say
-

Annual Household Income (please answer in your previously indicated home currency):

- Under 10K
 - 10K - 19K
 - 20K - 24K
 - 25K - 49K
 - 50K - 74K
 - 75K - 99K
 - 100K - 149K
 - 150K - 199K
 - 200K+
 - Choose Not To Say
-

Highest level of education obtained:

- Did not finish high school
 - High school
 - Technical/Vocational college
 - Undergraduate degree (Bachelors/etc.)
 - Masters degree
 - Doctorate
-

Are you currently a student?

- Yes, High School
 - Yes, Undergraduate, full time
 - Yes, Undergraduate, part time
 - Yes, Postgraduate, full time
 - Yes, Postgraduate, part time
 - No
-

Area of Employment:

- Full time student
- Not currently engaged in paid employment
- Admin
- Agriculture
- Arts and recreation services
- Communications/Marketing
- Construction
- Consulting
- Defence Force
- Education (primary or high school)
- Education (tertiary)
- Finance
- Food services (including bar and wait staff)
- Hair and Beauty Services
- Health Care
- Manufacturing
- Real Estate
- Retail
- Transport
- Warehousing
- Other

Display This Question:

If Area of Employment: != Full time student

Or Area of Employment: != Not currently engaged in paid employment

What is your current job title? e.g. high school teacher; waitress; retail worker; journalist; medical receptionist

How many hours per week do you engage in paid employment?

- 0
- Less Than 10
- 10-19
- 20-31
- 32-40
- 40+

Nationality:

Country of Residence:

Taylor Swift

What year did you become a fan of Taylor Swift?

- 2006
 - 2007
 - 2008
 - 2009
 - 2010
 - 2011
 - 2012
 - 2013
 - 2014
 - 2015
 - 2016
 - 2017
 - 2018
 - 2019
-

How did you discover Taylor?

- Through a friend
 - Magazine/Website
 - Radio
 - Saw people discussing online
 - Television
 - Stumbled upon
 - Other _____
-

How long after becoming a fan did you join an online fan community?

- Immediately
 - After a few weeks
 - After a few months
 - After a year or longer
-

What platforms do you use to communicate with other fans? (select all that apply)

- Facebook
 - Twitter
 - Tumblr
 - Instagram
 - WhatsApp
 - Discord
 - Slack
 - LiveJournal
 - Fanfiction portals (Ao3, Wattpad, ff.net, etc.)
 - Other _____
-

What platform do you **primarily** use to communicate with other fans?

- Facebook
 - Twitter
 - Tumblr
 - Instagram
 - WhatsApp
 - Discord
 - Slack
 - LiveJournal
 - FanFiction Portals (Ao3, Wattpad, ff.net, etc.)
 - Other _____
-

Do you have social media accounts specifically created because you're a fan of Taylor? i.e. separate to or instead of a personal account

- Yes
 - No
-

How do you find other fans to connect with online? Select all that apply

- Hashtags
- Popular posts
- Keyword searches
- Mutual friends
- Commenting in groups
- Other _____

Have you ever met up with other fans from online in person?

- No
- Yes, once
- Yes, multiple times
- Yes, frequently

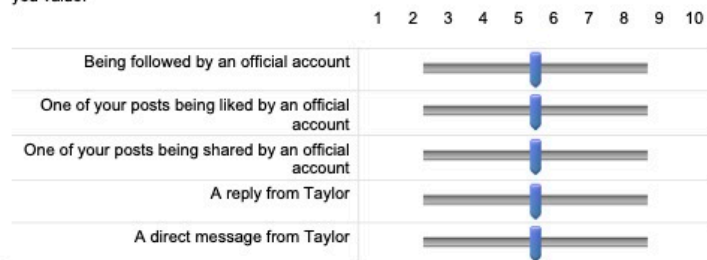
Do you follow "official" accounts on social media (e.g. Taylor Nation, band members, etc.)?

- Yes, all
- Yes, some
- No

What makes you want to follow another fan? (Select all that apply)

- They have a lot of existing followers
- Quality of posts
- They've met Taylor
- They seem nice
- They create content
- I have friends who follow them
- Shoutout from someone connected to Taylor

On a scale of 1-10, with 1 being "not at all" and 10 being "more than anything", how much do you value:



Are you more likely to follow someone if you know they have interacted with Taylor?

- Yes
- No

Do you produce content? (e.g. fic, fan art, update accounts, etc.)

- Yes
- No

Display This Question:

If Do you produce content? (e.g. fic, fan art, update accounts, etc.) = Yes

What sort of content do you produce? (Select all that apply)

- Fan Fic
- Fan Art
- Manips/Edits
- Curate Update Accounts
- Other _____

What sort of fan content do you consume? (Select all that apply)

- Fan Fic
- Fan Art
- Update Accounts
- Covers
- Fan Vids
- Other _____

How frequently do you consume fan content?

- Daily
- Multiple times per week
- Once per week
- Multiple times per month
- Monthly
- Less frequently

Where do you **primarily** consume fan content?

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Tumblr
- Instagram
- Youtube
- Archive Of Our Own
- Wattpad
- LiveJournal
- Other (Please Specify) _____

When new "official" content is actively being released (i.e. a new album, tour, etc.), does your consumption/interaction increase?

- Yes
- No

Approximately how much time would you spend **per day** on fandom related online activities?

- Less than half an hour
- 0.5-1hr
- 1hr-2hrs
- 2hrs-5hrs
- 5hrs +

In an average year where an album has been released, how much do you spend on being a fan of Taylor? Assume she is touring and include all related travel expenses in your estimate. Please answer in your home currency

- Less than 100
- 100-249
- 250-499
- 500-999
- 1000-2499
- 2500-4999
- 5000+

Please select all fandom related things you spend money on:

- Album
- DVD
- Merchandise (Clothing)
- Merchandise (Other)
- Concert tickets
- VIP concert experiences

An album is available to stream online. Do you still purchase a physical copy?

- Yes
- No

Have you ever purchased multiple of the same fandom related item (e.g. multiple copies of the same album)?

- Yes, once
- Yes, frequently
- No

Have you ever purchased a limited edition merch option (including, but not limited to, vinyls and Taylor-curated magazines)?

- Yes
- No

What would **primarily** motivate you to purchase a limited edition item?

- I want the item
- It sets me apart from other fans
- It shows I'm a dedicated fan
- I want to support Taylor
- I want to collect memorabilia
- Other _____

Have you ever illegally downloaded Taylor's music?

- Yes
- No

Taylor is touring, but not appearing in your closest city. Would you realistically be willing to travel:

	Yes	No
To another city in your state?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To a city in another state?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To another country?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

What is the most you would be willing to spend on a single fandom experience (including travel and accommodation, etc.)? Please answer in your home currency.

- Less than 100
- 100-199
- 200-299
- 300-399
- 400-499
- 500-599
- 600-699
- 700-749
- 750-999
- 1000+

Please describe what you believe would make someone Taylor's most dedicated fan:

Rank the following traits of a dedicated fan on a scale of 1-10:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10



Which of the following is the **most** important trait of a dedicated fan? Select only one.

- Owns lots of merchandise
- Has been a fan for a long time
- Is willing to travel to attend events
- Always has "good" seats at concerts
- Creates lots of content
- Supports other fans
- Always has a positive attitude towards Taylor
- Always has a positive attitude towards the fan community
- Has met Taylor
- Other _____

Have you ever had to miss out on a concert/fandom experience because of money?

- Yes
- No

Have work commitments ever restricted your fandom participation?

- Yes
- No

Have family commitments ever restricted your fandom participation?

- Yes
- No

If you could never afford to go to another concert, do you think you would still feel like a part of the Taylor Swift fandom?

- Yes
- No

Have you ever felt judged by other fans because...

	Yes	No	Not applicable
You had cheap tickets?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
You didn't go to a concert?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
You haven't met Taylor?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
You're a newer fan?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
You don't own merchandise	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
You don't travel to concerts	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Have you ever met Taylor?

- Yes
- No

Display This Question:

If Have you ever met Taylor? = Yes

What year did you meet Taylor?

- 2006
- 2007
- 2008
- 2009
- 2010
- 2011
- 2012
- 2013
- 2014
- 2015
- 2016
- 2017
- 2018
- 2019

Do you assume someone who has met Taylor must be a dedicated fan?

- Yes
- No

Do you think someone who has never been to a concert can be considered a dedicated fan?

- Yes
- No

Would you admire someone willing to sacrifice other things in order to purchase expensive tickets over someone who selects the cheaper option?

- Yes
- No

What do you think the most significant part of Taylor Swift fandom is?

- Listening to her music
- Trying to meet Taylor
- Creating fan content
- Consuming fan content
- Friendship formation
- Other _____

Age:

- 18-24
 - 25-29
 - 30-34
 - 35-39
 - 40+
-

Gender:

- Male
 - Female
 - Non-binary
 - Choose not to say
-

Marital Status:

- Single
 - Married
 - Divorced
 - Cohabiting with partner
 - Other
-

How many children do you have?

- 0
 - 1
 - 2
 - 3
 - 4
 - 5+
-

Display This Question:

If How many children do you have? != 0

What is the age of your youngest child?

- 0-5
 - 6-11
 - 12-15
 - 15-18
 - 18+
-

What is your home currency?

- AUD
 - USD
 - GBP
 - EUR
 - CAD
 - OTHER (Please Specify) _____
-

Annual Personal Income (please answer using the currency indicated in Q52)

- Under 10K
 - 10K - 19K
 - 20K - 24K
 - 25K - 49K
 - 50K - 74K
 - 75K - 99K
 - 100K+
 - Choose Not To Say
-

Annual Household Income (please answer using the currency indicated in Q52)

- Under 10K
 - 10K - 19K
 - 20K - 24K
 - 25K - 49K
 - 50K - 74K
 - 75K - 99K
 - 100K - 149K
 - 150K - 199K
 - 200K+
 - Choose Not To Say
-

Highest level of education obtained:

- Did not finish high school
 - High school
 - Technical/Vocational college
 - Undergraduate degree (Bachelors/etc.)
 - Masters degree
 - Doctorate
-

Are you currently a student?

- Yes, high school
 - Yes, Undergraduate (full time)
 - Yes, Undergraduate (part time)
 - Yes, Postgraduate (full time)
 - Yes, Postgraduate (part time)
 - No
-

Area of employment:

- Full time student
- Not currently engaged in paid employment
- Admin
- Agriculture
- Arts and recreation services
- Communications/marketing
- Construction
- Consulting
- Defence force
- Education (primary or high school)
- Education (tertiary)
- Finance
- Food services (including bar and wait staff)
- Hair and Beauty Services
- Health care
- Manufacturing
- Real Estate
- Retail
- Transport
- Warehousing
- Other

Display This Question:

If Area of employment: != Full time student

And Area of employment: != Not currently engaged in paid employment

What is your current job title? e.g. high school teacher; waitress; retail worker; journalist; medical receptionist

How many hours per week do you engage in paid employment?

- 0
- Less Than 10
- 10-19
- 20-31
- 32-40
- 40+

Nationality:

Country of Residence:

Appendix B: Survey open-text responses – codes

Supernatural

Code	References
community	34
content creation	21
conventions	45
doesn't exist	30
identity marker	3
incomplete	5
interaction	15
knowledge	22
love	27
merchandise	26
multiple meanings	14
negative	10
not a competition	24
not money	26
other	3
positivity	1
respect	16
sacrifice	4

Code	References
social media	19
spending money	25
support	36
the show	72
time	12
travel	10
values	8

Taylor Swift

Code	References
appreciation	1
community	19
concerts	34
consistency	12
content creation	15
doesn't exist	23
excitement	4
identity marker	7
incomplete answer	21
interaction	13
knowledge	18

Code	References
listening to music	38
love	22
merchandise	20
multiple meanings	8
negative	5
not money	22
openness	1
over the top response	1
positive attitude	6
positivity	2
prioritisation	1
sharing love	2
social media	27
spending money	22
support	117
time	28
travel	9

Appendix C: Interview schedules

Supernatural

Fandom Background:

- How did you first discover *Supernatural*?
- Can you describe what being a *Supernatural* fan means to you?
- How is being a *Supernatural* fan tied to your identity?
- Are you involved in any other online fandoms?
- What is your primary method of participation within the *Supernatural* fandom?

Interaction:

- Have you met any of the cast?
- Have you met any members of the cast multiple times?
- Do you think meeting the cast is an important part of fandom?
- How often do you attend conventions?
- What does meeting the cast mean to you?
- Do you share your pictures and autographs on social media?
- Do you think the way meet and greets are run is fair?

Social Status:

- What does being a dedicated fan mean to you?
- How did you make friends within the fandom?
- How important is friendship within the *Supernatural* fandom?
- Do you think there's a hierarchy among *Supernatural* fans?

- Are there popular fans within the fandom?
- Do you think the *Supernatural* fandom is cohesive?
- What do you think the most valued attribute is in the *Supernatural* fandom?

Economic Capital:

- Do you think fandom is an expensive activity?
- What's the most expensive fandom-related thing you've purchased?
- How much would you be willing to spend at a convention?
- How much time do you spend on fandom related activities?
- Have you ever felt like your participation was restricted by outside responsibilities?
- Do you think you could still have a significant fandom experience if you only watched the show?
- Have you had to make sacrifices to participate in any fandom activities?

Taylor Swift

Fandom Background:

- How did you first discover Taylor Swift?
- Can you describe what being a Taylor Swift fan means to you?
- How is being a Taylor fan tied to your identity?
- What's your favourite Taylor "era"?
- Are you involved in any other online fandoms?
- What is your primary method of participation within the Taylor Swift fandom?
- Do you consume fan-created content such as fan fic, fan edits, or fan art?

Interaction:

- What does being noticed by Taylor mean to you?
- Has Taylor ever interacted with you on social media?
- Do you try to get Taylor's attention on social media?
- How do you think Taylor picks fans to meet or send presents to?
- Do you follow people who are noticed by Taylor?
- Can you talk to me about fans "boosting" other fans on social media?
- What do you think makes a fan "deserve" to meet Taylor?

Social Status:

- What does being a dedicated fan mean to you?
- How did you make friends within the fandom?
- How important is friendship within the Taylor Swift fandom?

- Do you think there's a hierarchy among Taylor Swift fans?
- Are there popular fans within the fandom?
- Do you think the Taylor Swift fandom is cohesive?
- What do you think the most valued attribute is in the Taylor Swift fandom?

Economic Capital:

- What fandom objects do you spend money on?
- Do you feel required to purchase merchandise/tickets/albums to participate?
- Do you think fandom is an expensive activity?
- What's the most expensive fandom-related thing you've purchased?
- What's the furthest you've travelled to attend a concert?
- Do you attend multiple concerts per tour?
- What are your thoughts on ticket prices?
- What did you think about Taylor Tix?
- Do you think you should be able to buy meet and greets with Taylor?
- How much time do you spend on fandom related activities?
- Do you think you would still be able to enjoy participating in the Taylor Swift fandom if you couldn't afford to attend concerts or purchase merchandise?

Appendix D: Interview codes

Supernatural

Code	Interviews	References
Conventions	6	82
Fandom	6	111
Hierarchy	5	19
Identity	3	3
Interaction	6	42
Mental Health	1	2
Money	6	48
Online	3	14
Show	6	22
Social	6	53
Time	5	13

Taylor Swift

Code	Interviews	References
Attention	7	38
Community	6	27
Dedication	7	47
Demographics	5	9
Drama	7	30
Eras	7	12
Fandom	7	143
Friendship	7	14
Hierarchy	7	47
Identity	7	29
Interaction	7	41
Money	7	40
Music	7	45
Online	7	61

Code	Interviews	References
Participation	7	95
Social Media	7	51
Support	6	11
Time	7	26
Tour	7	35

Appendix E: "Dedicated fan" open text codes

Supernatural

Code	References
community	34
content creation	21
conventions	45
doesn't exist	30
identity marker	3
incomplete	5
interaction	15
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merchandise	26
multiple meanings	14
negative	10
not a competition	24
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positivity	1
respect	16
sacrifice	4
social media	19
spending money	25
support	36
the show	72
time	12
travel	10
values	8

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interaction	13
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multiple meanings	8
negative	5
not money	22
openness	1
over the top response	1
positive attitude	6
positivity	2
prioritisation	1
sharing love	2
social media	27
spending money	22
support	117
time	28
travel	9