

FANDOM IN THE DIGITAL AGE

- An exploration of value co-creation in online fan communities

FANDOM I DEN DIGITALE ALDER

- En udforskning af værdiskabelse i online fan fællesskaber

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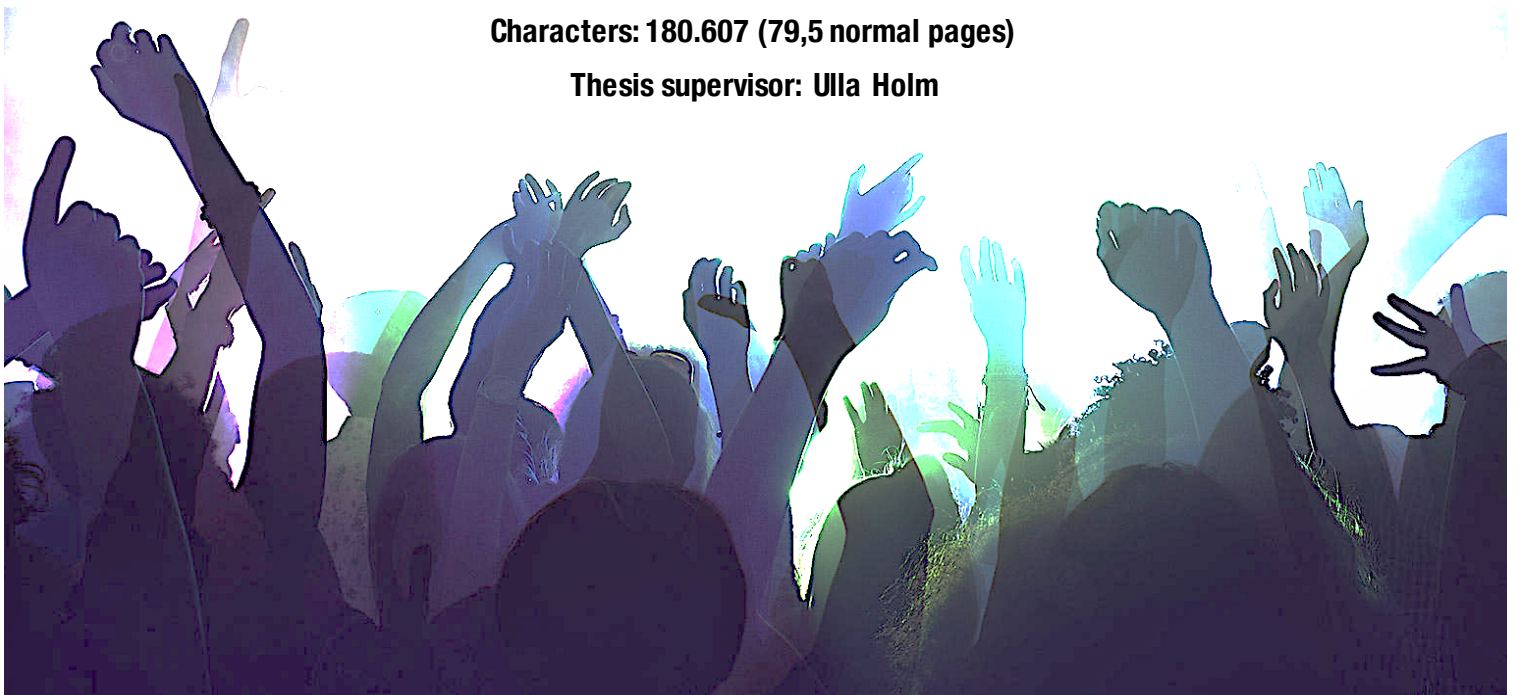
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Resumé

Dette speciale undersøger, hvordan brand-værdi bliver skabt i online fanfællesskaber. For at finde frem til dette, har jeg observeret og analyseret kollektive værdiskabelsesprocesser i to konkrete fanfællesskaber med henblik på at definere, hvordan deltagerne samskaber forståelse og værdi ud fra fanobjektets kulturelle kontekst

Ud fra et empirisk fænomenologisk perspektiv har jeg udvalgt fanfællesskaberne *Bronies* og *Beliebers*, som udspringer af hhv. legetøjs-franchiset My Little Pony og popsangeren Justin Bieber, til at repræsentere forbrugeradfærdsfænomenet. Interaktioner, adfærd og deltagelse i de to fanfællesskaber er blevet analyseret og dokumenteret i en fire måneder lang virtuel etnografi i et forsøg på at opnå en forståelse af fanfænomenet fra et forbrugeradfærds perspektiv. Formålet med at undersøge mindre kommercielle, men mere kulturbårne, fællesskaber er at afdække, hvorvidt disse potentielt vil kunne nuancere forståelsen af værdiskabelsesprocesserne i de mere traditionelle brand communities.

Mine resultater afslører, at der opstår dynamiske værdiskabende roller mellem den enkelte fan samt den kollektive fandom i online fællesskaberne. Det stod klart, at forbrugerne primært var/er drevet af de intrinsiske motivationer samt personlige oplevelser, som fanobjektet gav dem. Ved brug af forbrugerkulturkonceptet blev det konstateret, at fansubjektet repræsenterer tendenser fra post-postmoderne forbrugerisme, som er baseret på forbrug for fornøjelsens skyld, frem for postmodernismens fokus på symbolbetydninger. Fansnes evner til at fortolke kreativt på fanobjektet blev anset som at være et vigtigt element, hvori værdi blev både skabt og sammenskabt. Det var yderligere klat, at det er muligt at være en fan uden at være en del af nogen fandom, men at essensen af fandom-engagementet konkret bundet i at få kontakt med andre ligesindede. Den anden refleksion viste dermed, at fans er drevet af den kulturelle og sociale værdi, som de kan finde i disse fællesskaber. Følelsen af fælleskab og af deltagelse i et sådant univers forstærker den oplevede værdi i fanobjektet. Det sociale link, som folk oplever mellem hinanden, giver således en ny dimension af værdi, som er med til at forstærke den individuelle fans opfattelse af de intrinsiske og hedonistiske fordele.

Denne dynamiske værdiskabelsesproces blev statueret af en brony, som definerede sit forhold til My Little Pony som ”symbiotisk”. Deltagelse i fandom handler ikke om fanobjektet, men om alle de forbrugsaktiviteter, der rækker udover selve forbruget. Et eksempel på dette er

produktion og forbrug af fanskabte fiktion. Nogle bronies afslørede endda, at de end ikke er fans af showet, men at de kun ser det for at kunne deltage i fællesskabet. I dette lys kan fanobjektets værdi opfattes som en kulturel mægler for fællesskabets kollektive projekt – en særdeles vigtig mægler, som står til grund for fanfællesskabets oprindelse og muligvis også overlevelse.

Resultaterne har potentiale til at få konsekvenser for den stigende interesse i proaktiv ledelse af brand communities. I forhold til at skabe social interaktion og loyalitet i brand communities hævdes det, at det er mere end et spørgsmål om 'best practices'. Det i stedet foreslået, at brands skal fokusere på at pleje forholdet mellem forbruger og produkt samt at facilitere co-creation mellem forbrugerne. Virksomheden er kun én bidragsyder til et brands kulturelle liv og værdi – og ikke nødvendigvis den vigtigste af slagsen.

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Chapter 1 – Fandom in the Digital Age

1.1. Prologue

“You guys, the internet, fans, you guys made the studio do this. You bent their arms behind their backs, twisted their frigging necks, and here we are.”

In July 2014, test footage created for an abandoned movie centred on the superhero Deadpool leaked online. Despite immediate studio action to remove the copy, the video spread like wildfire across the Internet. Fan outrage (of the cancellation), enthusiasm and excitement over the footage consequently changed the film’s fate and two months after the leak Fox Studios greenlit the project, eventually conceiving the credit by actor Ryan Reynolds presented in the opening quote of this chapter. According to Rob Liefeld, creator of the Deadpool character, “the leaked footage served as one of those signature moments when fandom united across all social media platforms and made their voices heard” (O’Connell, 2015). Despite having been trapped in development hell for a century, the movie is, as of February 2016, currently being theatrically released across the world.

The notion of fandom is not a new phenomenon and predates the Internet by decades. Although most of the foundational work in fan studies was done in a world where zines (fan magazines) were traded through the mail, the field’s growth coincided with the popularization of the Internet, which has truly transformed that it means to be a fan (Baym, 2012). Fans can now build communities more rapidly with consequences not just for their enjoyment of music, film, television and games, but for everyone involved in the creation, distribution and promotion in any capacity (Galuszka, 2015). The emergence of digital communications tools has had a profound impact upon the media ecology, “empowering and disempowering, blurring the lines between producers and consumers and creating symbiotic relationships between powerful corporations and individual fans” (Pearson, 2010, p. 84).

This thesis is about these fan communities. It is not about the Facebook fan page fan nor is it about the casual audience. This study is about fandom, online fan communities, and their

members. More precisely, it is about two online fan communities – the Justin Bieber fandom, the *Beliebers* and the My Little Pony community the Bronies and how value and meaning are created in these virtual communities.

Below, I have highlighted a mere fraction of the literature constituting the field of ‘fan studies’. With this thesis I strive to broaden our understanding of fans and contemporary consumer culture. It is an attempt of uniting two often time conflicting theoretical fields, namely fan studies and consumer behaviour studies. My argument is that a lot of insights and knowledge lies at the intersection of understanding consumer behavioural aspects of fans. Especially considering hazardous social media phenomena such as “shit storms” and “hashtag hijacks”, an understanding of fandom may provide a major key to grasping many new forms of cultural production, consumer collectives and customer relationship management (Jenkins, 2009). However, let us now turn to a brief review of the body of knowledge within fandom studies.

1.2. Fandom is beautiful

This thesis focuses on the phenomenon of fan communities, or the so-called *fandoms*. Even though there is some academic debate surrounding the definition of fandom itself, this work will use the definition that involves “collective of people organized socially and their shared appreciation of pop culture object or objects” (Baym, 2007). Essentially, fan communities can form around anything – sports, music, comic books, and video games are only a few.

“Fans are, in fact, the most visible and identifiable of audiences. How is it then, that they have been overlooked or not taken seriously as research subjects by critics and scholars? And why are they maligned and sensationalized by the popular press, mistrusted by the public?”
Levis (1992, p. 1)

Lisa A. Lewis opened her book collection *The Adoring Audience* (1992) with the above question, which suitable introduce the restrictive and erroneous perceptions surrounding media fans that were predominant at the time. Along with Henry Jenkins’ *Textual Poachers* (1992) and Camille Bacon-Smith’s *Enterprising Women* (1992), the three works established the fan studies field of scholarship and provided the blueprint for the next decade of fan research. As Jenkins explained in the introduction to *Textual Poachers*, “fan culture is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon, inviting many forms of participation and levels of engagement” (1992, p. 2). Destined to change the perception of fans as mindless and uncritical consumers of pop cultural products, Jenkins (1992) persisted a nuanced picture of fans as critical, creative

and activist individuals, and that the study of these individuals offers rich insights into media consumption, identity, textual engagement and communications.

A key contribution emerging from the first wave of fan studies was the recognition that fans blur the lines between consumption and production. For fan studies, the notion of intertextuality has been pivotal from their very beginning. The term “textual poaching” became essential as it took the active audience theory and applied it to the fan way fan cultures ‘poach’ from their beloved text to create new create new texts. Jenkins (1992) extension of the term discusses how a fan simultaneously enjoys and interprets a text through both submissive and oppositional reading, allowing readers to stick to canon (unofficial rules and principles put forward by the original text) as they wish, while exploring a world of their own. Especially, fan fiction (Busse & Hellekson, 2006) has attracted the greatest amount of scholarship. Fan studies has increasingly been re-centered around forms of fan cultural production, especially as new forms of digital culture have rendered participatory culture practices more visible. As a result, the notion of an active audience became widely accepted and celebrated within media, communications and consumer behaviour studies.

Methodologically, fandom has often been approached from auto ethnographical approaches, where researchers provide insider’s view by inserting themselves into fandom – writing from the inside out. Greatly exemplified by Jenkins’ (2006) introduction to *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers*: “Hello. My name is Henry. I am a fan. Somewhere in the late 1980s’, I got tired of people telling me to get a life. I wrote a book instead” (p. 1.). In 1992, he coined the term “aca-fan” to refer the academic fan-scholar, a phrase that still influence fandom scholars this day today. I would be lying if I said that I haven’t been inspired by the work of Henry Jenkins, and with his blog and active Twitter engagement he has developed a fan following of himself, yours truly included. However, I do though believe that the aca-fan and auto-ethnographic approaches as well has limited the field to explore its full potential, as researchers are often studying fandoms they are often part of themselves. I will not focus on the methodological limitations of scholars studying their own fandom, but I believe that it has limited the broadening of the field towards more business related contexts.

Duffett (2013) recognizes this unbalance, “the focus on texts and textuality has meant that researchers have often tended to neglect both audiences and wider contexts” (p. 255). So far, entries of corporate aspects of fandom only offer critical accounts of ways media producers

exploit fan engagement and create authorized and regulated fan culture (Consalvo 2003; Stein 2011).

Fan practices have also been examined from consumer behaviour perspectives. These accounts are rare and often seek to understand the value of fans from a corporate perspective. Brown (2007) questions how representative hard-core fans are to the larger audience, arguing that fans are atypical consumers and thus their preferences should not guide corporate decision making. Kozinets (2001) at least embraces this research trajectory, modelling the intersection of consumer research and fan studies by exploring the meaningfulness of fan consumption of merchandise related to Star Trek.

Following Duffett's (2013) argument, an exclusive circle of cultural scholars and self-proclaimed fans have determinedly laboured to establish the predominant body of conventional knowledge on fans and fandoms, which so far has remained rather unchallenged (p. 255). With this study, I am going to approach an untouched territory which lies in the intersection between consumer behaviour research and fandom research, in which my theoretical contribution lies as well. With this thesis, I strive to broaden the field by considering fans from a marketing communications and consumer behaviour perspective. As Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington (2007) argue "studying fan audiences allows us to explore some of the key mechanisms through which we interact with the mediated world at the heart of our social, political, and cultural realities and identities" (p. 10). My hopes are that valuable insights are to be gained both as a new, fresh perspective of the contemporary consumer. As Jenkins' (2006) argues, we should no longer be talking about fans as if they were somehow marginal to the ways the culture industries operate when these emerging forms of consumer power have been the number one topic of discussion in marketing research over the past few years.

1.2.1. Theoretical foundation

In order to situate the consumer behaviours of Beliebers and Bronies within academic discourse, it is first necessary to clarify what type of theoretical lens will be used to understand them. With the study's emphasis on *the fan*, my interest is drawn to the issues of consumer sense making, the perception of consumption meanings, and value creation (Bengtsson & Firat, 2006). In recent years, the concept of value co-creation (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004) has been gaining attention in marketing and many related fields. In the traditional value chain, value was created

and controlled by firms where consumers were perceived as buyers and acceptors at the end of the chain. However, in the digital age relationships between producer and consumer have changed, which have given rise to an increasingly active consumer, who are looking for personalised, unique experiences. Specifically, Prahalad & Ramaswamy (2004) defines co-creation as “the joint creation of value by the company and the customer; allowing the customer to co-construct the service experience to suit their [own] context” (p. 8).

Value co-creation, however, is not only a fundamental concept within service marketing and business management, as the quote from Prahalad & Ramaswamy (2004) represents. Instead, it is a term that describes a shift to a more participatory process in which people and organizations together generate and develop meaning (Alves, Fernandes & Raposo, 2015). Following its first debut in literature, there has been a significant amount of research on co-creation from different perspectives; service-science, innovation studies, many-to-many marketing, post-modern marketing, consumer culture theory (ibid). In consumer culture theory, co-creation functions as “a means for attaining symbolic and cultural value in connection with the supply of the market, enabling consumers to achieve their projects and goals” (Alves, Fernandes & Raposo, 2015, p. 1627).

With Castell’s (2005) rise of the “network society”, the way consumers interact with each other have accelerated this unravelling as individuals are able to engage with each other and build new communities across space and time. As well as fans gathering in online communities, consumers are forming communities around brands. This have resulted in recent developments in marketing and consumer behaviour that have stressed the connection *between* consumers and not only considering the consumer’s relationship with the brand (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al. 2002).

In this thesis, I will consider value creation within fandom from a consumer culture perspective. Utilizing a cultural perspective offers a starting point that is consistent with the literature of fan studies (e.g. Bacon-smith, 1997; Jenkins, 2006; Hills, 2002), but most importantly it will help integrate the fans into the field of consumer research (e.g. Kozinets, 2001). It does so by combining cultural and communal views on brand making, arguing that individual fan may exist in a complex interplay between other fans, the fandom as a whole, and the object of fanaticism. As such, the study will contribute to the literature on value meaning making individual as well as collective, in general as well as to the particular emerging stream of

research concerned with value co-creation. The aim of this investigation is to gain a deeper understanding of the context that influences value creation in fandom. Askegaard and Linnet (2011) argue that “there is lack of adequate attention to social and cultural context in many analytical works” (in Akaka, 2014, p. 391). Thus, this exploration responds to a call for broadening the scope of context and expanding research regarding market-related cultures.

1.3. Research Question

To sum up, fandom remains a complex and challenging area of analysis, but worth studying for many reasons. As Western society shifts further into a digital, participatory, and experience economy, its analysis can help to explain why individuals are increasingly constructing their identities around the brands that they enjoy (Duffett, 2013). The bottom line is that there are unique marketing opportunities that can emerge at the intersection between brand and fan communities. Accordingly, the study is guided by the following problem statement:

This study seeks to explore and understand how brand value and meaning is (co-) created within online fan communities (fandom) and how these insights might be used in a brand community context.

I have deliberately chosen a rather broad, perhaps even vague, research question. As the study investigates an undeveloped theoretical intersection between two well-established fields, a more flexible approach allows the study to develop naturally (Gray, 2014). As such, how I eventually will consider the ‘brand community context insights’ will be dependent on the insights gained from the newfound understanding. It is still unknown whether the findings, if at all, are relevant in a theoretically, managerially or perhaps methodologically sense. To get a sense of the thesis’ research boundaries, the next chapter will briefly highlight what the study will include and what has been excluded.

1.4. Delimitations

As I explored, fan cultures especially have benefitted from opportunities of the Internet and as the study will investigate the fans’ online behaviour hereby excluding offline practices and interactions. My main goal is to examine fan communities in the digital era. More specifically, I will investigate how fans beyond their geographic boundaries organize online, how they differ

from regular consumers and how their presence is changing the communicative dynamics of global media and entertainment industries.

Furthermore, this thesis will solely concentrate on fan created communities, which are initiated and managed beyond organisational control. In relation, one of the most prominent delimitations is that the value creation processes will not be investigated from the media producer's point of view, but will exclusively focus on the fans' perspective. This thought departs in the thesis' ontological impetus which also will be further explained in chapter 2. As such brand value and meaning making is investigated through the eyes of the fan, to develop and understanding of their emotional experiences in engaging with fandom. This will both have affect theoretical perspectives used in the thesis, omitting concepts as relational branding and service-logic perspectives to co-creation as these are theoretically based on the shared interaction between producer and consumer. Empirically, communicational efforts from media producers will as such not be analysed. However, if these communications are included, they will be looked upon as a catalyser of fan behaviour. Having briefly sketched the boundaries of this study, the time has come to delve into the world of teenage idols and colourful ponies. However, before we get ahead of ourselves, I will briefly outline the structure of my argument.

1.5. Reader's guide to the thesis

Overall, the thesis follows a very traditional linear structure. However, it will get a bit more complicated as we move forward.

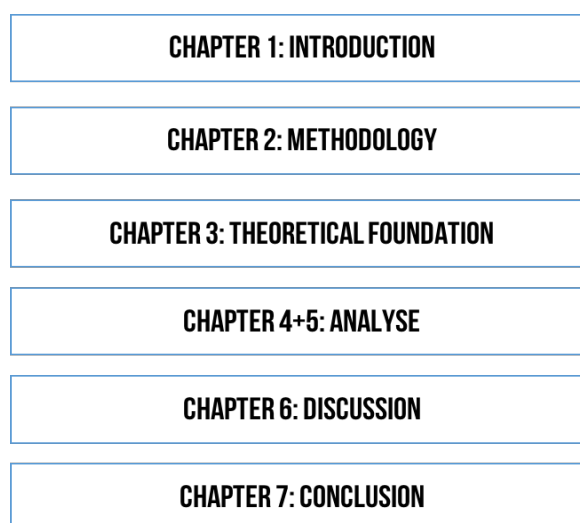


Figure 1: Thesis structure (own creation)

As it hopefully became clear during the preceding sections, *chapter 1* attempts to flesh out the body of conventional knowledge that this thesis seeks to broaden. I started by questioning the common approach and academic practices that have surrounded fan studies since its surfacing in the early 1990s. The study is guided by the following problem statement: *how is brand value and meaning (co-)created within online fan communities (fandom) and how these insights might be used in a brand community context*. This research question will stand as my “golden snitch”, so to speak, which will be pursued and eventually answered by the end of the thesis.

In *chapter 2*, I will describe the thesis’ ontological and epistemological stance including my phenomenological approach. Furthermore, the chapter will present and account for the research design, the chosen methods and how and why they are relevant when investigating value creation in online communities. A main focus on this chapter is the theory and approach of netnography, which will be used to analyse the naturally incurring online communications.

Even though that I have already briefly touched upon my theoretical position, *chapter 3* will go in depth with the theoretical foundation that will guide the analysis. Especially, themes regarding consumer culture, cultural value creation and brand community theory will be touched upon.

Chapter 4 and 5 will present the results of the study. How these two chapters will be structured I will comment on later as the epistemological choices of chapter 2 will have a saying in this.

Chapter 6 sets out, first of all, to summarize the most prominent conclusions of the thesis for then to discuss how these can be used to answer the thesis’ overall problem formulation. The thesis will close off with further reflections in relations to the implications they have on the academic field of brand community management. Finally, the limitations of the study will be presented with a focus on potential future research. But now lets us turn to the methodological considerations that have shaped the study.

Chapter 2 – Researching online fandom

2.1. Methodology

Methodology refers to the process by which the researcher critically justifies his choices (Duffett, 2013). Here, these choices will include a particular research philosophy (perspective on knowledge), research design (the best ways to shape the study and gather data), the usefulness of chosen methods, and an awareness of associated ethical issues.

In this thesis, I will though approach fandom from an ‘empirical phenomenology’ perspective. The section starts with a description of phenomenology - with subsequent subsections that describe important concepts and perspectives in the field of empirical phenomenology. Finally, the section will bring focus on the practical implication and clarify how empirical phenomenology, but also how elements of hermeneutics, is used in the thesis. However, first, I will consider the meta-theoretical suppositions of this study. These can be separated into three aspects; (1) Ontology deals with the researcher’s overall view of the world. What is reality, is there an objective world and if so what is how do objects exist in this world? (2) Epistemology relates to knowledge and how knowledge of the world can be obtained. At last, (3) methodology consists of the concrete methods to understand the world (Presskorn-Thygesen, 2012).

The goal of this research is to understand a human phenomenon of fandom and fans’ experiences of this phenomenon, why the study is based upon the philosophy, strategies and intentions of the interpretive research paradigm. Overall, two major perspectives exist in the social sciences; a positivist and interpretivist paradigm (Gray, 20014) with four overall paradigms; positivistic, hermeneutic, critical and constructivist (Presskorn-Thygesen, 2012). This study is founded within the hermeneutic paradigm. As opposed to the positivism, the interpretive approach of the hermeneutic perspective believes that we cannot study humans as scientific objects, but that people are always bound through individual motives and intentions from specific interpretation of the world (Presskorn-Thygesen, 2012, p. 31). Whereas the realistic perspective believes that everything has one universal truth or reality, my interest in the social world focuses on those aspects that are unique, individual and qualitative. Instead the

anti-realist believes that the world is “culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world” (Crotty, 1998, p. 67 in Gray, 2014, p. 23). This study, being based in the hermeneutic paradigm, as such, follows the paradigmatic assumptions:

- Ontologically, in this study the assumptions are that there are no ‘real’ world out there. The scientific subject should as such be seen in its human understanding of them. The primary scientific object is other people’s understanding of their world.
- Epistemologically, this entails that knowledge is always bound to specific subject’s understanding of the world. As the focus is *understanding* the epistemology approach of the study can be categorized as subjective. ‘Reality’ will as such always takes its point of departure in a subjective frame of understanding.
- Having defined the ontological and epistemological stances means that methodology in this study is to investigate qualitative understandings rather than to approach objective, quantitative data.

In this thesis, I will though approach fandom from an empirical phenomenology perspective. In relations to Presskorn-Thygesen (2012) distinction of the four paradigms, (Darmer, 2012) empirical phenomenology places itself in the hermeneutic paradigm and concurs with its ontology, its subjective epistemology and its qualitative methodology. However, there are slight differences between empirical phenomenology and the other hermeneutic analysis strategies, which have influenced the way I have approached my study. In the following paragraphs, I will elaborate on my reflections regarding phenomenology, which will result in the presentation of my research design and data collection strategies.

2.1.1. Underlying assumptions of phenomenology

Phenomenology is an umbrella term encompassing both a philosophical movement and a range of research approaches. The phenomenological thought was initiated by Husserl (1859-1838) as a radically new way of doing philosophy. Later theorists, such as Heidegger (1889-1976) have moved away from the philosophical discipline which focuses on consciousness and essences of phenomena towards elaborating existential and hermeneutic (interpretive) dimensions (Finlay, 2009).

Husserl introduced the concept of *Lebenswelt*, 'lifeworld', which is each person's subjective experience of their everyday life, meaning that a person's lifeworld is their social reality (Daymon & Holloway, 2010). Following this notion, even though we live in the same world and share common social structures, the 'life-world' is unique for every individual. However, this paper adopts an empirical phenomenology approach, which is more in line with hermeneutics understanding of ontology, its subjective epistemology and its qualitative methodology (Darmer, 2012). As the phenomenological ontology is the 'life world' and all of its limits and opportunities means that it is not concerned whether this is socially constructed or not (Fuglsang & Olsen, 2004, p. 287). Still focused on the subject, the ontology of hermeneutics and empirical phenomenology instead sees the subject as of interpretive nature, and the life world is thus a product of understanding and interpretation (Fuglsang & Olsen, 2004).

The epistemological starting point is marked by the ontological; which for the present project report has an interpretivist approach (Gray, 2014). Thus, there is basically no universal truth, as we as humans perceive and interpret phenomena differently, depending on our packed preconception and the stresses we are exposed to in the assessment of a phenomenon (Schutz, 1975 in Darmer, 2012, p. 105). Empirical phenomenology becomes an exploration, via personal experience, of prevailing cultural understandings, which serves a point of departure for the phenomenological reflection that is essential in the creation of knowledge in the researcher's consciousness (Darmer, 2012). However, as the reflections are based on the researcher's experience, an objective reality will never be in reach as it is the researcher's realisation that will make up the interpretation. The basis of phenomenology is thus experience, implying that it is the individual's reality, which is in the centre of the phenomenological development of knowledge.

2.1.2. Empirical phenomenology

Moustakas (1994) explains that the understanding of meaning, which is implicit in the actors' realities is the goal of phenomenological knowledge. Thus, the empirical phenomenology is not satisfied with pure observations or the studied subjects descriptions. These findings are instead the vehicle for an interpretation that elevates the findings into deeper insights and knowledge of the phenomenon. This could, for example, be a theoretical reflection, which is part of the

researchers' experience, but which is implicit to the subject, or it could be an interpretation from a new perspective, which brings a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

According to Darmer (2012), no precise research design exists within empirical phenomenology besides a rather broad frame of reference often depicted in two levels of analysis. On the first level, the focus is to understand the actors' and their realities, while on the second level, the focus is to reflect upon this understanding. Giorgi (1985, p. 69 in Darmer, 2012, p. 107) describes these two levels of empirical phenomenology:

“On level I, the original data is comprised of naïve descriptions obtained from participants through open-ended questions and dialogue. On level II, the researcher describes the structures of the experiences based on reflective analysis and interpretation of the research participant's account of the story”.

On level 1, the researcher will get data through interviews and dialogue with the goal of obtaining an understanding of research subject's reality, or lifeworld. In empirical phenomenology, in-depth interviews are then the optimal research method as it provides insights into the participant's life world, through their interpretation. However, as already mentioned this study will primarily be based on netnographic participant observations. How I am going to overcome this limitation, I will comment on the next section. When Giorgi (1985) speaks about “naïve descriptions”, it is not meant as in a negative way, but that the researcher should act completely open-minded Darmer (2012). On level 2, the researcher should then describe the experiences based on a reflection upon the findings of level 1. The interpretation on level 2 happens on the basis of a reflective analysis of the phenomenon, so that the interpretation on level 2 will bring new knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon.

1.1.2.2 Epoche

The main aim of phenomenology is to describe rather than to explain, and is thus an attempt at a "direct experience description" where there is no preconceptions basis (Darmer, 2012). Epoche is neither a theory or a specific technique, but a term that is used in phenomenology to emphasize that the researcher must be the river and challenge themselves and her perceptions and prejudices about the phenomena she examines (Moustakas, 1994). Epoche takes place both at level 1 and 2 and in the movement from level 1 to the second Epoche is a term that captures that openness and the challenge of himself and his own understandings that research is an intrinsic part of empirical phenomenological research (Darmer, 2012). It is crucial that scientists

do not project her own reality of the actor, as this will not give insight into the actor, but the researcher's reality.

2.1.3. Methodological structure

In many ways, the two-level structure of empirical phenomenology will structure the entirety of the thesis. As evident below the structure of the thesis has thus gotten slightly more complex. For the sake of simplicity for the reader, I have kept the theoretical framework in its original space. Even though this does not show my actual process, I have done this to keep the analysis as comprehensible without interrupting with the flow with theoretical interruptions.

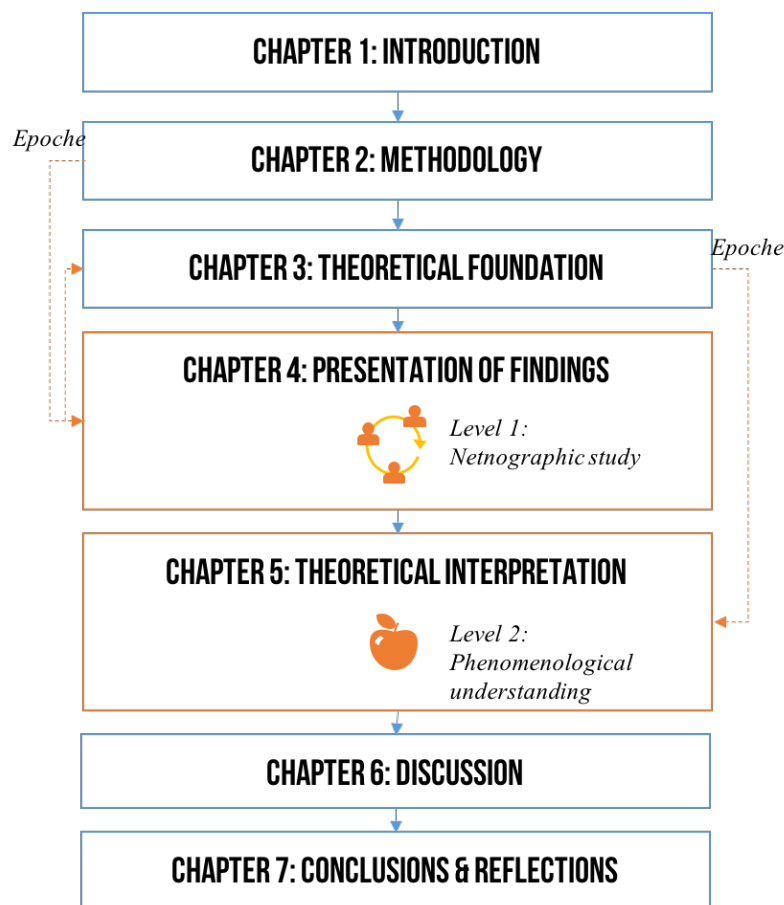


Figure 2: Methodological structure (own creation)

On a practical level, this entails that the application of theory has been postponed until a full-fledged understanding of the communities have been obtained. Whereas chapter 4 is about my perceived *nature* of fandoms, chapter 5 is about the theoretical *understanding* of the fan as well as the fan communities. As such, chapter 4 presents the netnographical findings of the two

fandom research sites. The chapter starts with a short overview of the two fandom, their origins and how they operate in the online world. Chapter 5 consists of the theoretical interpretation of the findings, which will be looked upon from a cultural perspective and a brand community perspective to brand value.

According to Daymon and Holloway (2010), *long interviews*, also referred to as *in-depth interviews*, are the typical method used to drive phenomenological data (p. 149). As phenomenological research has to lead towards *understanding* experiences is acknowledged as the most obvious solution. I will comment on how the theoretical foundation further affects how I will approach the research in the next chapter. However, as according to Duffett (2013), the truth is that fandom is quite a difficult area to study. Asking fans to be self-reflexive can change their stance. Furthermore, the outlook of each fan and their experience of fandom can be different depending on who they are, where, when and how they became interested. Instead, I have chosen to conduct participant observation. In phenomenology, observation of how participants live in their environment through time and space provides clues about how they might embody meaning (Darmer, 2012). Transferred to this thesis, I take to the fans' life world, as this is enacted in the communities, as according to Akaka et al. (2014), in this view, as value co-creation practices are enacted, value is phenomenologically determined through the evaluation of holistic experiences. The context can be described as the virtual world that they live in. As such, as will be elaborated on below, my approach to knowledge is based on ethnographic immersion in the online fandom cultures.

As my research finds itself in a situation where there is a 'mistrust' between the academic field of fandom studies and the corporate focus on fans, it is essential that understanding of fans, their behaviour, intentions and motivations is the sole focus for any chance to unite these contrasting views. As such, the objective of the thesis is to explore a rather unexplored hiatus and add new theoretical perspectives to an existing field of study, and its nature of the relationship between theory and research is inductive. When approaching the fan phenomenon, it is not my goal to analyse it through a theoretical framework as this might just create an abstraction away from the phenomenon that I am interested in understanding. Through a qualitative research study, I seek to gain an understanding of the meaning of fandoms in a consumer behaviour perspective to explore patterns and concepts from the data which may show some implications for media producers and brand managers in general. Thus, based on the

empirical study, generalizable inference is drawn out of the observations, interactions and immersion; contributing with new insights to the existing field of research (Bryman & Bell, 2007).

2.2. The study

This study researches two online fan communities, using the qualitative approach of netnography based on observation and enriched with experimental and immersive data. I will focus on two prominent, much-lauded fandom exemplars, both of which are children of the Internet, possess high levels of fan commitment and have strong ties to popular cyberculture. The first is the *Bronies*, an infamous following of the TV-show My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic, which consists primarily of adult and adolescent men¹ (State of the Herd, 2014). The second is the *Beliebers*, the devoted ‘fan-girl’ community of Canadian popstar Justin Bieber.

2.2.1. Overall design of the study and research objects

Categorizing the specific nature of this current study is not easy. Speaking from an overall perspective, before entering the discussion of particular methods, I regard this study more as pure research. There are however further tendencies of other research categories. Concentrating solely on two online brand communities could categorize this thesis as a case study (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002). Hence, the findings are highly contextual.

A general positivistic criticism of the case study as a method is that it is not scientifically based. There is no definition of how many cases are ideal in multiple case studies. However, the greater number of cases setting, the weaker focus can be on the individual case (Creswell, 2007, p. 76). Even though the use of *two* cases enables some measure of generalization to a wider universe and provides me with the opportunity of exploring parallels and differences between the cases, such a choice demands some reflections about the generalization of case study research. How

¹ In a survey completed by over 18,000 Bronies, 80% of respondents identified as male, a median age of 21, with 75% of the fandom is between 15 and 25, the majority hailed North America, with others from Europe, and Australia.

can one articulate general conclusions of the basis of a one or two cases? Moreover, how come I chose to focus on Bronies and Beliebers, and not other fan communities?

The answers to the first questions can be found in my approach to case studies, which is inspired by Bent Flyvbjerg (2006). Whereas the general criticism of case study as a research method is that one cannot generalize from a single case, Flyvbjerg (2006) believes that this is an oversimplified misunderstanding. Instead, he states

“One can often generalize on the basis of a single case, and the case study may be central to scientific development via generalization as supplement or alternative to other methods. But formal generalization is overvalued as a source of scientific development, whereas “the force of example” is underestimated. (p. 229).

The beliebers and the bronies might be considered as ‘extreme’ examples of fandom. They are often the subject of media news cycle, which tends to focus on them as obsessive² and fanatical³. However, as Flyvbjerg (2006) furthermore argues, a case can be simultaneously extreme, critical and paradigmatic. “The interpretation of such a case can provide a unique wealth of information because one obtains various perspectives and conclusions on the case according to whether it is viewed and interpreted as one or another type of case” (p. 233).

However, why then choose exactly Bronies and Beliebers and not other fan communities, such as a sports fans, or even fans of specific brands? Three reasons were paramount for me in choosing Bronies and Beliebers as cases for this thesis. First, both fandoms constitute modern fan communities which I consider as “children” of the Internet, meaning that the movements have their roots in the Internet and perhaps only exist in the dimensions as they do today due to the opportunities of information and communications technology. This point, I shall further visualize in the next section. A second criteria were that the two fandoms should be different in nature with distinct followings demographics, history, and occupation of positions in cyber culture. In defining fan communities, the two cases are in many ways distinct yet two traditional examples of fandoms, which chapter three also likewise will show. A last point that I want to reflect upon is the fact that I have not been involved with either of the fandoms. This might appear as unnecessary information. However, as perhaps evident by now, the subject of research

² Beliebers in TV2 nyhederne (2013) <https://www.facebook.com/tv2dk/posts/10151452765113089>

³ Bronies in Go’ Morgen Danmark (2014) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vYsdsD2CWwI>

includes a personal dimension and motivation. Following, Jenkins' (1992) approach, I would like to reveal my self as a fan. I am not a fan of My Little Pony or Justin Bieber though, which differentiates me from the auto-ethnographical, aca-fan approach. I have though conducted research on the brony community before, which gave me an advantage in terms of learning about the community's culture and norms. However, being both a business school student and a fan most definitely had an impact to the existence of this study. However, through the notion of epoche, reflecting upon this plays a great deal in the study to come. As it is evident that I am not projecting my own reality onto the bronies, my own perceptions and previous experiences with fandom are put in the background.

2.2.2. Between the virtual and the real

Our social worlds are moving online. Whether it is connecting with friends on Facebook, expressing opinions on Twitter, or interacting with likeminded in knitting forums, new social formations emerge in every corner of the Internet. Moreover, these users are not passively consuming published content, they are actively communicating with one another, reaching out to form, express and deepen their social alliances and affiliations. To stay relevant and to understand contemporary society, Kozinets (2010) argues that social scientists have to follow people's social activities and encounters onto the Internet. "Netnography has been developed to help us understand their world" (p. 2). This argument stands as my guiding light for the thesis's data collection and analysis processes. As covered in the previous section, the fandoms chosen in this study has been founded and exists primarily through technologically mediated communications, it is considered a natural progression that my study will exist within the virtual boundaries of these communities.

A fan community is a social phenomenon and it can be viewed as interactions, which consequently build the "reality" of the fan community. The "reality" investigated in this study exists of social actors, thus the members of the communities will be the focus. The study is founded in the symbolic interactionist school of thought. According to Daymon & Holloway (2001), symbolic interactionism "focuses on interaction between human beings and attempts to understand how individuals interpret each others' behaviour and language, how people give meaning to their own actions and thoughts (by communicating) and reorganize them when interacting and negotiating with others" (p. 119). As such, symbolic interactionism is here used as the theoretical approach to understanding the relationship between the fans. Instead of

focusing on large-scale social structures, this approach will look at individual and group meaning-making by focusing on human action. As such, it fits with the thesis' roots in phenomenology which emphasises the subjective meaning of reality (Akaka et al., 2014).

2.2.3. Netnography

Netnography originates from traditional ethnography and is a method specifically adapted to the study of the online world (Kozinets, 2015). In other words, netnography, or virtual ethnography, adapt the conventional ethnographic principles of cultural immersion, participant observation, and progressive data collection and analysis are adapted to online environments (Hine, 2008).

Netnography refers to a specific set of research practices, “where a significant amount of the data collected and participant-observational research conducted originates in and manifests through the data shared freely on the Internet, including mobile applications” (Kozinets, 2015 p. 79). The approach uses computer-mediated communications as a source of data to arrive at the ethnographic understanding and representation of a cultural or communal phenomenon, meaning that netnography opens up the possibilities of incorporating and blending the myriad communicative acts and interactions flowing through the Internet. This can be textual, graphic, photographic, audio-visual, musical, commercially influenced and sponsored or not. This data collection approach is ideal for the thesis due to its flexibility, unobtrusive nature and depth due to its long-term immersion in analysing the communicative dynamics of the fan communities as the purpose is to understand members' social behaviours and interactions to give a deeper human understanding of the fans' motivations, experiences and life-world. It “enables the researcher to gain a detailed and nuanced understanding of a social phenomenon, and to capture and convey its cultural qualities and give “a human window into naturally occurring behaviours” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 55-56). My research will occur as the participants use the Internet, leaving their traces and transmission for me to discover and decode. The data will often be created on the user's own initiative, in his/her natural state, as opposed to an interview situation or a focus group interview set-up, where participants are aware of the research situation.

Even though Hine (2000) offers one of the most extensive methodological treatments of the topic of online ethnography, she has a somewhat sceptical view of the 'virtual' dimension.

“Virtual ethnography is not only virtual in the sense of being disembodied, virtuality also carries a connotation of ‘not quite’, adequate for practical purposes even if not strictly the real thing” (Hine, 2000, p. 65). Under some conditions, netnographies can be considered as only ‘partial’, but as Kozinets (2010) questions, “where is netnography, based solely upon online data, insufficient? And, conversely, where is it sufficient?” (p. 63). Thus, to determine the extensiveness of the netnographic approach, I need to consider whether the research is on ‘online communities’ or on ‘communities online’ (Kozinets, 2010, p. 65). The choice of method is essentially grounded in the assumptions previously made. As both of the cases are born online, and the research focus is on online practices, behaviours and human interaction in general, it is qualified as a study of online communities. Thus, according to Kozinets (2010), netnography as a primary and standalone method entirely is “appropriate, exhaustive, and complete within itself” (p. 65).

Already now I have used different typologies to refer to the practice of ethnography in an online context. The research method is still relatively new in social studies, but as with many methodological concepts several neologisms emerge as the research field matures. However, there are procedures and ethical guidelines specific to the different concepts, and an academic practitioner need to be aware of the varying methodological considerations. In this paper, I will limit the focus strictly to the practice of *netnography*. This will then include a particular analytical framework, and a consistent set of guidelines for entree, observation, data analysis and ethics.

2.3. Research design

My fieldwork took place in the two online fan communities for the period of three months and included specifically it contains participation/observation in the fandom, analysis of 150 tweets and 20 forum threads. The netnographic data can be found in the provided USB stick (Appendix 2), an overview of the of netnographic data can be found in Appendix 1.1, and the observation guide which framed the observations can be found in Appendix 1.2. The guidelines of Kozinets (2015); (1) planning and preparation (2) data collection, (3) data analysis and interpretation, (4) conducting ethical research (5) representation has helped me conduct this research.

2.3.1. The netnographic process

As suggested by Kozinets (2015), I initiated the netnographic research by looking at several relevant online communities to identify particular online communities relevant to my study. The reflections and processes that I went through here is also presented in the chapter 4 as they revealed to be valuable in understanding of how the fans and the fandom operates. However, as most important was the fact that both communities were relevant, active, interactive, substantial, heterogeneous and data rich (Kozinets, 2015), (see chapter 4.1.1 and chapter 4.1.2). After hours of investigating, I essentially chose to conduct my research on www.mlpforums.com for the bronies (Appendix 2.1) and Twitter for the believers (Appendix 2.2).

As researcher, I started the experience by lurking around the two sites, MLP forums and Twitter. Here, I began to observe the conversations that was happening, looking for patterns and identifying specific users. What were they discussing? How was the tone in general and in the particular conversations? Do they engage in conversations? (Appendix 2.2, Appendix 2.3). As I maneuvered the sites, I found my two separate, but on-going experiences to be very distinct from each other. I need to address these early findings as they eventually have had important implications for the discoveries that I have made. Even though the focus is on the fans and how they use digital communications tools in developing the fandom practices and collective identity, I find it necessary to acknowledge the sites' technological differences and how they might afford specific communicative processes. Based on Treem & Leonardi's (2002) framework on technological affordances⁴, an analysis of the two sites were conducted. The table in Appendix 1.3, showcases the similarities and differences and how they may have affected my research and the behaviours identified on the research sites.

It was only when I felt that I achieved the status as a knowledgeable fan (Kozinets, 2010), that I was culturally fluent, recognizable as both a fan and a researcher trying to learn about fandom, that I entered the sites. My hypothesis was that a pragmatic understanding of the universe would help me when the time came to enter it in a culturally appropriate manner. My exploration of research sites was, therefore, supplemented by a range of preparatory activities, including

⁴ This netnographic study, however, is not created from an affordances approach and as such the technological affordances is only briefly accounted for in the analysis.

watching MLP:FiM and learning all about Justin Bieber and his music. I collected information through mainstream media, through brony and belieber related documentaries and fan made podcasts. Finally, I was lucky to obtain surveys, performed by Bronies themselves, which was collated from 21,637 submissions. I even went so far to buy tickets for Justin Bieber's World Tour. Alright, that might have been partly influenced by pleasure, but my dedication was on point.

2.3.2. Data collection

When conducting netnographies, there are general issues that the ethnographer needs to consider. One such issue is the question of participation; should the ethnographer actively participate or and 'become' the field work data, or remain an invisible lurker? I chose the former.

There are several reasons for this choice. First, the fandom consists of very specific cultural practices. Removing the participative role would eliminate my opportunity of experiencing the broader cultural understanding (Hine, 2000). Without this profound knowledge and experience of the cultural context, my interpretation would essentially be impaired. I would, therefore, have to move beyond the lurker stage to gain a broad understanding of the community, otherwise it would simply be a coding exercise. However, as a researcher, I will never be able to become a full participant (Darmer, 2013). This, however, should not be considered a limitation as a full participant might find it easy to describe a culture in his/her own terms but tend to share the research fields' assumptions (Hine, 2000, p. 261). According to Kozinets (2010), an advantage of netnography is that the researcher is able to "experience social interaction in the way that your participants are experiencing it" (p. 87). As such, by participating in dialogue with the fans instead as well as immersing myself into the culture and the community my goal was to obtain a deep understanding of the fandom experiences.

Data in netnography becomes a tripartite act of collection (which must always be selective), curation (which is highly selective) and annotation (which involves and captures the ongoing reflection of data-method-theory) (Kozinets, 2015, p. 164). These three aspect of collection loosely relate to the three types of netnographic data – the collected, the co-created and the produced. My research involves all three aspects, which are present in Appendix 2. Collected data is provided by either text, links or as screenshots whereas the elicited is provided through

my interactions with other fans. The final type of data is my reflexive field notes. For the field notes, I created an observation guide to structure my participation. However, as an inexperienced researcher in ethnographic methods and with limited time, the process of producing field notes revealed to be a difficult task. Generally, the saved screenshots and conversations were to the biggest value.

2.3.3. Data analysis and interpretation

In netnography, there are two ways in which data analysis is conducted: through cyborgian coding or hermeneutic interpretation. The researcher can choose one, however Kozinets (2010) suggest that both methods are used, as they overlap in certain aspects of data analysis (p.120). They are complimentary as they can shed light to aspects of the data that otherwise would not have been possible.

I chose to solely hermeneutically interpret the data. As the hermeneutic interpretations attempt to address the cultural undertones of text that can vary from person to person, which I found important for this study. The goal of hermeneutic interpretation is to gain a “coherent interpretation” by freeing the text from contradictions by interpreting and reinterpreting the text as a whole and as individual element (Kozinets, 2015). I investigated the opportunities of Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS), but eventually identified more limitations and advantages. Especially, I was worried by losing cultural context and meanings in the process.

On a contextual level, the data consisted of gathering tweets and conversations from the two fandoms. Due to the constraints of the sites, the brony fandom data was converted to .pdf files and the tweets were structured in excel sheets for easy processing. During successive readings, the data was schematized, which resulted in Appendix 1.4

2.3.4. Ethical concerns

Not only does netnography raise epistemological challenges when utilising lurking and participatory strategies, but also it is also important for researchers to understand the ethical implications of Internet research and the representation of data collected online (Kozinets, 2015). Even though many Internet environments are publicly accessible, “for those involved the interactions in question might be deeply intimate and be experienced as if they were private”

(Hine 2008, p. 265). In particular, online interactions and self-representations may be presented in ways that the participants would not approve of. As such, ethical concerns must be addressed by specifying how informed consent was obtained, how the dignity and interests of community members were respected and by ensuring anonymity and confidentiality where required and properly citing and crediting culture members (Kozinets, 2015).

The foundation of an ethical netnography is honesty between the researcher and online community members (Kozinets, 2010), which is why I also revealed my identity as researcher when making my community-required introduction post in the bronies (Appendix 2.1) as well as creating my belieber profile on Twitter (Appendix 2.2).

Secondly, researchers should ensure confidentiality and anonymity to informants (Kozinets, 2010). Therefore, I have anonymized the identity of the community members' posts that I have included in this thesis. As I have included the entirety of the netnographic on the USB stick, I have been forced not to anonymize the identity of the members due to time constraint. Recognizing the grey area of anonymity in online research, the reality is that anyone with access to the Internet will be able to reach the sites and locate the threads where the quotes are from. However, there are sub forums on MLP forums, in which only higher status members are able to reach (Appendix 2.4). These sub-forums often include highly personal matters and as such these posts have been excluded from the analysis. However, these still affect my personal experiences with the fandom, which is subconsciously evident in my perceptions and interpretations.

2.4. Reliability and validity

Conventionally, researchers have referred to notions of reliability and validity to demonstrate the goodness or quality of their studies. However, reliability and validity are complex terms, derived from quantitative research (and a 'realist' or positivist paradigm), and not everyone agrees on their value for qualitative methodologies. According to Mason (1996), however nonetheless still have to think carefully about the reliability and accuracy of their methods.

Reliability is concerned with the question of transparency in sense-making from raw data (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002). Here, netnography has the advantage that the reader is gradually introduced into the findings through developing interpretations and conclusions rather than just

presenting findings. I attempted to be as consistent as possible in interpreting the data. Despite my efforts, I assume that I cannot speak of total consistency. However, I have aimed at being trustworthy in my interpretations. I display the actual statements and messages to show where the information comes from, and I have added the entire threads of my investigation in the appendices.

Validity is concerned with whether or not a study gains access to relevant data (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002). My immersion with the social life of the fandom allows a certain authenticity of findings (Bryman and Bell, 2003). Indicated by my feeling of “going native”, I believe that I gained access to relevant insights. However, as the research period is limited to three-month full-scale data saturation may entail that potentially relevant data is possibly missing. I did, however, experience a small-scale saturation effect during my immersion. Nevertheless, I believe to have gotten a deep understanding of the communities, and I suggest somewhat fair validity.

Chapter 3 – Co-creation of Value

3.1. Value creation in a Consumer Culture

To situate the (consumer) behaviours of the bronies and the beliebers, it is first necessary to conceptually understand what type of theoretical lens will be used to understand them. Thus, the purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the theoretical themes that subsequently are going to found the second level of interpretation of the analysis.

With the study's emphasis on the fan, my interest is drawn to the issues of sense making, brand value meanings and the hybrid forms of collective groupings of consumers. The chapter will be explored through a twofold theoretical focus on respectively a cultural and a community approach to understanding the relationship between consumers, the marketplace, and cultural meanings. Both sections are based on the historical development and key theoretical understandings. The two perspectives will be united in the chapter's last section, which will found the basis for the theoretical interpretation of the analysis.

However, first, I will consider the larger theoretical context, in which the thesis is developed. This is done to limit my theoretical focus as well as illuminate my approach to understanding the rather ambiguous concept of 'value creation'.

3.1.1. Consumer Culture Theory (CCT)

I have in this paper chosen to situate the fandom phenomenon in a consumer culture theory (CCT) perspective. CCT is not a unified, grand theory, nor does it make nomothetic claims. Rather it "refers to a family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace and cultural meanings" (Arnould and Thompson, 2005, p. 868). CCT is the study of consumption choices and behaviours from a social and cultural point of view, as opposed to an economic and psychological one. CCT research as thus often has its roots in the naturalistic inquiry of data, why the 'phenomenological netnography' of this thesis is well suited to the CCT philosophy.

Although CCT comprises a plurality of theoretical approaches, CCT research share a common theoretical orientation towards the study of cultural complexity. According to Joy & Li (2012), CCT research is concerned with cultural meanings, socio-historic influences, the social dynamics that shape consumer experience and identities in the many, messy context of everyday life. The term “consumer culture” as such conceptualizes an interconnected system of commercially produced images, texts, and objects that groups use—through the construction of overlapping and even conflicting practices, identities, and meanings—to make collective sense of their environments and to orient their members’ experiences and lives (Kozinets 2010). As such, translated into the context of this thesis, this focus allows focus to be placed not only on how fans receive brand meanings, but also on the ways they alter them to fit their lifeworld.

In the traditional value chain, value is created by firms, and the customers are buyers or ‘acceptors’ of this process. However, relationships between customers and firms have changes, and value is created in the interaction of customers, firms, and other stakeholders (Gao & Yang, 2015). Value in a value co-creation process is abstract, and cannot be evaluated or be traded as a commodity.

Specifically, within the value creation framework, the perspective of CCT conceives co-creation as “a means for attaining symbolic and cultural values in connection with the supply of the market, enabling consumers to achieve their projects and goals” (Alves, Fernandes & Raposo, 2015 p. 1627). As such, this new perspective on value contrasts the Service Dominant (S-D) logic perspective to co-creation, which has been the most perspective to value creation in the last decade. In the S-D logic, creation of value now results from a joint production process involving both the company and the customer (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). The S-D logic unfortunately still provides more relevance to firm’s value, whereas consumer culture theory is more focused on customers’ value. Fans are seeking for products that come with high cultural input and spiritual meanings. Engaging in, buying, and interacting around media objects are important to our everyday life and crucial to the cultural material through which our social life is organised (Gao & Yang, 2015).

Thus, not only will the following theoretical framework found the second level of understanding, but it will guide me towards a solid foundation in which I will be able to discuss the opportunities and challenges that might emerge in engaging with co-creating with fans and fandoms.

3.2. The cultural perspective - cultural creation of meaning

Viewing consumption through the cultural lens means that all aspects of consumption experiences are analysed in their respective cultural context (Heding et al., 2009). In this view of consumption, the consumption objects are seen as cultural artefacts carrying meaning from the culturally constituted world to the consumers.

Whether we talk about a high culture of basic goods, our contemporary culture is basically something ‘to be consumed’. It is though important to note that, although cultural context is a critical factor in value co-creation, these contexts are constantly intersecting with other social and cultural contexts (Akaka, et al., 2014, p. 270). Thus, to gain a deeper understanding of how value is co-created, the consideration of the broader socio-historic context within which they are embedded is needed (ibid). The cultural approach is different from other approaches as it characterized by having many layers of opposing views both managerially and philosophically (Heding et al., 2009). These views are often portrayed through the paradigm metaphor, in which a new world view overtakes the other. As such, the next section will study two socio-historic periods, namely *postmodernism* and *post-postmodernism*, which will form the basis for reaching a consumer behaviour perspective for the contemporary fan, and the role the fan and fan object occupies in meaning making practices.

3.2.1. From modernity to postmodernity

The postmodern thought arose in the late 1970s the identification of a departure against the tendencies in modernism, which had characterised society since the eighteenth century. According to Brown (1993), the understanding of postmodernism is founded in this paradigm shift as it represents “some kind of reaction to, or departure from, modernism and modernity” (p. 20). Postmodernity is thus a break with the modern ideals and the acknowledgement of the fact that these can’t be reached: “Postmodernity recognized that the goal originally set by modernity will never be reached” (Cova, 1997, p. 16).

The postmodern movement has also focused attention on marketing issues previously considered irrelevant to managerial mainstream of brand choice and shopper behaviour (e.g. gift-giving, compulsive consumption, obsessive collecting) (Brown, 2006, p. 223). Thus in many ways, the inclusion of postmodern theories fits in the thesis exist in the developments of this. The centre of attention in this thesis, the fans, has always been a known phenomenon, just

consider Beatlemania of the 1960s, however it has never been given attention as a field of media behaviour research as it did throughout the 1990s.

1.2.1.3 Postmodern consumer culture

The modern distinction between production and consumption and the notion that the manufacturer creates objects that consumer destroys, becomes the basis for their description of a new consumer culture where the individual is released from the modernist metanarratives straitjacket. On the basis of their criticism of modernism sets Firat and Venkatesh (1995) suggest five facets that capture the postmodern consumer: decentring of the subject, juxtaposition of the opposite, fragmentation, hyperreality and reversal of production.

One of the most discussed conditions in post-modernity's concept of hyperreality. Reality has lost its authenticity in the postmodern society. In that sense, hyperreality involves the creation of marketing environments that Brown (2006) describe as 'more real and real'. This is greatly exemplified by virtual realities of cyberspace and the pseudo worlds of theme parks, where the consumer enters an illusion of what is reality. What is experienced becomes the real, and the construction of this condition constitutes the hyperreal. In effect, the distinction between reality and fantasy is momentarily blurred (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). In branding, the 'objective' reality cease to exist and are instead replaced by a hyper-reality which is negotiated through symbols.

In this greater attention to the symbolic, the multidimensionality and multi-layered collages of images that determine human sensibility and sensitivity beyond reason, there is a fragmentation of life, experience, society, and, most important, of the metanarratives (Lyotard 1992 in Firat and Venkatesh 1995, p. 252). In this way, Lyotard looks at the postmodern man as a subject enough fragmented but also is released from the modernist meta narrative's oppressive regimentation. The liberated postmodern subject can thus even construct their own version of reality that is not governed by a notion of essential truth. (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995 p. 253-54; 263)

In the postmodern paradigm it is paradoxical to talk about a subject at all. Where the acceptance of the consumer as fragmented means that the consumer's reality consists of several independent parts, means decentralization of the subject, the individual accepts this lack of unity conception of reality and embraces the often conflicting parts. The world is also divided into dichotomous

pair that is in contrast to each other so as reason / emotion, male / female, culture / nature, producer / consumer and subject / object. When reality consists of individual fragments as decentred individual embraces, makes it that opposites never polarities. Consumers will often have incoherent consumption behaviour when realities are not seen as contrasts, but as independent elements. This means that consumer behaviour can be profoundly different and irrational, depending on the context consumer operate. An example is the mixing of high and mass culture, as seen particularly in retail, where malls and the like often provide the framework for art exhibitions and other cultured activities, such as concerts, plays.

Firat and Venkatesh (1995) see the postmodern as liberating the individual and not least for the consumer, no longer just consumer objects, but now also produces meanings. They call the postmodern condition for a world of symbolism and spectacle, and this is liberating, because “the logic of production (order, coherence, and systematic and scientific thinking) is no longer the criterion by which consumption is evaluated, nor is it necessary for consumption” (p. 250). Rather, it is the importance of being put in the objects produced; a meaning that consumers in the postmodern itself is helping to create, and which is characterized by an aesthetic representation in images and symbols. The consumer holds a dual role and is both consumer and producer, he produces his own identity through its consumption. He therefore chooses not products from their functional properties, but their image. “The postmodern branding paradigm is premised upon the idea that brands will be more valuable if they are offered not as cultural blueprints but as cultural resources, as useful ingredients to produce the self as one chooses” (Holt 2002, p. 83).

For example, Burberry's strong popularity among violent hooligan groups in Britain highlighted as an example of postmodern consumer behaviour. Clothing manufacturer Burberry have since mid 1800> century sold luxury products and tried to market the products as sophisticated and luxurious. But in the late 1990s began violent hooligan groupings to buy Burberry products and use the brand as an expression of belonging to such violent groups (Bothwell 2005). Thus, the claimed universal values of Burberry products no longer the mainstay criterion for consumption, but rather was the product values defined by consumers who consumed from an experiment in identity formation.

3.2.2. From postmodernity to post-postmodernity

According to Douglas Holt (2002), there are many signs that suggest that the postmodern marketing paradigm is losing its impact. Based on the anti-branding movement represented by, among other Kalle Lasn's magazine "Adbusters" and Naomi Klein's book "No Logo" (1999), he describes a new type of consumer. Where the postmodern consumer constructs his identity through images, Holt (2002, p. 87) argue that the post-postmodern consumer has seen through the postmodern brandings 'empty' messages and looking back to what is real and authentic.

To provide a societal perspective to Holt's (2002) post-postmodernity, I have chosen to include the French philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky's (2005) 'Hypermodern Times'. For Lipovetsky, this work mark a shift from the postmodernity to hypermodernity. Even though the discussions are not that wide spread outside of France, and not much literature has been published in English, it might consider a fascinating aspects to viewing fan cultures. The main difference between the two periods characterized as "the first version of modernity was extreme in ideological and political terms; the new modernity is extreme in a way that goes beyond the political - extreme in terms of technologies, media, economics, town planning, consumption, and individual pathology "(Lipovetsky, 2005, p. 33). As such, Lipovetsky (2005) finds that the hypermodern society is characterised by a more complex approach to the phenomena of society and consumption than it was in modernism and postmodernism. According to Lipovetsky (2005) the paradigm can be characterized through three concepts: hypermodernity, hypernarcissism and hyperconsumption (Lipovetsky, 2005, p. 10).

Hypernarcissism is, according to Lipovetsky (2005), a different state of narcissism, which is used to describe the many paradoxes of hypermodernity. Hypernarcissism is an expression of the hypermodern individual's maturity, effectivity, sense of responsibility and flexibility, which is necessary for personal development. However, these states create paradoxes as these aspects are not always corresponding, which creates eternal conflicts.

Furthermore, in hypermodernity, we focus exclusively on the present for fear of what the future will bring: "these days Narcissus is gnawed by anxiety; fear has imposed itself on his pleasures and anguish on his liberation" (Lipovetsky, 2005, p. 13). The development of society has brought fear and insecurity towards the future's unpredictability. We are indulged in a sense of insecurity where we are concerned with our health, terrorism, globalization, technological

advancements, climate changes, catastrophes and epidemics, and we have to live and act in the present, while there's still time. Fear of the future and its unpredictable nature, forces us to live and think in the moment and act selfishly, which might have a great influence in the way we seek out what Lipovetsky (2005) considered as hyperconsumption;

“Hyperconsumption is a consumption which absorbs and integrates greater and greater portions of social life, which functions less and less in accordance with the model of symbolic confrontations dear to Bourdieu, and which is, rather, arranged in such a way as to meet individual ends and criteria, according to an emotional and hedonistic logic which makes everyone consume first and foremost for their own pleasure rather than out of rivalry with others” (p. 11).

The consumerist fever for immediate satisfactions, the aspirations toward a playful and hedonistic lifestyle, have of course by no means disappeared – they are being unleashed more than ever: but they are enveloped in a halo of fears and anxieties (Lipovetsky, 2005, p. 45-46). Individualistic consumption now takes precedence over consumption commanded by what others think and as such consumerism is driven more by emotion than popular opinion and is more about amusement than prestige. The ultra-modern consumers' desire to live in the present is thus great potential for organizations wishing to create experiences.

1.2.2.3 Post-postmodern consumer culture

A similar approach to consumption is found in Holt's (2002) thoughts, which especially is highlights the preference for ethical responsibility. Like the postmodernity's distinction from modernity's ideal of symbolic engineering, contemporary consumer culture is desecrating itself from what Holt (2002) determines as postmodernity's 'authenticity claims'. In postmodernity, consumption was a tool of identity creation and as such the consumer sought authenticity not in his consumption but in the symbols they portrayed. The post-postmodern consumer does not seek the same way to create identity through consumption, but consumes products and brands that “(...) create worlds that strike consumers' imaginations, that inspire and provoke and stimulate, that help them interpret the world that surrounds them.” (Holt, 2002, p. 87). As such sincere authenticity is a key concept for the post-postmodern consumer, and according to Holt (2002) that is the reason why are seeing the emergence of what he defines as a dialectical relationship between consumer culture and branding:

“When firms push aggressively at the moorings of the branding paradigm, and as consumers become more knowledgeable and reflexive about the previously

accepted mechanics of branding, the conventional branding techniques developed within the culture gradually loses their efficacy” (Holt, 2002 p. 80)

According to Holt (2002) the reasons for such a development is found in the parties' conflicting interests. Every time a company is trying to optimize its branding by developing new methods and branding strategies, they cause a backlash from consumer culture, in which a new consumer culture is formed. As brands seeks to approach the new consumer culture, it develops a new branding paradigm, then the story slowly repeats. Although consumers constantly are breaking down old branding paradigms, free spaces open in the market, which creates new opportunities for businesses (ibid. p. 89). The dialectical theory on branding and consumer culture is constructed in figure 3.1.

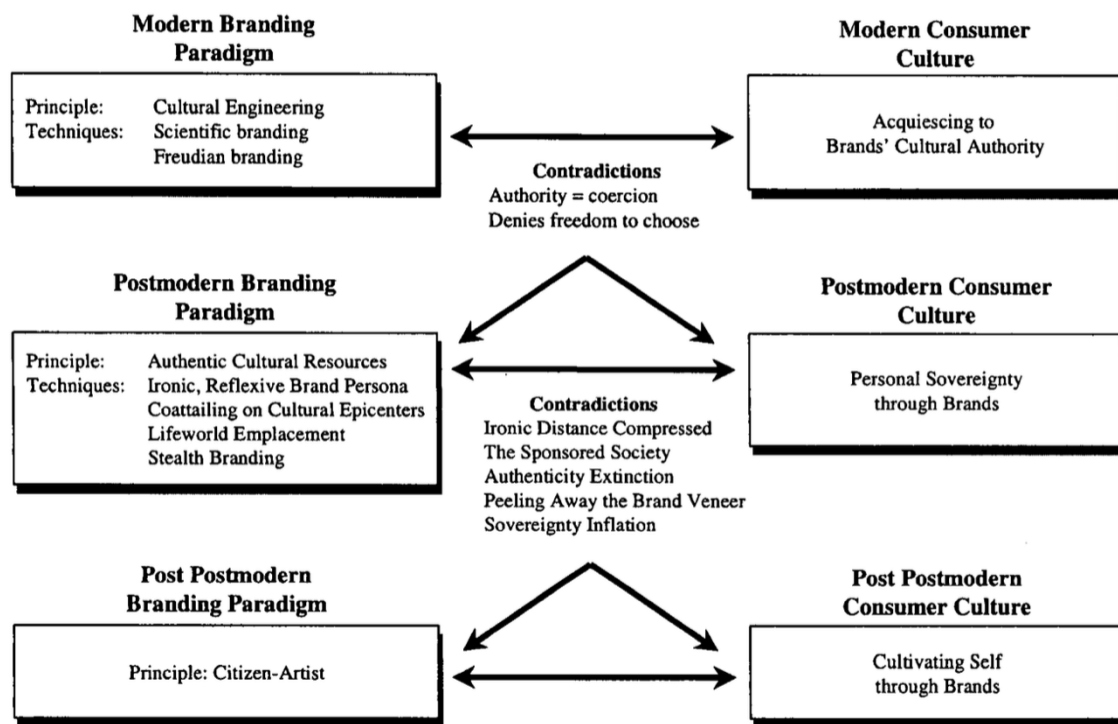


Figure 3 - Dialectical model of branding and consumer culture (Holt, 2002, p. 81)

The figure is divided into three periods, which describes the development of branding and consumer culture that has gone from being modern, to becoming postmodern and now it appears to be heading towards a post-postmodern phase. Essentially, the second level of understanding will consider the netnographic results from a postmodern and hypermodern perspective, which might inform our understanding of the links between fandom and consumer behaviour. Most

important, following Holt's (2002) logic these insights might entail a reassessment of how we should understand fandom related communications in contemporary consumer culture.

3.3. The community perspective - social creation of meaning

The literature on collective brand relationships has roughly followed two streams of research; one concerned with the subcultural or tribal brand affiliation (Cova & Pace 2006), and one concerned with more close knit brand community affiliation (McAlexander et al. 2002; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schau et al., 2009). The primary difference between the two lies in the members' relation to the brand; in consumer tribes, the brand itself holds secondary status as a supporter of social links, whereas the brand in a brand community setting comprises the very linking value.

Especially the literature on brand community has received managerial interest and will form the backbone of this section. However, as the two streams of research have recently started merging (Cova & Pace 2006; Fournier & Lee 2009), tribal aspects of collective brand relationships will also be approached.

3.3.1. From the Local Village to the Virtual World

With the advent of modernity, traditional forms of community, such as village, family, and religion, were challenged and began to unravel (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). With Castell's (2005) rise of the "network society", the way consumers interact with each other have further accelerated this unravelling as individuals can engage with each other and build new communities across space and time. As Muñiz & O'Guinn (2001) states, the contemporary consumer is characterized by a "homeless mind" and are on a "desperate search for the social link" (Cova, 1997, p. 299). The late postmodern decline of individualization entails the return of community – a redefined community (Maffesoli, 1996). The stream of CCT research also addresses the ways in which consumers forge feelings of social solidarity and create distinctive, fragmentary, self-selected, and sometimes transient cultural worlds through the pursuit of common consumption interests (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). These communities have become more than a place. Due to media's ability to spread the sense of community, members do not have to be physically close anymore, as media is thus capable of uniting physically separated individuals (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). Whether characterized as subculture of consumption, communities of practice, brand communities or fan communities.

The notion of online communities has brought up many reflections on what the term “communities” means. However, as I am concerned with two communities that both have gathered around a specific brand, I have chosen to include the concept of ‘brand communities’ as the theoretical foundation for the study in this thesis.

3.3.2. The brand community

“A brand community is a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand. It is specialized because at its center is a branded good or service. Like other communities, it is marked by a shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility” (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001, p. 412).

The stream of research into brand communities took off with Albert Muñiz & Thomas O’Guinn’s (2001) study of brand communities. The study continued upon Fournier’s (1998) icon brand relationship metaphor but applied it in a social context, which included the interactions between consumers as well. The brand as such was no longer a relationship partner but has become a social intermediary essentially destined to link consumers together through their common interest in the brand.

Based on classical sociology, Muñiz & O’Guinn (2001) argue that three constructs identify the features of brand communities, offline as well as online. First, a consciousness of kind, which refers to the sense of belonging to a group; “members feel an important connection to the brand, but more importantly, they feel a stronger connection toward one another” (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001, p. 418). Second, rituals and traditions refer to the social practices that celebrate behavioural norms including special greetings, honouring the brand’s history and storytelling (ibid, p. 421). Third, a moral responsibility that members feel towards the community and what produces collective action and group cohesion (ibid., p. 424).

Muñiz & O’Guinn found the most significant element of brand community to be consciousness of kind described as a sense of ‘we-ness’. Muñiz & O’Guinn (2001) stress that this triangular, rather than dyadic, social constellation is a central facet of brand community echoing Cova’s (1997) assertion that for postmodern consumers that “the link is more important than the thing” (in Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001, p. 418). The linking value is the “glue” that connects the consumers in online brand communities and makes them return to and stay in the community and develop a sense of loyalty towards the members of the community (Cova & Cova, 2002, p.

602). Value creation studies illuminate the collective process of value creation within brand communities. For example, Muñiz & Schau (2005) have examined the case of the Apple Newton brand community, in which the stigma of an ‘abandoned’ brand led consumers to co-create the brand meaning, thus extending the brand’s life.

In subsequent research, McAlexander et al. (2002) widened Muñiz & O’Guinn’s (2001) conceptualization of brand communities, defining it as a web of several relationships including not only the brand and other consumers, but also the product and the marketer/company behind. The original 'triad' was thus situated within a more complex web of relationships, where the individual’s commitment to the community is subject to the strength of each of these relationships. (p. 39). The two brand community relationship model is presented below..

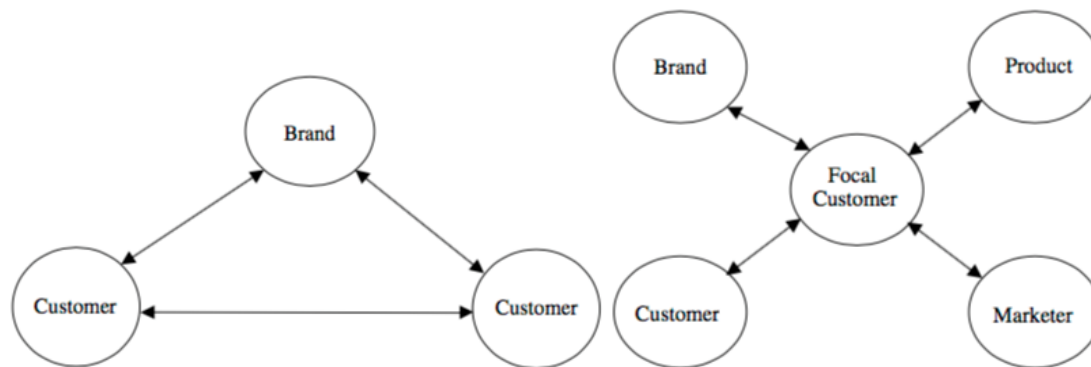


Figure 4 - Muñiz & O’Guinn’s (2001) brand triad (left) and McAlexander et al.’s (2002) Customer-Centric Model of Brand Community (right) (McAlexander et al., 2002, p. 39)

With this model, McAlexander et al. (2002) explain that the existence and meaningfulness of online brand communities are based on the consumer experience rather than the brand itself. The members are vital in an online brand community for it to be successful and, even though it is important that members are devoted to the brand, it is even more essential that the members build strong with each other (Sicilia & Palazón, 2008)

Members can develop strong bonds with each other and a strong corporate feeling with a company. Even though this often contributes to stronger relationships between the customer and the company and an increase of word-of-mouth (Schau et al., 2009), it can also tarnish the reputation and the brand. Marketers must, therefore, be aware of facets that can cause problems in online brand communities when managing these. Community members can even hijack the

brand, which happens when “a consumer takes a brand away from its marketing professionals to enhance its evolution” (Wipperfurth, in Cova & Pace, 2006, p. 1090). Social media phenomena such as “shitstorms” and “hashtag hijacking” seems to happen frequently in online brand communities today as the consumer wants to be included, wants influence and, most importantly, wants to be an influential participant in the construction of experiences. Most recently, a Twitter campaign by McDonald’s backfired when people started sharing the wrong kind of #McDStories. With the hopes that the hashtag would inspire stories about Happy Meals, it instead attracted snarky tweets of McDonalds’s anti-fans who turned it McDonald’s horror stories. Schau et al. (2009) suggest that to keep an online brand community “healthy,” companies must foster social networking practices to inspire further co-creation as well as to build and sustain the community (p. 41)

3.3.3. Online brand communities and practices

The concept of practices can be seen as what Muñiz & O’Guinn (2001) explain as rituals and traditions that community members perform to sustain their brand community membership. Members’ practices are a way for individuals to explicitly or tacitly display consciousness of kind (identification), brand commitment, and moral responsibility, the concepts originally proposed by Muñiz & O’Guinn (2001).

Muniz & O’Guinn’s (2001) notion that participation in activities and experiences related to a brand can lead to communal attachment, and thus the creation of brand community is supported by Schau et al.’s (2009) findings that participation in community practices develops a sense of membership among brand users. Schau et al. (2009) investigated practices in online brand communities and found that practices had the ability to “endow participants with cultural capital [...] generate consumption opportunities” [and] “evince brand community vitality” (p. 38-39). Based on this central finding, Schau et al. (2009) set forth a fundamental proposition that “if firms give consumers the opportunity to construct brand communities and the freedom to modify their product, they will” (Schau et al. 2009, p. 41). As such, it is implied that commitment to a brand community will arise from participation in social practices related to the brand independent of consumers’ initial attitudes and feelings towards the brand, and hence, the role of the marketer is to seed such practices. They highlight a set of 12 collective practices whereby consumers co-create value. The model’s 12 practices can be categorized into four thematic categories that characterize the value outcome: Social networking, impression

management, community engagement, and brand use. The thematic categories work in close cooperation together as a process of value creation as shown in figure 5.

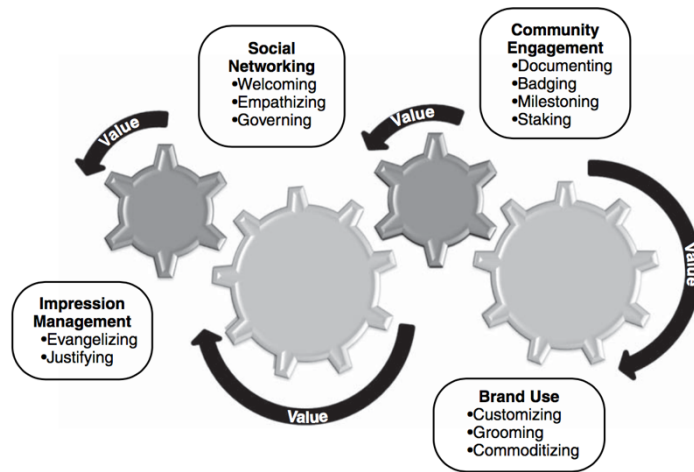


Figure 5 - The Process of Collective Value Creation in Brand Communities (Schau et al., 2009, p. 36).

As such, while Muñiz & O’Guinn (2001) were initially rather vague on the matter, other theorists haven been more confident regarding the managerial scope in proactively creating brand community and collective attachment to a brand. McAlexander et al.’s (2002) and Schau et al. (2009) believe that if the marketer understands and respects the dynamics of a brand community, it is possible to proactively create a platform that facilitates a brand community to evolve. This will notion will be important in the discussion when I will move toward a more managerial approach to understanding fandom communities.

3.4. Sub-conclusion: Co-creation of value in a cultural-community-context

The intersection of cultural perspectives and community perspectives provides a framework for considering the cultural (and social) context through which value is created. However, the processes by which value creation occurs within and across context requires further examination (Akaka et al. 2014). According to Akaka et al. (2014), one of the main features of value co-creation is emphasised in the Consumer Culture Theory perspective is the phenomenological nature of value (p.268). Furthermore, they argue that “practices” have been recently recognized as a central construct in studying market-related phenomena, and thus are a critical factor in understanding the co-creation of value. In this view, as value co-creation

practices are enacted, value is phenomenologically determined through the evaluation of holistic experiences. Even though, value is dependent on the viability of the researched actor and individual viewpoints and evaluations may differ, Akaka et al. (2014) argue that the viability of an actor or system provides a measure of value for a system as a whole. In particular, practices have been a focus of investigation for CCT researchers aiming “to better understand the lived experiences of consumers and how they contribute to the creation of identities and meaning” (ibid, p. 275). As such, following Akaka et al.’s (2014), the first part of the analysis will have a focus on investigating the practices that takes place in the forums. Following methodological guidelines, the first part of the analysis will not be guided by any specific theoretical framework, which will be saved to the second part.

The second part, however, will utilize the findings of the theoretical chapter. In order to lay the foundation for a more comprehensive understanding of the process of brand meaning and value creation evaluation, this chapter has reviewed the literature on collective brand relationships as well as an alternative cultural perspective on consumption and consumer culture. This analysis will focus on partly, the consumer culture and the community. One could argue that the both approaches essentially is about brand meaning found in groups. However, the focus of analysis is a bit different why I believe that the mix of two provides a solid foundation for a deeper understanding of the fandoms (Heding et al., 2009). The two approaches are summarized below.

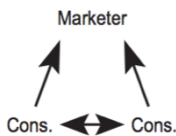

The cultural approach	The community approach
Developed around 2001	Developed around 2000
Key words: Brand communities, the brand triad, the internet, tribes	Key words: Globalization, popular culture, brand icons, No Logo
Brand perspective: Social	Brand perspective: Cultural
Themes: Community theory, subcultures of consumption	Themes: Cultural consumption, No logo, the citizen-brand prospect
Brand value creation: 	Brand value creation: 

Figure 6 – Taxonomy of the cultural and community perspective (Own creation based on Heding et al. 2013)

In the cultural approach, specific meanings and values are shared (as collective representations) and it is through this common ground of understanding that a culture can be said to exist. According to Heding et al (2009), cultural studies departing from this definition of culture attempts to clarify “explicit and implicit meanings of the culture in question, as well as understanding how meaning is produced and circulated” (p. 209). The community approach adds *groups* of consumers to the picture, which changes the basic premises of the ‘brand-consumer exchange’. In the thesis, the community approach is used to add meaning found in the social interaction between fans to the theories of how brand value can be (co)created: “The brand communities are social entities that reflect the situated embeddedness of brands in the day-to-day lives of consumers and the ways in which brands connect consumer to brand, and consumer to consumer” (Muñiz & O’Guinn 2001, p. 418).

Even though much research used in the thesis is from the turn of the millennium and the Internet has opened up many opportunities and theoretical leaps since then, I argue that the chosen theories are still valid. The three main theories presented here (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al. 2002; Schau et al., 2009) are still heavily used within the business scholarly discourse, universally acclaimed as founding theories.

Chapter 4 – The Fandom Experience

4.1. Welcome to the herd(s)!

In the first part of the analysis, I will explore the historical, societal and technological contexts of the believers and bronies. To follow the thoughts of Flyvbjerg (2006), “the most advanced form of understanding is achieved when researchers place themselves within the context being studied. Only in this way can researchers understand the viewpoints and the behaviours, which characterizes social actors” (p. 236). The first section is structured in with a twofold focus, first focusing on the brony fandom, how the fandom started, where they socialise online and how I experienced my first days and how I entered the research field. Afterwards, the same process will be run through with the believer fandom. Conclusively, it will lead me to the identified netnographic results

4.1.1. Bronies – The unexpected following of My Little Pony

When thinking of Hasbro’s My Little Pony franchise, originally a set of colourful ponies from the 1980s, one may assume that the target audience is clear-cut; “young girls”. However, the latest reboot My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic (MLP:FiM) which follows the stories of Twilight Sparkle and her daily life in Ponyville, has sparked an unexpected following of adolescent and adult males (State of the Herd, 2014). The group adopted the name Brony (pl. Bronies), a portmanteau of 'bro' and 'pony', and an online phenomenon was born.

As with any Internet phenomena, it is almost impossible to determine the sheer size of the brony fandom. However, the movement should not be underestimated. In June 2014, the largest MLP:FiM blog 'Equestria Daily' reached 500 million page views, currently attracting 175,000 page views a day (Equestria Daily, 2014); the MLP: FiM section of the fan-art site Deviant Art receives over 2,000 submissions a week (Deviant Art, 2015), and the latest BronyCon attracted almost 10,000 attendees (Meehan, 2015).

1.1.1.4 “Mods are asleep - post ponies!”

“I... actually kinda like this. Don’t really care about what’s going on, but it has decently timed gags, fluid motion, voice acting that doesn’t make me cringe. I’m scared, /co/. Hold me.”
Anonymous user on 4chan

As with many cyber cultural phenomena and internet memes, the Brony fandom has its roots on the image board website *4chan* (Appendix 1.5 show the *very first* recordings of the brony fandom). 4chan, founded by then-teenager Christopher Poole in 2003, was originally created as a place for English-speakers to talk about manga and anime. Since then, the website has become a hub for Internet culture and known for being a brutally sardonic, lawless and tenacious community (Robertson, 2014), notably infamous for its Internet hacks, its use of child pornography to scare away newcomers, Anonymous, and 2014 celebrity photo leaks. To make a brief account of a long story, the brony story began when a formation of trolls⁵ pretended to like the MLP:FiM animated series to agitate a reviewer who complained that the show was a commercial sell-out. The article and related threads generated /co/’s⁶ initial interest in the show, which made several members watch the first episode when it aired in October 2010. A second movement of troll claimed to actually liking it to agitate the first group of trolls, however, as evident from Appendix a, which is the first known record of brony activity, this fragmented into a third group who genuinely liked it. While users of /co/ liked the series because of the artwork and animation, users of /b/⁷ found themselves enjoying the plot and characters.

From here on, pony-related threads on /co/ went from around 200 daily posts to over 6000 a day. The sudden and overwhelming influx of MLP-related media on 4chan led to an internal flame war between MLP:FiM fans and those who disapproved of the fandom (KnowYourMeme, 2016a). From then it spiralled out of control and eventually in February 2011 MLP and everything related to ponies became the first topic to ever get banned from 4chan. This is even considering the image board’s infamous history of offensive content such as child pornography and cyber bullying. As the bronies finally left 4chan and settled in other places of the web, it allowed both mainstream audience and media to catch on. Subsequently, a Ponychan board was founded, following a number of social networking and information sites for FiM fans such as Equestria Daily, Everypony’s Network and MLPforums.

⁵ A person who submits deliberately inflammatory articles to an Internet discussion (Collins Dictionary)

⁶ 4chan's image board dedicated to the discussion of Western cartoons and comics.

⁷ 4chan's image board dedicated to random images.

2.1.1.4 MLP Forums - The friendliest forum on the ponynet

For the bronies, I chose to investigate the fandom through the message board *MLP forums*, a site that provides an outlet for all brony related interests, including the show, the fandom, merchandise, fan productions, roleplay, personal troubles and so forth. Since its launch in October 2011, MLP Forums has gained over 30,000 registered users and over 2.2 million posts. MLP forums are part of an integrated super-community called Poniverse, which spans across multiple fan sites including a music hosting site, video sharing site, a game platform and roleplaying site.

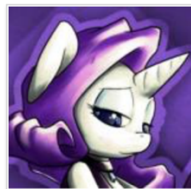
MLP Forums should be understood not simply as a website with static features, but rather as a space that is shaped and given social meaning through the ongoing interaction of its members. Still, a critical feature of MLP Forums for fostering social interaction is the discussion board interface, which is a hierarchical or tree-like structure containing a number of sub-forums, each of which may have several threads. These discussion threads stand as hubs of social interaction. The table below briefly highlights the different sub forum sections and a more detailed description can be found in Appendix 2.1. At first look, the main pattern that I discovered was that people were extremely friendly and that topics spanned from everything related to a specific unnamed background character to “how are you feeling right now” (a topic thread that always were in the ‘recently discussed’ category and which currently counts almost 10,000 responses).

Forum:	Content:
Canterlot	MLP Forums specific content. (Global rules, FAQs and “Welcoming Plaza”, where new users introduce themselves)
My Little Pony – Friendship is Magic	Discussions related to the My Little Pony universe.
Octavia’s Hall	Artwork, (fan art, fan music, fan fic, fan vids etc.)
Roleplay World	Roleplaying
Beyond Equestria	Discussions that are not directly related to My Little Pony.

Figure 7 – Structure of www.MLPforums.com (Own creation)

After several days of observations and interaction with the television show, I gathered a sense of how the community functioned. It was though clear that a large part of being a member of the community lied in being an actual, visible member. As I explored in the method section, my introduction would come the time that I felt that I was able to make it culturally appropriate. At a very early stage, I felt that I was part of this community, partly because of the overwhelming responses I got on my introductory message. Members are encouraged to be the

“best welcoming pony you can be!” (Appendix 2.1) and many regular members make a point of welcoming newcomers to the blog and emphasizing its social nature. In response to my own introduction post, I received fifteen replies welcoming me to the forum (Appendix 2.5). Below are some of the responses. As evident, these are very friendly and reveals many facets of the culture of the brony fandom.



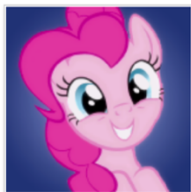
Members

Hello ==>==> and welcome here on the pony land of happy pony forum of MLP Forum ==>==> I hope your time can be great and enjoyable here in this pony community ==>== and I hope you can meet many of the ponies and friends here ==>== and having fun time ==>== YAY ==>==

if you have any questions feel free to ask ==>==

You, JonasDarkmane, YourSillyPoneh~ and 6 others brohoof this.

Un-brohoof



Members

Welcome to the forums, [Lockheed!](#) It's great that you joined the forums! I hope you enjoy, have a great time here, and make some wonderful friends! 🐾

If you'd like, feel free to PM any member here at any time. Enjoy!

Ooh, what TV shows and video games do you like?

4.1.2. Beliebers – This is forever

Justin Drew Bieber was born March 1st, 1994 at 12:56 pm on a Tuesday in London, Ontario, Canada in St. Joseph's Hospital on the 2nd floor in room 126, delivered by Dr. Simon, weighing 7.11 pounds and rumour has it that it was raining (Appendix 2.4). The information presented here might be a bit excessive, but this is considered common knowledge and something that everyone should know in the thesis' second fan community, the beliebers.

The story of the beliebers is especially interesting for this thesis as the cold reality probably is that without social media there would be no Justin Bieber. Not only did he build his brand, most notably, on YouTube and Twitter but he was also 'discovered' on YouTube. The short story, which reads more like a creation myth; Canadian musical prodigy teaches himself to play the drums at age 3, become a YouTube sensation at age 12 because proud mom wanted to share cover songs with friends and family. As she continued to upload videos, his popularity on the site grew and eventually he was spotted by talent manager, Scooter Braun in 2007 (Falsani, 2011). Since being plucked from his hometown of Stratford, Ontario, Bieber has grown from a 13 year-old with a popular YouTube account into a worldwide sensation, boasting sales and social-network stats that rival those of any Tween star. His first album, “My World”, was released on September 17th, 2009. It sold 137,000 albums in its first week, and peaked at

number five on the U.S. Billboard 200. His next album, “My World 2.0”, released on March 23 2010, gained number 1 status on the U.S. Billboard 200, making him the first artist since the Beatles to debut at No. 1, and proceed to sell more the following week.

1.1.2.4 #beliebers

As illustrated by his record-breaking following on Twitter, (81 million as of February 2016), Facebook (77 million fans as of February 2016) and YouTube (10 billion views), Justin has cultivated a large, lively and loyal following. These fans are, as previously mentioned, called Beliebers, a portmanteau of Bieber and Believer, which is defined as “a fanatical devotee of the pop singer Justin Bieber” (KnowYourMeme, 2016b). Use of the term predates 2010, and the existence of the community is a result of the Internet, dating back to Bieber's early YouTube videos.

Beliebers have often been subjects of attention from the media and cyber culture institutions such as 4chan. Especially 4chan infamous incidents such as #BaldForBieber, a hoax claiming that Justin Bieber had been diagnosed with cancer which caused fans to shave their heads in solidarity and #CuttingForBieber, a hoax and Twitter hashtag campaign launched by members of 4chan in trying to spread a rumour that fans of Justin Bieber are cutting themselves in response to the leaked photographs of the singer allegedly smoking marijuana (KnowYourMeme, 2016c).

When it came to joining the Beliebers, more or less extensive discussions with him appear on many online forums across the Internet. However, these are often occasional references within other unrelated or partially related topics. However, publicly available Justin Bieber centred forums were almost impossible to locate as all sites were either shut down, inactive or moved to BKSTG, a site that eventually ends up gaining a starring role in my exploration of the Bieber community. Eventually, I chose to conduct my study on Twitter. On a practical level, I “constructed” the community by following a lot of self-proclaimed Beliebers, which I found by using community trending hashtags such as #kidrauhlforever, #belieberforlife #justinbieberismyworld #staystrongjustin or by following Justin’s tweets to localize devoted fans. From here, I went through their profiles, to see whether their tweets were just random, or whether I can find patterns in what characterized the believer. This process can also be reviewed in Appendix 2.2.

4.2. Netnographic findings

In the following, I will give insights into my exploration and what I discovered throughout my time with the two fandoms. In order to answer the question of how value is co-created by fans in their fan communities, I have investigated the fans' practices and how they interact with each other in their online spaces. Especially, two important narratives played out during my time with the fandoms, which ended up shaping much of my study as they revealed many aspects of online fandom membership; interpersonal relationships, fan perceptions of value, and fandom perceptions of value.

In the Brony, March marked the season premiere of the sixth season of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (Appendix 2.8, Appendix 2.12). This was considered an excellent opportunity to explore how the fans relate to the fan object, how do they consume, and where are value and meanings created?

In the Belieber community, the story is a bit more chaotic. In general, it surrounded Justin Bieber's third world tour *The Purpose World Tour* which started on March 9th. It all began when pictures flourished the internet where Justin was not smiling doing his regular meet and greets (Appendix 2.9). Instances then were spread around Twitter where Justin Bieber fans were shown almost 'attacking' Justin in the hopes of a smile, a greeting or a selfie (Appendix 2.13). Eventually, after a week of touring, Justin cancelled all his meet and greets as they left him 'emotionally exhausted' (Appendix 2.10). Not only devastated by this news, many of the fans now were left with an up to \$2000 concert ticket as the supplier of backstage passes, but BKSTG was also reluctant to give out compensations (Appendix 2.11). Following the case study approach, these events stand as an excellent opportunity for exploring the relationship between the fans, the individual fan and the fandom as a whole.

This manual analytical process entailed continued shifting, sorting and resorting of the text and visual evidence from which three aggregates of collaborative practices; Identity practices, fan practices, and community practices. Not only does these three practices provide an excellent overview of the observed behaviours, but they reflect the immersion process as well; creation of profiles, engaging in fan practices and finally learning about the communal undertones that guide the communities. Each of these aggregates is made up of several collaborative practices described and exemplified in Appendix 1.5.

4.2.1. Identity practices

In the context of the fandom communities, the findings of the netnographic study show that the fandom and the in particular fan object is used as a valuable resource for expressing one's identity. Members create the fan identity in a variety of ways. However, primarily through the intertextuality of the fan object, through the shared knowledge consequently create, and through a shared culture and the use of language.

1.2.1.4 *Joining the herd*

Already from the very first interaction with the fandoms, it was clear that a significant amount of being a 'part' of the communities lies in being an actual, visible member. An important aspect of "joining the herd" is developing a profile, which becomes your identity within the virtual space of the fandom. Interesting though is that in the MLP Forums, members' choice of name, avatar, signatures and membership status are the most important identity cues as they appear every time member posts, comments or bro-hoofs (equivalent to Facebook's like button and Twitter's favourite button). "Real life" data are secondary, as this information is only, if at all, present on a member's personal page (Appendix 2.5) It is evident that the online personas are more important than any "real world" data. As a member, you are known by your username, and one's personal identity unfolds from here.

In the MLP Forums, users construct themselves in part by identifying with one of the six main characters (Mane 6) of MLP:FiM. This was evident both in the creation of a personal profile and in the encouraged introduction post, where character identification was on equal terms with basic personal information (Appendix 2.5). This "Mane 6" identification has been particularly evident in the choice of avatar. To further investigate this, I started a thread asking, "what does your avatar say about you?" (Appendix 2.5). Within a couple of days, it had almost 150 responses:



I made this hoping it would represent my personality. I like to style my hair and wear jewelry, but I also live in a dreamworld so I went with a dreamy look. My cutie mark is a pillow propped against a crescent moon, again with the dreamy idea in mind.

Stormfury brohoofs this.

✓ Brohoof This



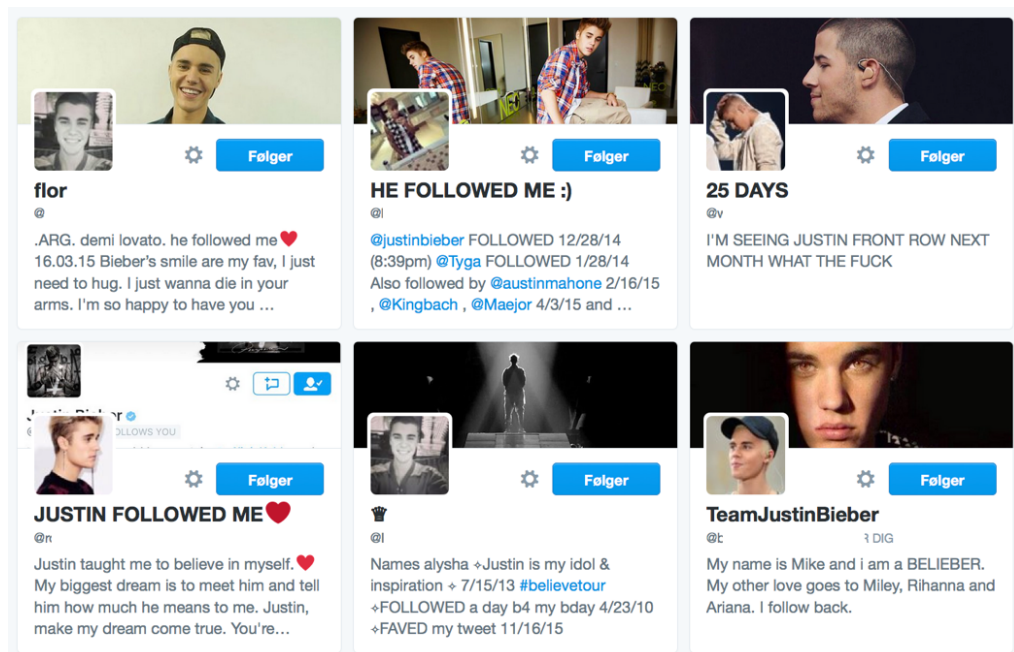
Members

I've chosen to stay detached from the fandom and avoid finding any sense of "community" within it. I walk wherever my interests take me within the brony fanbase.
Nothing more.
Nothing less.

It might seem lonely but I know who my friends are and where to find them.

However, most of the answers were based on fandom or fan object related issues. According to Robertson (2014), the personification of the ponies allows the fan to identify with their personalities, flaws, and strengths. In that sense, the characters and their individual personality traits are, in the shared virtual space of the fandom, used as symbolic subcultural representations. As such, the ponies provide an opportunity for self-expression, identification, and reification within a virtual space where physical, social cues are lost from the interaction.

Even though the believers operate in a social media structure that extends beyond the limits of the fandom (See Appendix 1.3 for more discussion on research sites). I observed the same tendencies when it came to negotiating a sense of individual identity (Appendix 2.2). Real world identities were very much downplayed, and hence, other cues became necessary. Only once did I encounter a believer posting a picture of her self: “This is me for anyone who never seen a picture. My name is teanna” (Appendix 2.19). As evident below, the cues used are often fandom related such as when did you become a fan, how many times have you seen him, have he followed, when you are seeing him (Appendix 2.2).



2.2.1.4 Demonstration of knowledge and dedication:

To continue the previous discussion, as these communities are not bound by a “real-world” presence, notions of physical cues to identity such as body presence, clothes, gender, social status, etc. are downplayed to a minimum. Digital media seem to separate selves from bodies,

leading to disembodied identities that exist only in action and words (Baym, 2010). Instead, the fandom members have to rely on the thing that bounds the group together, namely the shared interest. The shared devotion to Justin Bieber and My Little Pony serves as an important social element in the communities. The fans are not just My Little Pony fans or Justin Bieber fans, but they are *Bronies* and *Beliebers*. According to Groene & Hettinger (2015), when you join a group, you not only adopt the group identification, but also the psychological benefits and cost of engaging with the group, and as such it becomes a critical element of one's social identity.

In the believer community, a turning point from which one became a believer is an important indicator of your devotion. Evidence demonstrating this is often found in the fan's Twitter biographies "Belieber since 2014 ❤️" or "Been a believer since 2009 and I am not going anywhere" (Appendix 2.2). Through this action you not only show your devotion to Justin but to the other believers as well.

However, what was striking in the fandoms is that what separates 'the fan' from the fandom fan' is the possession of excessive knowledge; do you know where Justin's next concert are, or do you know who Derpy is? This group knowledge facilitates a common ground on which the fans can engage with each other and create a community of like-minded. Muñiz & O'Guinn (2001) describes this as the process "whereby members of the community differentiate between true members of the community and those who are not, or who occupy a more marginal space" (p. 419). As such, this distinction between being a believer versus just being a Justin Bieber fan became crucial to the notion of self and the feeling of fandom membership. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, many events put the fans' devotion to the test. Throughout my participation in the believer community, there was a general atmosphere of alertness and worry, because the fans could feel that Justin was not happy. When Justin cancelled his meet and greets, which have been custom since he began his career, instead of showing anger or sadness, it became a matter of showing to the community that you are a real believer. In this case, a true believer is worried about his health than some selfie (Appendix 2.9, Appendix 2.10). Furthermore, when Justin was attacked by a mob of fans, a lot of the fandom fans showed much resentment towards these "other" fans. As evident below, the fandom members refer to the other fans as 'they', when Justin is approached by a 'mob' of screaming fans in Boston (Appendix 2.18):

“THEY FUCKING DID IT AGAIN”

“the fake ones are going to ruin it for the real ones who haven't gotten a chance).:”

“WHY CAN'T THEY RESPECT JUSTIN?! That's so sad.”

“IT HURTS CAUSE THERE ARE TRUE BELIEBERS OUT THERE WHO HAVEN'T EVEN HAD THE CHANCE TO MEET HIM”

“sorry but they're not true fans.”

The fandom fans are showing much resentment towards these fans. As evident above, the fans use ‘they’ to refer to these ‘non-fans’ distancing themselves from their behaviour. In this context, the believers distance themselves from the other fans by demonstrating that they “really know” Justin as opposed to being a fan of him for selfish reasons. Ostensibly, anyone who is devoted to the culture, rituals and symbols of the fandom can be a member regardless of actual ownership of any Justin Bieber or My Little Pony merchandise. However, membership of the fandom requires cultural capital both of the fandom and the fan object (Schau et al. 2009) otherwise, you will not be able to participate. This cultural capital demonstrates one’s expertise, secure fan status, and commitment to the community (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001).

3.2.1.4 Shared culture and language

This shared interest is expressed in many ways beyond just being the focal topic of discussions; it is also the basis for the culture and language. In the communities, language accomplishes very different things within the community, including the continuing growth and sustenance of the communities and the negotiation and expression of fandom membership (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). A specific manner of using language has to be embodied and continuously exercised, to constantly display membership. In the Brony fandom, despite referencing phrases and catch phrases from the show, the bronies have created a separate language, Bronyspeak. Many of the words and phrases are taken directly from the dialogue of the show while others are fan-created or reference tropes. For example, everyday words are “ponified” into their pony equivalents (e.g. “everybody and “everypony”, “handmade” and “hoofmade”, “what the heck” and “what the hay”) (Appendix 2.4). Furthermore, the phrase “brohoof”, which comes from the word “bro-fist”, is often used to convey the nonverbal social cue of approval even sometimes shortened to /)\, representing two hoofs bumping. The believers as well have a certain “fangirl-

language”, which is certain chatter language often characterized by a lack of punctuation, verb tenses, capitalization, and syntax. Examples are evident in the previous section.

Overall, consumption of these fan objects is a complex mixture between personal gratifications from consuming the fan object and showing a level of dedication. However, it is though interesting that most of the fans in both fandoms are anonymous, rarely portraying any identifying cues that potentially can link them to their real-life selves or more “public” online selves such as on Facebook.

4.2.2. Fan practices

From my investigation into the fandoms, it quickly became clear that most of the interactions are structured around the fan objects. These fan practices are as such concrete in which the fan object is used to facilitate interaction between the fans. These include (1) informative practices (2) interpretive practices, and (3) collective consumption.

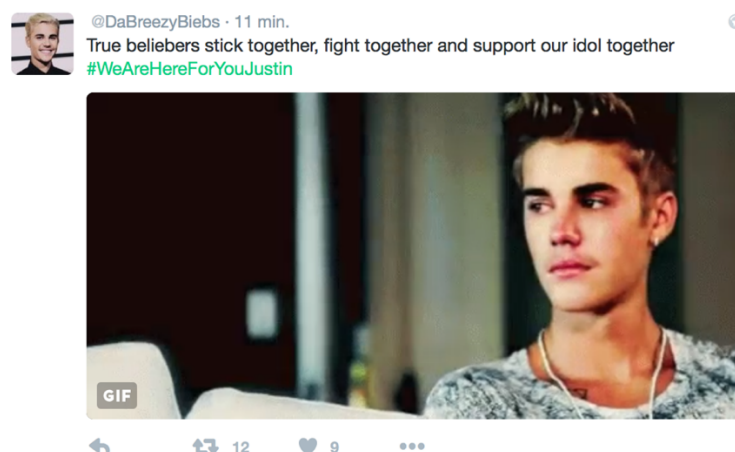
1.2.2.4 Informative practices

The stories shared within the fandom provide an insider perspective on both of the cultures (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001). However, how these actions were performed varied. Whereas the believers often utilised storytelling about Justin and the fandom, the discussions identified in the brony fandom were more focused on sharing and discussing views on the show. Essentially both practices relate to the production, consumption and sharing of knowledge, such as learning about Justin’s upcoming concerts, or why Twilight Sparkle’s cutie mark is shaped like a star.

In sharing stories, they often posit two purposes; to reinforce how amazing Justin is and how much he loves his fans;



As one of the tweets here show, these stories often take a backward-looking view and old videos and pictures are often shared. In these stories, or ‘myths’, Justin always comes through as this religious figure whom the fans worship, echoing Hills (2002) introduction of neo-religiosity to fandom studies. The very act of returning regularly to Twitter, posting pictures of him, commenting on other pictures of him, or checking the latest trending topics constitutes a ritual that makes up the fan’s everyday life (Appendix 2.3). Often, the stories that were told and re-told several times as a way of reinforcing Justin’s’ love for them. Especially, as Justin almost tried to detach himself from the believers, the storytelling intensified; “Justin loves his Beliebers, and he never wanted to disappoint us, but his health comes first #WeAreHereForYouJustin” (Appendix 2.10). A prominent story was furthermore the celebration of fandom and their shared devotion; “We found you here – We are still here - This is forever” (Appendix 2.10).



As such, being a believer is about showing that you care about Justin. The ‘horror’ years of 2013/2014, where he quit his profession, got arrested, and had some bad episodes with the press is often profiled; “DO YOU WANT A SAD AN DEPRESSED JUSITN LIKE HE WAS BACK IN 2013/2014? IF YES U ARE IN A GOOD WAY BY DISRESPECTING HIM” (Appendix 2.10). In general, the conversations never centre on this music, but instead, they are in a sense collectively consuming his persona. It is not so much about Justin, but it is what happens with the community if Justin’s health returns to the state it was in 2013/2014. Justin even announced his retiring, which meant no new music or content on social media, threatening the community’s raison d’etre.

In the brony community, the discussions were more focused on sharing and discussing show interpretations (Appendix 2.3, Appendix 2.6). The discussions are often reflected in specific thoughts on the show (both positive and critical), favourites (who is your favourite pony, favourite song, etc.), interpretive discussions (How old are the Mane Six, which pony least lives up to her element) and hypothetical (which pony would you take as a roommate?). Once a member of the Herd, everyone has an equal right to make contributions to the community. That can be a brony related discussion, personal matter or sharing of brony art. Every little detail in the show was discussed, interpreted and analysed. Through both sites, I found information and knowledge. I began to know everything about My Little Pony and about Justin, where he was, what he was doing and how is like as a person. However, the information did not get from the fan object, despite active engagement with the text, but it was from the other fans.

At one point, one of my sisliebers (what beliebers call each other) met Justin, she and her friends were invited into his tour bus as she said: “he wanted us to be safe” (Appendix 2.15). This was crucial to the fandom because they could get ‘direct’ insights into “how is he”, “how tall was he”, “was he happy?”. The histories of these fans were shared in several days, and they were praised for behaving like “true” fans; “TO THE GIRLS WHO TALKED TO JUSTIN IN THE TOUR BUS: THANK YOU FOR MAKING HIS LITTLE HEART HAPPY BY TALKING TO HIM.” (Appendix 2.15). In return, the other fans were getting advice on how to behave if you want to meet him: “Treated him just like anyone else I would! Treat him with respect and so will he” (Appendix 2.15).

2.2.2.4 Interpretive and creative practices

One thing that distinguishes fan communities is that the stories always emanate from the actual fan object. According to Muñiz & O’Guinn (2001), in all communities, text and symbols are powerful means of representing the culture of the group. However, the beliebers and the bronies echoes Jenkins (2006) notion of ‘interpretive communities’, which essentially is a particular way of reading a text. Jenkins (1992) here used the term ‘textual poaching’ to discuss how a fan simultaneously interpret a text through both dominant and oppositional reading as they wish. Interpretive practices concern the work fans do to make the fan object personally meaningful by way of referencing from its life to their lives (Jenkins, 2006).

As we have already touched upon, the bronies discuss everything together, and they actively interpret on the show, the characters and even on Hasbro. By these interpretations, fans

exchange their worldviews and their position in it (Jenkins, 2006). Many of these interpretive practices have already been touched upon in the previous section. However, the fans take it even further by acting as producers as well, and a large part of being a brony is being involved in the artistic and creative environment. During a week, almost 25% of the Herd is involved in creating brony art, 50% read fan fiction, 80% watch fan-created videos, and 80% hear fan-created music (State of the Herd, 2014). On MLP forums, there have been 20,000 entries in the visual fan art section. Many of these products are even more popular than the official. For example, a fan made episode was released on the 12th of April and already by the 1st of May, the episode had reached six million views on YouTube.

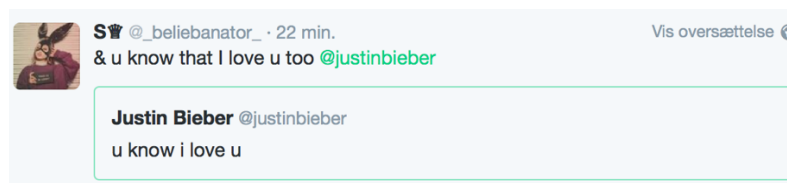
Interpretive practices in many ways make sense in the MLP forums as they have character, storylines, villains and a six-season spanning universe to draw from. However, these practices were also found in the belieber community. In fanning Justin Bieber, different aspects of the singer are articulated. He is a man (regarding race, age, physics, religion), he is a performer on stage. There is a public Justin Bieber persona, and then there is his personal, Justin Drew Bieber. Also, Justin is intertextually present (in mediated expressions) and commodified in this music, lyrics, and music videos. Herein lies what the fans have at their disposal to work in, negotiate and remake as an integral part of 'acting out' their fandom. For example, when Justin cancelled all of his meet and greets, many fans were left with a \$2000 concert ticket. This led to a lot of media attention, which in turn resulted in a series of tweets from believers, aiding Justin:

Justin Bieber Not Returning Fans Meet & Greet
Money After Canceling Them: \$2,000.

"Justin has just found out about this and he is very angry. He had nothing to do with this. He is now suggesting that everyone who bought a package gets a FULL REFUND and gets to keep the concert ticket – for free," sources tell NAUGHTY GOSSIP. "He loves his fans and knows that they had nothing to do with this. He cancelled the meetings backstage and wants to make sure that fans are not punished further by having to give up a ticket in a great seat as well. He wants this fixed ASAP."



As evident, the tweet was very popular and had received 424 retweets and 295 favourites within five hours. However, the fact is that it is not true, but it is merely a fan's interpretation of what she/he imagine what Justin's response is when he finds out (supposing he does not know) that fans lost \$2000 due to the cancellations. Such statements illustrate how fans use interpretations to re-negotiate the meanings they derive from fan objects. This sort of interpretive practices is also found in the way fans 'manipulate' his words by re-tweeting old tweets:



The tweet was published in relation to the cancellations of the meet and greets, but in fact, Justin's original tweet is from 2012 (Appendix 2.10). As evident above, Twitter does not always show the date of the original tweet leaving fans open to understanding the tweet as recent. Often times, this type of interpretation is used to reinforce the importance of the fandom, securing their shared foundation:

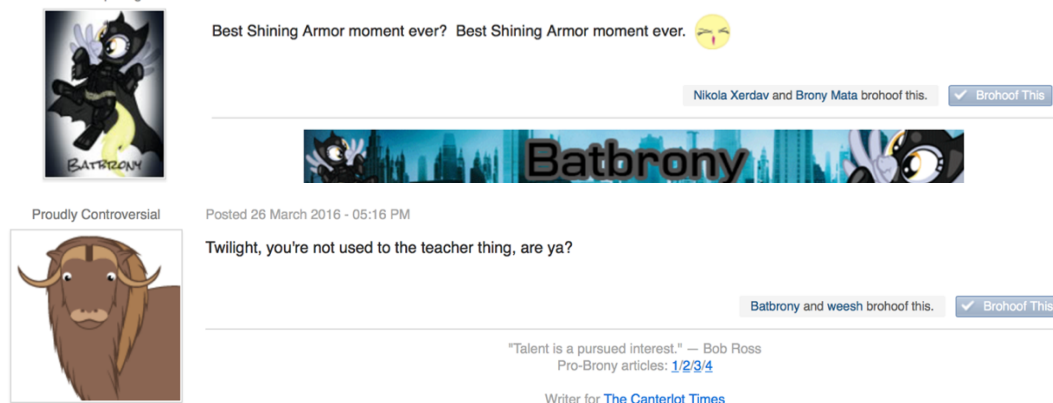
"Justin's health, as he has always done, you can feel he has always put it in second place. Fans and music has always come first. Though he can defend himself now to cancel the meet and greets [...]. Let us think about how much he actually does for us because the only reason that he cancels these meet and greets it is like so he can deliver a great show for all of us. All of us who sit and not have the money to get to meet him. Ultimately it is for us."

According to Jenkins (2006), 'poaching' blurs the line between producer and consumer, giving the reader power to produce their meanings based upon interpretations. However, these interpretations are not produced between the fan object and the individual fan, but they are shared across the fandom and almost institutionalized as 'canon' (see chapter 1.2).

3.2.2.4 *Collective consumption*

Finally, I want to sum up by retconning how collective these practices are. On MLP forums, the brony community not only debate the merits of each episode, critique and promote merchandise, create reviews. However, the bronies have taken things to the next level and are also watching the show together (Appendix 2.11). Of course, they are dispersed regarding geography, but they collected through the same video streaming server and the live discussion on MLP forums. The Internet may have changed fan cultures, yet as evident from the brony

fandom, they have had some pronounced effect of how they choose to use the internet and digital media. Over time, these live discussions typically attract between 300-500 comments, numbers that can increase significantly during particular famous episodes such as season openers and finales (Appendix 2.3). It is particularly fascinating, yet very stressful to be the part. While the episode aired, the discussion thread roughly received 60 entries, where fans just comment on what's happening in a tweet-like format;



As evident from the quotes, nobody answers each other or converse. However, as the episode ends, the discussions alive with extensive reviews, use of gifs/memes from the episode, and critical commentary (Appendix 2.11). However, importantly interactions as these shift knowledge and power from marketers to consumers. Only around 15 % of the bronies use The Hub, where the show airs. Instead, most of the bronies use YouTube, stream it online or download it illegally (State of the Herd, 2014). As such, it was evident that consuming the show is not only about the actual show, but it is the communal experience of watching the show, and then discussing it afterward.

Another type of collective consumption was found in the belieber fandom. If for example, a belieber is at a concert, she will tweet out videos and pictures of the concert to her fellow fans, which will be shared amongst the community (Appendix 2.3). Furthermore, the beliebers ability to organize around Justin was evident at the various “Fan-Army honours” at award shows, where the fan group collective started a hashtag movement, which attracted thousands of tweets in hours (Appendix 2.12). As already touched upon, the consumption of Justin is about the social aspect, where you are sharing your devotion for him with all other beliebers. Often, beliebers are just tweeting about his looks, which is a guarantee of favourites and re-tweets.

Participating in these collective reinforces a consciousness of kind between members (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). By sharing these moments with each other, members reinforce the sense of community, and it comfortable in their understanding of the fandom, as there are many like-minded others “out there”.

4.2.3. Community practices

There is a significant difference in the way these moral systems are put in place by the participants of the communities. As evident in the affordances analysis (Appendix 1.3), whereas the boundaries of the brony community are closely knitted within the virtual walls of MLPforums the beliebers operate in the public space of Twitter. This has a great difference in how fans perceive the unwritten rules of the fandom. Whereas the bronies are focused on keeping up with the relationship between the fans, the beliebers are concerned with their collective relationship with Justin.

1.2.3.4 Emotional responsibility towards the community

In the Brony fandom, the community rules were contextualized with specific ground rules, which involved everything from language, plagiarism behaviours and to the actual quality of one's contributions (Appendix 2.1). One of the most prominent values, which is a direct reference from the television show is their value for “love and tolerance”. The saying has become a shared standpoint for dealing with trolling and hatred by the Internet and in the media, where they were deemed as a “disturbing trend” and as the “end of American manhood”. Love and tolerate is now commonly used in place of violent terms in an attempt to stay non-confrontational. Even when individuals post graphic images creating pornographic or gore imagery of the MLP characters, though not approved by all, they are in a way accepted as being part of the community (Appendix 2.4).

Discussion in comment threads regularly strays far from pony-related matters, and it is common for members to share details from their offline lives that range from the mundane (e.g. what they had for dinner) to the deeply intimate (personal stories about struggles). It was clear that the bronies' social connection towards each other is based on a lot more than just affection towards cartoon ponies. This was especially evident when talking with the bronies about the difference between online and offline friendships. In a thread questioning the legitimacy of

online friendships, a majority of the respondents felt that their online friendships are just as important or even more important than their offline friendships (Appendix 2.14).

2.2.3.4 Emotional responsibility towards the fan object

Member-brand relationships were especially important in the belieber community. As mentioned, belieber interact in the “open” cyberspace of Twitter – a space where Justin also operates. The moral responsibility thus primarily exists towards how Justin perceives them: “Think before you say something because Justin could be reading all these tweets right now while crying and being even more depressed” (Appendix 2.10). During my three-month immersion in the fandom, Justin was attacked by the media for many things; for not smiling at meet and greets (Appendix 2.9), for cancelling the meet and greets (Appendix 2.10), for not letting the fans get their \$2000 back (Appendix 2.17), for cultural appropriation, for de-crediting Prince and lastly he was attacked for comparing himself to God (Appendix 2.18). However, the worst attack was when he cancelled the meet and greets, where my Twitter feed exploded:

We will always be here for you @Justinbieber #WeAreHereForYouJustin

*I'll be here to support Justin till my last breath, I promise.
#WeAreHereForYouJustin*

Justin can't be replaced, money can #WeAreHereForYouJustin

*IF YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND HOW HARD IT IS FOR HIM Y'LL DON'T
DESERVE HIM #WeAreHereForYouJustin*

*Justin's mental health means more to me than having a picture to prove to people
that I've met him. I pray Justin remains healthy and happy.*

Once again everything was centred around being supporting of Justin. It was almost taboo to say anything against him or even suggesting that you are sad. A belieber who lost her \$900 further elaborated on this; “I actually feel guilty complaining about not getting the VIP Merchandise because that's not what this tour is about. I just want to see and hear him live (.” (Appendix 2.17)

As Justin is so relevant to what constitute the Belieber community and hence by defending him, the Beliebers defend their community. These actions reflect an emotional responsibility and commitment to Justin, which is a responsibility towards the community: #WeAreHereForYouJustin. It is more about *them* supporting Justin, and reaching out to other

beliebers, than it is for him. Standing up for Justin is perceived as an opportunity of showing your dedication – it shows that you are a true fan.

4.3. Summary of results

Reflecting upon my hours of wandering in the virtual streets of MLP forums and my quasi-constructed Belieber community on Twitter, I couldn't help reflecting upon a podcast with music scholar Nancy Baym (2012), "when music works, it makes us feel, and we feel, it's human nature to want to share those emotions with others". This, I believe is very characteristic for the two fandoms. These fans might already be obsessing, but fandom gives them the opportunity to act on those obsessions. In return, connecting with people who understand what you feel, they can amplify your devotion to this interest. As such, fans participate in a self-perpetuating process, in which they are getting immersed deeper and deeper into the collective to a point where I began questioning whether the fan object really matters to the survival of the fandom or if it just represents a symbolic crowd leader?

Nonetheless, the netnographic investigation of the Belieber and Brony fandoms revealed genuine devotion and interest in the fan object. The online activities of the virtual fan communities reveal that notions of both individual and collective identity, community culture, and language are both united and anchored by the common fan object and consumption symbols. It seems reasonable to infer from this that the consumption object takes an important personal and social, communicational role. The members of these communities are so enthusiastic about the fan object that they self-identify as members of a social group of similarly enthusiastic individuals, in which they share not only emotional but also cultural competencies of how to engage with the object. In the next chapter, I will specify the analysis to consider value creation specifically. I will here draw upon the theoretical framework to explore how cultural meanings of value, as well as social meanings of value, is perceived within the two fandoms.

Chapter 5 – Value co-creation in fandom

5.1. Fans as co-creators of value

Having reproduced the essential findings of the netnographic study, the focus will now turn to the theoretical reflection. The second level of empirical phenomenology will be presented here. The section will bring forward an interpretation of the phenomenon from the fans reality (or rather my interpretation of the fans' reality – hence the double interpretation), which will give new insights into the fan phenomenon. In this regard, I have found it valuable to use epoche, to 'objectively' consider perspectives that could be applied to produce insights and new knowledge.

Historically, fairly large and diverse gatherings of fields, spanning from cultural studies to psychology and sociology have been drawn upon to explicate the fandom phenomenon. It seems reasonable to interpret the Brony and Belieber fan phenomena as encompassing an array of fluid, multi-layered cultural and communal elements. Given these complex social phenomena, how should we then frame our consumer behaviour understanding of fandoms and fan communities? One way of synthesizing this body of empirical work is to relate it to the way it informs our understanding of the creation of value between the consumption objects and the consumers. As such, to reach a deeper understanding of fans as consumers; how they realize themselves as consumers, cultivates self-identification through consumption and develops meaning in the consumption objects, I want to comprehend the fan in a context of cultural branding and brand community.

5.1.1. Fans as (post)postmodern consumers

In this section, I will explore how the fans derive meaning from the fan objects. I am here concerned with the cultural approach, and as such how the fans use the consumptions objects and translate them into their lives and meaning making projects (Holt, 2002). Specifically, I

will here argue that the fandom phenomena, as I have explored here, display ‘abnormal’ consumption patterns in a postmodern perspective, which affects how value is created.

Through the netnographic study, a consumer culture began to emerge; the fans are devoted, emotionally and socially invested with high levels of loyalty, they are creative and active participators in the process, they looking to extend their consumption experience with others, and then they are living anonymously in their communities. As Lipovetsky (2005) argues, today’s goods are purchased less with a view towards social distinction and more with a view towards personal sensations and satisfaction; “They are driven by emotion than popular opinion and by amusement than prestige” (p. 45). Arguably, this fits with the consumers I have identified in the fan communities. In the case of fandom, it is evident that the consumers are in looking for intrinsic gratifications through their consumption of the fan object at it is not driven by social status or self-promotion, but is in many ways driven by emotional connection with the fan object and with the other fans. Not only is both of the communities based on anonymity, which means that the individual consumer has distanced herself from the real-life self. The anonymity allows the fans to act in ways that they might not have done in real life, where their physical “real” identity is exposed. As such, I believe that the consumption that I have identified is consistent with Lipovetsky’s (2005) hyperconsumption which “absorbs greater portions of social life”, but it arranged through an emotional and hedonistic logic which makes everyone consume for his or her own pleasures (p. 11).

From the superficial observation, it would be easy to assume that adult men watching a show for girls surely is not consumption for the sake of social prestige. However, I am more concerned with the level of devotion that I have found in the fandoms. The enthusiasm manifests itself in a powerful emotional engagement with the fan object. Justin is not just an artist, and My Little Pony is not just a show, but through meanings and practices, individual fans are able to legitimate particular differences between them, locate their sources of identity and invest themselves into a new social world (Kozinets, 2001). The values of “Love and Tolerate” is not just elements of a show, but they are practices and brought into their lives, reflecting the fact that consumers look for elements that “contribute directly to their identity projects by providing original and relevant cultural materials with which to work” (Holt, 2002, p. 87). They are not just consuming the show, but they are looking for experiences that inspire, provoke and stimulate, which helps them interpret the world that surrounds them.

In many ways, the bronies provides an excellent commentary on the societal and cultural changes that is happening according to Holt (2002), Lipovetsky (2005) and Kirby (2009). Holt (2002) explores in his article that the postmodern contradictions eventually brought an inflation of aggressive stealth attempts to reach an increasingly unavailable audience. This inflation has led to the heightened attention and criticism towards what he terms the ‘sponsored society’. If we consider the beginning of the fandom, it all happened because a journalist, in a rather postmodern reaction, were critical to clear commercial motivations (section 4.1.1). Instead of jumping on the bandwagon, the fans simply recognized its commercial purpose but was more interested in the cultural values that the show brought. This greatly represents Holt’s (2002) leap, arguing that in the post-postmodern world, “when all brands are understood as commercial entities, through and through, consumers will be less inclined to judge a brand’s authenticity by its distance from the profit motive” (p. 87). This is also evident in the brony case as they genuinely liked the show for its characters and its story (Robertson, 2014). According to Cova (2013), the post-postmodern perspective believes in something and represent a new earnestness that turns away from postmodern irony and pastiche to a more realist worldview. I here argue that the bronies is part of the post-postmodern neo-sincerity movement, which incorporates “ironic detachment with sincere engagement” (Wattercutter, 2011 in Robertson, 2014). According to Kendall (2008), this paradoxical ethos flourishes in the geek subculture as “irony affords young men a strategic device to express their heteronormative masculinity while retaining deniability” (in Robertson. 2014, p. 126). For example, the “brony” name came to exist to distance them from what they are not; the regular ‘bro’, which according to the Urban Dictionary, the Internet’s very own dictionary, is an ‘alpha male idiot’ and an ‘obnoxious partying male who is often seen at college parties’. As Robertson (2014) describes, “combining this nomenclature with the effeminate realm of toy ponies contrasts the hyper-masculine with the ‘girly’ in an intentionally ironic way” (p. 27). The identity and the subculture of bronies employs both irony and sincerity, making it a notable example of how post-postmodern consumers affect a sense of authenticity by using the brand as a cultural resource in their meaning-making projects. Through the show and with each other, the bronies have found value through subverting negative aspects of the geek stereotype and embrace an identity that celebrates joy, tolerance, and friendship. This is though fascinating when considering the context that includes Hasbro, and businesses in general, as we have an unlikely collective of

people who have ‘taken over’ and interpreted on the brand to find meaning that suit their life world.

A clear characteristic that I observed in the belieber fandom was that Justin was not used as a mean of enhancing their own status. Of course, getting a picture with Justin entailed a deep respect by fellow believers. However, there is a level of respect towards his person, so the real believers would boast the notion of treating him with respect (see section 4.2.3). This reflects the concept of devotion consumption (Pichler & Hemetsberger, 2008). When consumers are devoted, they will more likely treat the object with respect and care. This is evident in the belieber community as they are very focused on expressing their care and welfare of Justin with a significant consideration of his needs. This I believe as well is a clear indicator that fan is driven by more hypermodern values rather than postmodern ones. This is also evident when including the concept of Lipovetsky’s (2005) hypernarcissism, which is an expression of the hypermodern individual's maturity, responsibility, efficiency, flexibility and organizational ability. These features, however, create some serious narcissistic paradoxes in the observed fandoms because the fan’s personal desires and moral principles are not always compatible.

As evident in Appendix 2.9 and Appendix 2.10, there were several episodes where Justin ‘let down’ his believers either through lack of engagement, cancelling meet and greets or complaining about their behaviours. Even though he kept testing their devotion, their response was the same; #wearehereforyoujustin. Furthermore, in one my conversations with a fan who lost her backstage ticket because he cancelled his meet and greets, the dedication was especially evident;

Oh no!! Never in a million years would anything so little change how I feel towards Justin. It also has nothing to do with him, himself. I actually feel guilty complaining about not getting the VIP Merchandise because that's not what this tour is about. I just want to see and hear him live (: it's just the merch and everything is a part of the experience that I paid to have and I don't get it.

Even though she paid \$900 for a \$75 concert ticket, her emotional investment in Justin remained untested. These behaviours of loyalty and engagement are more reflected in Holt’s (2002) and Lipovetsky’s (2005) notion of a new consumer, compared to the fragmented and fluctuating postmodern consumer of Firat & Venkatesh (1995) and Cova (1997). I will cover these paradoxes later where I am going to explore how the fans deal with these internal conflicts and

how the importance of the collective. Next, I will go deeper into exploring wherein the consumption practice that value is derived for the fans.

5.1.2. Creative Resistance: Fans as Cultural Producers

As we saw in the theoretical discussion, the emotional consumers are not only driven by meaningful relations, but they are seeking an immediate pleasure due to the future's unpredictability (Lipovetsky, 2005). As such the notion of 'authenticity' has gotten a new meaning. Whereas authenticity in the postmodern paradigm was about 'stealth' branding, the post-postmodern represent an earnestness. However, when this authenticity does not live up to the fandoms' expectations, they will just change it to create their more authentic version, or at least what they perceive to be authentic. As such, value is placed in the act of consuming and not the specific gratifications that the show or the piece of music gives the fan.

In general, the postmodern stance celebrates activities such as these that blur the oppressive modernist boundaries between the fantastic and the real (Kozinets, 2001, p. 84). "When these simulations capture the imagination of a community, its members begin to behave in ways that authenticate the simulations so that it becomes the social reality of the community" (Firat & Venkatesh 1995. Moreover, as such, the immersive participation in fandom might reflect an "escape from reality." (p. 250) Just as the consumers enter a pseudo-reality when they enter theme parks of virtual realities such as Second Life, the fans enter a new reality when they engage with the media object and the fandom at large. The hyperreality of media consumption, the simulation that exists solely in whatever space you choose to view it from, now takes precedent to the experience. Following this logic, the real value of the brand does not come from interacting with the fan object, but it is in the simulation that you consume the fan object in. With the spread of the network society, today's fans can now immerse themselves even further into this reality, considering the unlimited access to the content afforded by online representations. In examining the effects of anonymity in online environments, Roger & Lea (2005) concluded that the lack of personally identifying cues is related to greater identification with the group and greater adherence to group norms (in Fiol & O'Connor, 2005). The hyperreality of media consumption, the simulation that exists solely in whatever space you choose to view it from, now takes precedent to the experience. This creates a separation from reality, and this disconnect allows for more "extreme" behaviour as we witnessed in the first

part of the analysis such as roleplaying, fan-fiction, ‘ponified’ language and the need for the believers to create a hyperreal reality, where they are Justin’s number one priority.

Whereas postmodernism called ‘reality’ into question, post-postmodernism defines the real implicitly as myself, now, ‘interacting’ with its texts (Kirby, 2009). As I observed in the two cases, this allows for a new type of textuality that is often co-authored by the fans and has changed the relation of production and creation. As opposed to reinforcing a sense of postmodern fragmentation or Foucauldian panopticon, the technological environment plays a more beneficial role in the fandom. This allows for a new type of textuality that is consumer-created and institutionalised in the culture, leaving the notions of ‘producer’ and ‘consumer’ up for question. In the brony fandom, it is not just co-creation of meaning, but it is outright production of content, which often is more popular than the actual fan object.

As well as collective viewing, the evidence of creative interpretation and textual poaching practiced by the fandom members is a means of strengthening and reinforcing the connection between members as well as co-creating of value. As the previous section dealt with these interpretive behaviours from the individual’s point of view, here the behaviours are scaled to a group level. The best definition, I could find to describe this type of individual interpretation which is further negotiated and interpreted upon on a collective scale is Kozinets et al.’s., (2008) notion of “collective consumer creativity”, which they use to describe collective innovation; “Collective consumer creativity is qualitatively distinct from individual consumer creativity—it occurs when “social interactions” trigger new interpretations and new discoveries that consumers “thinking alone, could not have generated” (Hargadon and Bechky 2006, 489 in Kozinets et al., 2008, p. 341). This greatly reflects Baym (2012) who argue “fans are generally interested in knowing more” [...] and “they can create a pool of far more information than they can alone” (p. 12). This is greatly exemplified in the discussions and sharing of knowledge that might seem pointless from the outside, but is valuable on the inside; “who is your favourite pony”, “how old are the Mane Six”, “which pony would you take as a room mate?”. In other words, fans co-create value by conversing and arguing in threads and on Twitter. When they participate in discussions or gain new knowledge and information from other members, they act as producing entities in the consumer-brand relationship.

5.1.3. Socialising away from the fan object

There are many ways of engaging with a fan object without being a “fan”. However, the fans are driven to connect with other fans. Entertainment is essentially social. As Baym (2012) states, “from its very origin thousands of years ago, music has been social”. Its original and arguably core nature are to connect people.” In connecting around entertainment, bronies and believers are continuing to foster the connection between the fan object and sociability by talking about and sharing it. These findings ring true with Duffett (2013), who argue that fans are “in love with the pleasure that they discover, not necessarily with objects in themselves.” (p. 279). Pursuing a deeper connection with a television show or performer becomes the key motivation factor. Even though focus so far has been the individual fan, the fact that other people share this emotional attachment, and the validation of sharing this obsession becomes extremely important; “by sharing the comments of other community members, any one member feels more secure in his or her understanding that there are many like-minded others “out there,” (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001, p. 423). In a thread, where the bronies began self-reflecting on the ways they became bronies a user comments (Appendix 2.16);

My friend got me turned on to watching My Little Pony, and I started watching midway into Season 1. I then started watching the remainder of Season 1 and I continue watching it. I love the show, it's changed my life for the better and I love the community of bronies as a whole. It's nice to be a part of a community of people who all can relate to the characters, enjoy the show, love the songs, and can just be themselves even if others judge and mock.

As Muñiz & O’Guinn (2001) argue, sharing stories and knowledge reinforces a consciousness of kind between community members. As we found in the previous section, fans’ value the fan objects for its intrinsic, emotional gratification. However, having access to other people who share those feelings validates our experience and provide means to foster and perpetuate these feelings. As evident from the quote, it is clear that the social aspect of being part of the Bronies play a dominant role for members in value creation processes. Members perhaps obsess in the first place, but fandom gives them an outlet for that obsession. In the believer fandom, the notion of sharing histories of Justin’s greatness reflects Schau et al.’s (2009) ‘impression management,’ which refers to the focus on creating positive impressions of the brand. As we found, appreciation of Justin’s history and a personality differentiates the true believers from the regular fans. Knowing these things is a form of cultural capital as it demonstrates one’s expertise, secure membership status, and commitment to the larger community (Muñiz &

O'Guinn, 2001). Following Muñiz & O'Guinn (2001), the status that members obtain from migration from 'fan' to 'belieber' "adds value to the consumption experience and is an incentive for becoming a stronger and more informed brand advocate" (p. 423). As Schau et al. (2009) argues, "consumers who achieve status within the brand community are reluctant to give it up. (p. 38). In many ways, this also rings true to fans as I have identified here. Many of the believers have developed complete social profiles with thousands of followers and some of them have perhaps gotten a favourite, or even a follow from Justin. A follow in the believer community is worth much cultural capital and is a source of pride and validation. The believer is not only recognized by Justin himself, but is also recognized by the community as a true, and recognized fan. As such, the believer stay engaged because she garners a continuous source admiration of others in the community, and this increases the value she experiences from the brand (Schau et al. 2009).

As we found in the theoretical foundation, Schau et al. (2009) found that practices had the ability to foster consumption opportunities and create value for both consumers and marketers. The fans may have come together as a result of their shared interest. In this way, they participate and interact with fellow members to experience pleasures (Schembri & Latimer, 2016). As according to Schau et al. (2009), the fan practices provide participants with an almost inexhaustible source of shared insider jargon and modes of representation, which enhance consumers' brand experiences. It is through practices that brand fans become brand devotees. By displaying immediacy and engaging in shared behaviours that are exclusive to the category, it reduces the psychological distance within the Bronies and the Beliebers and thus increases affiliation. These common terms and genres work as markers of insider status and promote a sense of togetherness, which help forge a group identity despite the relative lack of physical contact. As the shared practices, language and behaviours continuously are made salient within the space, the fandom identity is continuously maintained, which enhance the feeling belongings to the social category.

According to Schau et al. (2009), community practices "continually create and perpetuate new opportunities for consumption", which in turn allow customers to derive greater value from the brand (p. 39-40). Members' interaction can improve or increase use of the brand through grooming, customizing and commoditizing (Schau et al., 2009, p. 35). This was evident in the way bronies had begun viewing the show together. These behaviours perpetuate and extend

consumption behaviours, as community engagement suddenly has become real-time. Through collective viewing, the fans are directly interacting, conversing, and exchanging knowledge – or in other words - co-creating value.

These findings help extend the view of Schau et al. (2009) by arguing that productive actions are a core function in co-consuming communities, or at least, in fan communities. Just as Cova & Dalli (2009) suggest that consumers are producers of cultural value that are beyond organizational control, this work confirms that consumers are generating value through the demonstrated ritualistic member action and interaction such as contextualised exchange and narrative play. Notably, much of the value produced in the fan communities are indeed outside of organisational boundaries.

5.1.4. We came for the show, but stayed for the community

Apart from the shared interest in My Little Pony and Justin Bieber, it is the strong links and the member-to-community loyalty that reinforces the social relations among the members (Cova & Cova, 2006). These relations are boiled down to the essential meaning of what it means to be a Belieber or a Brony and as such, the linking value where what established a foundation from which the brony and belieber culture has emerged. In this light, it is clear that being a part of a fandom is much more than an adoration towards an object. Bronies is not about guys liking a girl's show, but it is about the community they've created. This is a big saying for the bronies; "We came for the show, but stayed for the community". This is furthermore reflected in a thread, where the bronies reflected upon what it means to be in the fandom;

"If I'm being all that truthful, I don't like the show that much. Don't get me wrong, I can see the show is good and can have great episodes, it's just not the sort of show I would watch above others. The only reason I started watching the show was so I knew what everypony was talking about in the fandom, and so I could have more enjoyment when watching analyst ponies reviews on the episodes."

"To me the show and the fandom have a symbiotic relationship. The show provides ideas, and inspiration for the fandom who create numerous works of art, writings, and other things that I enjoy. Then all of the ideas, analysis, and headcanons made by the fandom have helped me to look at the show itself in different ways, and find more enjoyment in it."

At this point, the fan object is not relevant for the individual brony anymore. He still appreciates the show, but the fandom is what keeps him engaged in the show. Their only incentive to enjoy

the show is so that they can enjoy the My Little Pony content, which has not been created by Hasbro such as reviews, fan art, writings. As the second quote defines, he considered his relationship with the show and the fandom as symbiotic.

Here it is noted that the real value for this particular lies in the enjoyment of watching pony reviews of the episodes rather than consuming the actual product. Fans are not just consumers, but active co-creators of value and even creators of value, by helping to create new meanings in the text. Fans explore and develops myths and imagined memories as part of a continuation of their interests. This approach not only tells us that consumers are co-creators of the consumption experience, but that they engage imaginatively, creatively and constructively with the fan object. As such, the fan object is reduced to 'inspiration' and a jumping off point for further fan activities, that they would rather participate in. However, the fandom still needs content to fuel the fandom conversations, discussions, and interpretations. As such both parts need each other, because if one would perish, the other part would perhaps not survive at all.

As I explored in the discussion on the post-postmodern consumer in the previous section, the resulting feelings of experiencing authenticity, not only reflects the genuine interest of the object, it signals a higher degree of intimacy. However, with the notion that the social link that people experience between each other we can argue that the genuine concern for the object's well-being is just as much a reflection of the concern for the community's well-being. As we saw in the believer community, nobody wanted to complain or upset Justin Bieber because it would drive him further away from them, thus evaporating the social link that bonds the fans together. A Change.org petition was even put in place asking for a 50% refund of the original purchase price. The goal was to reach 5,000 supporters, but they were not even able to get past 2500 supporters. From a +80 million Twitter fan base, this seems rather unimpressive. Instead, the events were used as a way of expressing your believer identity and showing that you are a devoted fan, that believes that his "happiness & health is more important than see him in depression seriously" and if you are true believer then "you want to see Justin smiling and not saying he's depressed" and you should "get over it and stop starting shit" (2.19).

In the next chapter, I will discuss the findings of the present and the previous chapter. Together, the two chapters have played an important role in the 'hows' and 'whys' of value co-creation and as such, they have provided a solid point of departure for further discussing the relevance of fan communities.

Chapter 6 – Discussion

6.1. Introduction to discussion

To return to where we started, I want to follow through and specify what has happened with the *Deadpool* since its release. The film broke numerous box office records and became the highest-grossing R-rated film of all time and the highest grossing *X-men* film with a worldwide total of \$761.7 million against a \$58 million budget (Mendelson, 2016). In the wake of the *Deadpool* movie, the industry is scrambling, just like everyone else, to re-evaluate the power of fandom and its potential.

This chapter reflects on the main research findings presented in Chapter 4 and 5. In accordance with my research purpose, I will now discuss the processes within these fandoms that create value for the fandom members as well as how fandoms might be used to inform our understanding of contemporary consumer behaviour. As such, these concluding sections will be revealed in two steps;

First, I will summarise the previous results to discuss how the notion value is experienced within the fandom context. Specifically, the section will focus on the fans' consumption practices in engaging with the cultural resources of the fan objects and how these value-creating practices generate value collectively. Subsequently, the insights are transferred back to a brand community context. Finally, drawing on Holt's (2002) dialectical theory, a number of managerial implications are drawn out. Specifically, I will shed light upon how this newfound understanding of brand communities relates to strategic brand community management.

6.2. Fandom as co-created brand value

Through a netnographic investigation of the *Brony* and *Belieber* fandoms and the theoretical reflection upon the observed and participated practices and experiences have provided a depth of insights into the value creation process.

First, it was evident that value from the fan objects was found in the fans' selfish enjoyment of the fan objects. Through the perspectives of Holt (2002) and Lipovetsky (2005), the fan objects were valued in their delivery as cultural resources of pleasure and amusement. As such, we see a distinct break with the postmodern notion of identity, consumption and value. Arguably, these media brands are not used as a mere source of symbolic and cultural construction of self, but they have integrated a great portion of social life (Holt, 2002). They are not just Justin Bieber fans or My Little Pony fans, they are beliebers and bronies with everything these social category identifications entail - positives and negatives. Both of the fandoms were then perceived in their socio-technological context. Here it was evident that with the advent and the spread of web 2.0 elements, the fans are situated in a context where they can transform and manipulate texts as they please (Kirby, 2009). As such, nothing was taken for first-hand value, and if the media object did not live up to the fans' perceived authenticity, it was altered to fit the lifeworld of the fans. This was evident in the way Beliebers creatively interpret on Justin's tweets, making them relevant to their context. In the bronies, they have even begun to consume fandom-made My Little Pony content; reviews, visual fan art, music, fanfiction, roleplaying, fanvids with more pleasure than original My Little Pony content. As such, value is not only created through the acts of consumption but is similarly maintained and amplified in the acts of production.

However, the real value of fandom was found to lie in the ability to connect with and social experiences with other fans. The second reflection thus revealed that the fans in fandom are driven by gaining increased cultural value and social value. Continuing the notion that the pleasure-seeking benefits drive fans, they want more of it, which they can find in collective communities. Here they can gain new knowledge, engage in roleplaying, and act out 'fannish' behaviours with others. The fact that other people as well is experiencing this emotional connection with an object and the validation of sharing this obsession becomes imperative. The sense of community and the participation in community practices, in turn, amplifies and mitigates the perceived value of the brand. The social link that people experience between each other provides a new dimension of value that perhaps even becomes stronger than the hedonistic benefits of the product. Still, in connecting around the fan object, the fans are continuing to foster the connection between the individual and the fan object. The social value of connecting with others gives power to the individual fan's perception of brand value.

These findings seem to support Holt's (2002) notion that consumption has changed in the post-postmodern paradigm; the brand has taken a great sense of social life that supersede the postmodern consumption of symbols. In a modern sense, value was centred on a brands functional resources, in the postmodern sense value was found in the brands symbolic resources and here we are seeing that value is generated from the symbol *act* of consuming (Holt, 2002). Here, the fandom not only utilized the symbolic values of the brand, but altered them in such a degree that it makes sense to the way they interpret the world. In the believer community, where it was evident that value of 'consuming' Justin Bieber was found in his ability of providing content to *their* identity projects. Through their devotion to Justin they were able to tell a history of themselves. However, compared to the postmodern notion the difference lies in the fact that it is not about simply consuming symbols, but it is the very act of *beliebing* that is value creating. For example, when Justin was attacked by fans, the real believers were quickly out to distance themselves from the non-fans and as such the collective feeling that comes from acting like true believers gives value to fan process. Justin's value lies not in his music nor does it lie in his image, but his perceived value is generated through the *act* of consuming him together with others. Reflecting upon Cova's (1997) "social link" and Muniz & O'Guinn's (2001) "consciousness of kind", fandom is not about the fan object, but it is about the social link between people. However, without the fan object the social link would not exist. This dynamic value creation process was greatly exemplified by one of the bronies, who defined the fandom's relationship with My Little Pony as 'symbiotic'. The show mainly provides ideas and inspiration for the fan activities that they enjoy to participate in. Then all the knowledge, analysis and head canons⁸ help gain a deeper understanding and enjoyment from the fan object. Some of the bronies even revealed that they enjoy the show, but mainly engaged with it to keep up with the fandom. As such, both fandom and the fan object survives because if one would perish, the other part would essentially be damaged as well.

6.3. From fan communities to brand communities

Overall the findings show similarities between fan communities and brand communities. Both groups show emotional commitment (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001), value their social relations

⁸ Head canon is the ideas or opinions about a fictional series (Book, TV, Comic, or otherwise) that is true in one's head, but has not become a canon fact.

with others, and seek additional information, which can further intensify their connection with the brand (Schau et al. 2009; Kozinets, 2001; Ford, 2006). According to Ford (2006), the two fields are increasingly blurring as consumers are acting like fans such as the Apple Newton community (Muñiz and Schau, 2005) and Harley Davidsons owners (Schau, 2009).

In my findings, it was evident that the cultural values and symbolic meanings of the fan object were deeply ingrained in the community culture. I find that the intersection between the cultural and social perspective provides a strong framework in considering the fan community context through which value is created. As such, the study reflects the understudied subject of the influence of cultural context on value co-creation (Akaka et al. 2015). These findings extend the study of Muñiz & Schau (2005) who examined the ‘abandoned’ Apple Newton brand community, in which they found that in which the stigma of an abandoned brand led consumers to co-create the brand meaning, thus extending the brand’s life. It furthermore reflects Brown et al. (2003), findings that retro brand meanings are predicated on a communal element and an enlivening paradoxical essence. Retro brand management involves an uneasy, co-creative, and occasionally clamorous alliance between producers and consumers. This study follows the thoughts of Akaka et al. (2015), that if “marketers want to better understand how to increase positive evaluations of a value proposition, they need to consider the cultural context practices, norms, meanings, and resources that mediates the derivation of value”. (p. 281). “Existing scholarship has been guilty of underestimating or altogether ignoring the role that consumers (and especially fans) play in investing brands with meaning” (Crisp, 2013, p. 324). As such, I provide additional, and perhaps conflicting insights to those presented by Schau et al. (2009) and into the value creation process by exploring both the cultural context as well as individual roles within the communities. In general, my findings diverge from Schau et al. (2009) and McAlexander (2002) on a fundamental basis. Whereas they assert that brand community facilitation essentially is a matter of encouraging practices and that “there are specific recipes for managers to follow to foster brand community [impression management, networking, community engagement, brand use] (Schau et al. 2009, p. 37). However, in my findings, the remarkable success of these two franchises were build from fan-generated and fan-produced communities that exist beyond corporate control. As Schau et al.’s (2009) study is founded in corporate created communities, we might find the roots to the differences.

Still, the influence of cultural context on value co-creation is an important consideration for researchers and practitioners, who want to better understand how to increase the level of value in consumer communities (Akaka et al., 2015). Research conducted regarding Mattel's successful American Girl brand found that the basis of its marketing lying in well-researched, moralistic, value-rich, historical stories to attach profound levels of complexity and moral meaning to the dolls, their clothing, and accessories (Diamond et al. 2009). Furthermore, as the findings reflected Holt's (2002) post-postmodern branding paradigm, which is premised upon the pursuit of personal sovereignty through brand and the creative resistance of consumers. Here, "[...] brands will become another form of expressive culture, no different in principle from films or television programs or rock ands (which in turn, are increasingly treated and perceived as brands)" (p. 87). Seen in this light, fan communities might indeed be able to able to provide insights into both theoretical and practical implications of how brand community management will be shaped in the future. As an interpretive study and in contrast to previous research such as Schau et al. (2009) and McAlexander et al. (2002)), generating generalizable and normative suggestions becomes a difficult challenge. Rather, I would like to re-visit Holt's (2002) dialectical model of consumer culture and branding to theorise suggestions of how to deal with these new, consumer groupings.

Following Holt's (2002) notion, in this prospect of a post-postmodern branding paradigm, the brand should act as a citizen-artist, and brands will be trusted to "serve as cultural source materials when their sponsors have demonstrated that they shoulder civic responsibilities as would a community pillar" (p. 88). Translated into the specific context of this thesis and the insights I have gained, two major themes emerge; *be sincere* and *facilitate co-creation*.

If a new branding agenda is about to emerge, it is relevant to look at the major differences between the existing and the new. According to Darmer et al. (2013), 'authenticity' is central to understanding the proposed shift from the postmodern to the post-postmodern branding paradigm. In the postmodern branding paradigm postmodern, 'stealth' branding was perceived as being authentic. However, the post-postmodern represent a new earnestness where brands should be sincere about profit motives and honest in their marketing communications (Cova, 2013).

The role of brands has changed with a renewed focus as cultural resources serving the consumers' needs. If you want your consumers to talk about you, you need to give them

something of cultural and social value. Encouraging consumers to act as a collective intelligence strengthens ties within the community and thus fosters greater emotional bonds with the property. Give them things that stimulate the activities they want to do; give them things to build identity with, to offer up for collective interpretation, to pool into collective intelligence. This might allow them to build brand communities by them selves. As it was evident in the study, as consumers co-create with each other, they develop stronger emotional with the brand, which creates good word-of-mouth and loyalty (Schau et al. 2009). Further research should investigate differences in brand created and fan/consumer created communities to seek if management absence creates stronger communal relations between community members.

Before I reach the final stage of the thesis, I will briefly consider the media producer's perspective to exemplify my above argument. According to Corona (2012), there is a character who embodies the post-postmodern sincerity, Lady Gaga. "Whereas Madonna is about professionalism – slick, perfect, ironic and managed -, for Lady Gaga, it's about blood and guts, stumbles and falls, life and death (Cova, 2013, p. 9). This furthermore reflect the reality of Justin Bieber and the way he has engaged and mobilised his fan base. Of course, his "boyfriend" image is clean-cut outwardly (Ibsen et al. 2013), but in approaching his fans, he is honest and flawed: "sorry not sorry about grammar it's not my strong point" (Appendix 2.17) You don't get a sense of a filter between him and his fans. He is also hyperactive on social media with 30,000 tweets and daily Instagram pictures, which gives the fans something to work with. Bieber has become larger than the music and now primarily serves as the knot that binds the fans together, and now his fans work for him.

Chapter 7 – Conclusions and reflections

7.1. Epilogue

The present study sought to tap into the paradoxical intersection between grassroots media fandom studies and a business school, consumer behaviour perspective. With the point of view provided by the *Bronies* and the *Beliebers*, the study has shed light on two online media fandom. Both of which are ‘born’ online with most of the communities’ interactions appear in the digital space. As the study was guided by a general curiosity towards the subcultural phenomenon of fandom, the research purpose was to reveal processes of value creation among the networked actors in fan communities. What are the fan getting out of participating in these communities and how does it affect the perceived value of the fan object? As a concluding note, I wanted to investigate how a focus on fan communities might deepen our understanding of brand communities, beyond media and entertainment.

My results reveal the dynamic roles between the individual fan and the collective fandom in the value creation process. Turning to consumer culture theory, it was evident that these devoted consumers are driven by intrinsic values and the personal experiences that the fan object gave them. Through the reflections of Douglas Holt (2002) and Gilles Lipovetsky (2005), it was found that the fan represents tendencies of hypermodern or post-postmodern consumerism, which is focused more on the pleasure-seeking benefits rather than the postmodern focus on symbol construction of the self. Furthermore, an important theme was found in the fans’ utilisation of resistant and creative interpretive strategies to infuse authenticity and meanings into the fan object. The bronies co-created and even produced value through creative play with the fan object, and the beliebers maintained their sense of value through creative interpretation of Justin’s messages, surely blurring the line between producer and consumer.

However, it was clear that you can still be a fan without being engaged in any fandom, which led to the next focus. Here it was revealed that fandom is a social experience, and dedicated fans want to connect with other fans. The second reflection thus showed that the fans in fandom are driven by cultural value and social value. The sense of community and the participation in

community practices, in turn, amplifies and mitigates the perceived value of the brand. The social link that people experience between each other provides a new dimension of value that becomes even stronger than the hedonistic benefits. Still, in connecting around the fan object, the fans are continuing to foster the connection between the individual and the fan object. Hence, the social value of connecting with others gives power to the fan's perception of brand value.

This dynamic value creation process was greatly exemplified by one of the bronies, who defined his relationship with the My Little Pony as 'symbiotic'. The fandom is not really about the fan object, but it is about the social link between people. However, without the fan object, the social link would not exist. Some of the bronies even revealed that they enjoy the show, but mainly engaged with it to keep up with the fandom. Combining that with the argument of the egoistic consumer, we see that the fan object is merely a mediation for the fandoms' collective project.

In understanding the remarkable success of these two franchises, the research suggests that entertainment products are key conceptual spaces that consumers in contemporary society use to construct their identities, make sense of themselves as consumers and interact in the online spheres of the world. The fan is an example of a post-postmodern consumer - a consumer who does not consume for the sake of cultural symbols and engage in creative resistance towards the brand. The study indicates that fandom, community interactions, and value co-creation are mediated by the cultural context of the brand and the fan object. Especially, with the consideration of resource integration and creative interpretation as a central practice for value co-creation, the findings presented consequences for the growing interest in the proactive facilitation of brand community. Building a brand community is more than a 'how-to' question of facilitating interaction and social practices. Based upon Holt's (2002) dialectical model as well as the findings of the study, it is instead proposed that brands should emphasise care and facilitate co-creation, which will allow the fans to create communities by them self. The role of brands has changed with a renewed focus on cultural resources serving the consumers' needs. If you want your consumers to talk about you, you need to give them something of cultural and social value. Give them things that stimulate the activities they want to do; give them things to build an identity with, to offer up for collective interpretation, to pool into collective intelligence. Corporate activity is only one contributor to the cultural life and value of a brand, and not necessarily the most important.

7.2. Reflections

A primary concern in advancing this thesis was that it spoke with the fans' voices to comprehend with the gap that was identified between the fields of fan studies and consumer behaviour studies. As such, I believe that I have kept my promise. The research is built from their voices, but still the voice that you have engaged with is my own. This is not a voice that speaks for every member of the culture or community, or that even seeks to. It is an inescapably authoritative voice that *allows* the subject their voice, one that, even while attempting to fashion a multi-perspectival undertaking, ultimately can relate only partial and situated knowledge. Furthermore, it should be noted as my results is solely on the basis of the active members within these forums a lot of insight might be lost as I have only been concerned with a specific type of fan. Also had I chosen more "popular" fan cultures such as football fans or Game of Thrones fans (which has become a pop culture phenomenon) my findings might have been different.

To compensate for the methodological shortcomings, it would be intriguing to consider more digital approaches to netnography. Even though fan studies have been characterised by its auto-ethnography approach, teasing open methodological relationships between the aca-fan and digital netnography methods, beyond being challenging, would perhaps provide greater depth to the ontology of the aca-fan and offer different approaches for doing qualitative research. We are only at the beginning of the digital revolution, and we will surely much stranger consumer/producer dynamics in the future. The challenge is to find new theoretical frameworks that can guide the study of these phenomena. This thesis suggests that some of these processes could be interpreted with the help of value co-creation. As Galuszka (2015) argues, such links between fans and business studies may have been inconceivable a few years ago. However, today, when consumers are becoming fans, it is something that should drive future research.

Regardless of the method's shortcomings, extended beyond the context of mass media consumption, the insights from this netnography may still inform our understanding of a range of other consumption phenomena. Especially, as online consumer activism and consumer movement phenomena such as "shit-storms" and "hashtag hijacks" have moved online to territories where media fan and fandom are progressively mainstream. Perhaps then, questions of ownership and control might be answered by beginning with the spaces and communities where brand 'conversations' take place. This strikes me as the kind of analysis that fan studies as a discipline should be well suited to.

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Appendices Part 1

Appendix 1.1 – Overview of netnographic data

xxn	Date:	Fandom:	Overall Theme:	Contains:
2.1	10/02/2016	Bronies	Infrastructure of Research Site	- 13 Screenshots - 3 Pages - Field notes
2.2	17/02/2016	Beliebers	Infrastructure of Site + Creation of profile	- 13 Screenshots - Field notes
2.3	01/03/2016	Beliebers	General Discussions	- 13 tweets
2.4	03/03/2016	Bronies	General Discussions	- 2 Pages - 5 Threads - 60 Posts
2.5	17/05/2015	Bronies	Creation of profile	- 1 Introduction message - 2 Brony profile analyses - 1 Thread - 40 Posts
2.6	05/03/2016	Bronies	Show Discussions	- 4 Pages - 3 Threads - 50 Posts
2.7	06/03/2016	Beliebers	#FollowMeJustin!	- 20 Tweets - Field notes
2.8	07/03/2016	Bronies	Season 6 teaser	- 2 Threads
2.9	10/03/2016	Beliebers	Justin is not smiling at M&G	- 10 tweets
2.10	23/03/2016	Beliebers	Justin cancels M&G	- 27 tweets
2.11	26/03/2016	Bronies	Season 6 premiere	- 1 Threads - 80 Posts - Fieldnotes
2.12	04/04/2016	Beliebers	Best Fan Army	- 11 tweets - Field notes
2.13	05/04/2016	Belieber	Justin is attacked by fans	- 30 tweets
2.14	10/04/2016	Bronies	Personal Discussions	- 2 Threads
2.15	14/04/2016	Beliebers	Meeting Justin	- 27 tweets
2.16	18/04/2016	Bronies	Fandom discussions	- 6 Threads - 60 Posts
2.17	28/04/2016	Beliebers	Correspondence with fan	- 1 Interview - 5 tweets
2.18	28/04/2016	Beliebers	Justin is attacked by media	- 23 tweets

2.19	01/02/2016 – 15/05/2016	Beliebers	Overview of tweets	- 150 tweets
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Appendix 1.2 – Observation guide

Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein (1997) have developed a list of what should be included in all fieldnotes:

1. Date, time, and place of observation
2. Specific facts, numbers, details of what happens at the site
3. Sensory impressions: sights, sounds, textures, smells, taste
4. Personal responses to the fact of recording fieldnotes
5. Specific words, phrases, summaries of conversations, and insider language
6. Questions about people or behaviors at the site for future investigation
7. Page numbers to help keep observations in order

According to Kozinets, In these fieldnotes, “netnographers” record their own observations regarding subtexts, pretexts, contingencies, conditions and personal emotions occurring during the research. These written reflections often prove invaluable to contextualizing the data and are a recommended procedure.

Purpose with participant observation:

- Generally, to examine and study fans’ interactions, behaviours and actions during and after news regarding their object of affection, the producers behind, or actions from other fans that might affect their sense of fan identity or their relationship to the object of affection/producers behind.
- How do the fans speak to each other?
- How do the fans speak about the producers?
- How long time do they interact?
- What are their feelings towards the product of affection?
- How important is the media text?
- I will work with both clean descriptions and with confirmations or disapprovals of assumptions.
- I will take screenshots, save URL destinations as supplement to my descriptions.
- Key words: Behaviour patterns, moods, social conventions, importance of the media text.

Important considerations:

- Shifting between observation and participation
- Reflection of my presence
- When do I observe something and when don’t I see? Type down afterwards as rationalization about what I didn’t see.

- If there is something that we will have to ask people about, it is done in the situation.
- Alternatively, I can extend the observation by provoking behaviour during the concert, for example, by questioning other fan's logic.

Theme	Description	Comments:
Details:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Event - Time - Group of people - Location 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Specify when it began and ended
During course of events:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Describe how fans are reacting to the event - Describe the fans - Describe the general atmosphere of the event. - Describe how fans act and behave towards each other. - Describe how fan act and behave towards the product. - Describe the fans' moods. - How do they use the affordances of the platform? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Take Screenshots - Alternatively, focus on specific fans and their actions, communications etc.
After course of events:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Interaction with the product/brand – is the issue resolved? - Has it changed the power relationship with producers? - Identified themes - Assumptions that need confirmation or disapproval 	

Appendix 1.3 – Affordances of research sites

	MLP Forums	Twitter	Research implications
Category	Message board (volunteer owned)	Micro-blogging network (A listed company)	The believers “piggyback” on a social media Bronies own their own site Beliebers doesn’t have any responsibility, Bronies do
Association	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Allows opinion expression (e.g. the <i>bro-hoof</i>) - Activity of related others displayed on page - Latest activity is displayed on the front page 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Displays content based on followers and following. - Use of @ to converse - Use of # to contribute to topic - Allows comments and opinion expression (<i>love</i> and <i>re-tweets</i>) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - On Twitter, everyone (anti-fans and fans) can contribute to the conversations, whereas you need to have joined the herd to participate in the forums. - On Twitter, my posts will only reach a small audience whereas in the forums, I will potentially reach the whole forum. - Beliebers are structured around hashtags to create a sense of collective - On Twitter, the research site will be determined by who I choose to follow. In the forums, I will receive content from all who choose to contribute.
Edibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Asynchronous entries - Contributions can be deleted - Everyone can contribute and begin discussions - Moderators manage forums 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Asynchronous entries - Contributions can be deleted - Content consist of text, videos hyperlinks, pictures, gifs - Limited in characters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I need to save the data right away as it may be deleted. I furthermore need to note down the users as are able to change their identity or even leave the fandom. - The bronies are able to alter posts, Twitter is locked, - Twitter is limited to 140 characters. - I will need to analyse pictures, gifs etc. text is not enough. - How will individuals edit their self-presentations? - How do they recognise each other?

Persistence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hierarchical tree-like structure - Content is saved until the thread is closed - Chronological threads 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Catalogue of entries - Content is retractable, but disappears from feed. - Profiles indexed by search engines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In the forums, I will be able to extract conversations that happened years ago. I won't be able to do this on Twitter. - On Twitter I needs to save findings right away otherwise it will be gone. I wont be able to locate what has happened in the community when I am away. - I have to be in 'research mode' all the time to follow the conversations.
Visibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Partly closed media - Pushes activity to friends - List of friends 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Public media - Pushes content to subscribers - Shows subscribers and those to whom a user subscribes 	<p>Ethical concerns: I essentially can hide my identity as a researcher</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Some forums in the brony fandom is very closed off. - Bronies are protected in the forum, whereas the Beliebers are in the public vulnerable to critique - Beliebers are in direct contact with Justin Bieber (panopticon?)

Appendix 1.4 – Aggregated findings

Aggregate:	Practices:	Description:	Examples:
Identity practices	Symbolic consumption	Using the cultural context of the media text in shaping individual fan identities.	Bronies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Main 6 identification from masculinity • “Love and Tolerate” Beliebers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrating “belieber” identity
	Culture / Language	Sharing languages, rituals which is only understood within the fandom.	Bronies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bronyspeak, memes Belieber: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Fangirl” speak, emoticons,
Participating practices	Storytelling	Sharing the news and celebrating the brand/community stories. Detailing the brand and one’s relationship with the brand in a narrative way.	Beliebers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Translating milestones into symbols “Followed on ..” • Celebrating Justin and his history Bronies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing how they became fans
	Knowledge sharing	Recognizing variance within the brand community membership. Marking intragroup distinction and similarity	Beliebers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing content about Justin • Learning how to behave in front of Justin Bronies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing/discussing show interpretations
	Collective consumption	Consuming the media object together. Either by worshipping Justin’s appearance or watching the show together.	Beliebers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share videos from concerts • Worshipping • Participating in fan army awards Bronies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watch the show together • Read/Write reviews • Roleplaying
	Textual Creativity	“Poaching” the product to suit collective or individual needs. includes Interpreting/changing	Bronies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fan fiction/Fan art Beliebers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘creative’ interpretations of Justin.

		meanings to creating fan objects	
Community practices	Emotional responsibility towards the community	Greeting new members and assisting other members in their use of the brand. Lending emotional and/or physical support to other members,	<p>Bronies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greeting new members + How to practice Love and Tolerate <p>Beliebers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning others how to get closer to Justin; How to behave in front of Justin
	Emotional responsibility towards the brand	Articulating the behavioural expectations of how to behave towards the brand.	<p>Beliebers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Showing emotional towards Justin (This was more prominent in the beliebers

Appendix 1.5 – First recordings of the Brony Fandom

[3 / adv / an / ck / co / fa / fit / int / k / mu / n / new / o / p / po / pol / r9k / soc / sp / toy / tv / v / vp / x index / top / reports / site discussion / report a bug]

/co/ - Comics & Cartoons

Text search [?] Go [Advanced]

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File: 166 KB, 813x606, ponies-1.jpg [View same] [iqdb]



The Zam Sun Oct 10 17:04:12 2010 No.20460984 [Reply] [Original]

1st episode is up

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TjI8XulH51E>

The Zam Sun Oct 10 17:10:12 2010 No.20461101

le bump

Anonymous Sun Oct 10 17:12:12 2010 No.20461162

>>20460984
This is not sexy, what were they thinking?

The Zam Sun Oct 10 17:19:12 2010 No.20461284
File: 118 KB, 640x480, CHI 03.jpg [View same] [iqdb]



>>20461162

Steven T !tODQ5E/o2TY Sun Oct 10 17:20:12 2010 No.20461314

>>20461162
Are you saying you found the originals sexy?

Anonymous Sun Oct 10 17:21:12 2010 No.20461340

I... actually kinda like this. Don't really care about what's going on, but it has decently timed gags, fluid motion, voice acting that doesn't make me cringe. I'm scared, /co/. Hold me.

The Zam Sun Oct 10 17:26:12 2010 No.20461428

>>20461340

As long as you don't dream to be a pony, youre ok.

Anonymous Sun Oct 10 17:32:12 2010 No.20461553

>>20461428
No, no I should be fine then. I do only want to see the ponies kick some ass, Powerpuff style.

Anonymous Sun Oct 10 17:35:12 2010 No.20461621

>>20460984
It's not bad.

The Zam Sun Oct 10 17:46:12 2010 No.20461846
File: 12 KB, 384x269, Pony.jpg [View same] [iqdb]



Hey, Kid wanna /ss/ pony for a while?

:o

Anonymous Sun Oct 10 17:50:12 2010 No.20461931

Thanks for telling everyone, OP. This is actually good.

Anonymous Sun Oct 10 17:50:12 2010 No.20461939

I liked My Little Ponies as a kid. The toys more than the cartoon, though. Still, ever since hearing about this, my inner child has been curious to see it.

I'm not really fond of how Littlest Pet Shop toys and now My Little Ponies have turned into these huge-eyed Bratz-lookalikes. And I'm not sure if I like the overall art style here. Except for manes; they look fun and diverse for once. And everything (animation, voices, characterization) feels so much more polished than the cartoon I watched in my childhood.

I couldn't help but laugh at the name "Twilight Sparkle". I had forgotten how lame and girly names these ponies had.

wtf was with the method how Spike sent/received letters

Anonymous Sun Oct 10 17:52:12 2010 No.20461969

Do you think the [redacted] art of the ponies will have [redacted] that are twice the length of their bodies, or [redacted] that are three times the length of their bodies?

Anonymous Sun Oct 10 17:53:12 2010 No.20462008
File: 19 KB, 640x480, vlcsnap-2010-10-10-22h52m49s162.jpg [View same] [iqdb]



Ugh... Too much pie...

Anonymous Sun Oct 10 17:54:12 2010 No.20462023

>>20461969
I sure that will only be the beginning of the new wave of porn for this.

I await the scat. Yeeesssssss

Anonymous Sun Oct 10 17:55:12 2010 No.20462069

>>20462023
Manure is good for plants.

Anonymous Sun Oct 10 17:56:12 2010 No.20462080

>>20462008
Too bad you don't have fingers.

Anonymous Sun Oct 10 17:57:12 2010 No.20462107

>>20462069
That's, uh... certainly a bonus. I guess.

Anonymous Sun Oct 10 18:00:12 2010 No.20462158

why did i get [redacted] from watching this wtf is wrong with me

Anonymous Sun Oct 10 18:02:12 2010 No.20462218

>>20462158
>Flash
>Has actual animation
>The characters are not circles and 90-degree angles
>Female horses

Anonymous Sun Oct 10 18:04:12 2010 No.20462286

Twilight Sparkle is a badass genius.
The only problem with this is that it tells little girls to be dim socializers.

Anonymous Sun Oct 10 18:06:12 2010 No.20462354

>>20462286
Face reality, they were all going to be dim socializers anyhow.

Anonymous Sun Oct 10 18:12:12 2010 No.20462505
File: 10 KB, 320x276, charliebrown.jpg [View same] [iqdb]



> Equestria
> My Face

Anonymous Sun Oct 10 18:15:12 2010 No.20462584

>>20462286
That's not what I get. what I get is that you can be smart yet still have friends.

The main hero being cool and smart is, I think, a very positive role model for little.

Anonymous Sun Oct 10 18:15:12 2010 No.20462586

>>20462107



Anonymous Sun Oct 10 18:16:12 2010 No.20462611

I actually WATCHED this holy [redacted] /co/ what have you done to me.
can't wait for next episode

Appendix 1.6 – Collected tweets

Type	Text
video	for people who say justin bieber can't sing
video	IM LAUGHING, HE HAS NO CHILL😂
picture	🔥
	Would you rather have a smiling and healthy Justin Or some pics in which he may not even be happy JUST THINK!!
video	😏😏☹️#WeAreHereForYouJustin
tweet	I'd rather support someone who takes risks and isn't boring than someone who never changes up their style.
billede	Justin deserves just an award for his smile and beautiful heart!
billede	HES SO HOT
video	THIS IS SO BEAUTIFUL
picture	Justin's eyes are shining, he's truly happy, i'm so alive #iHeartAwards
billede	It looks like he wants to cry so bad :"(
billede	Fans holding up "We Never Left" signs on the #PurposeTour in Seattle, Washington. (March 9)
picture	Worst feeling ever. Wish me luck on a ticket for the tour some how!
picture	This is so heartbreaking :(can't believe I actually have to do this...

link Very well said. Try to stay positive. Justice for Ultimate and I'll Show
You package holders - Sign the Petition!

picture Currently ticketless thanks to this situation. My mom refuses to let
them scam this way, it's my hard earned money.

picture So upset, praying I'll find Purpose Tour tickets soon so I don't worry
so much. IM GOING NO MATTER WHAT. I'VE WAITED SO LONG FOR
THIS.

picture Currently ticketless thanks to this situation. My mom refuses to let
them scam this way, it's my hard earned money.

tweet I'm not getting a partial refund to still pay \$550 for "VIP" that doesn't
exist. A SEAT, NOT EVEN PIT. Original value is \$150 at box office.

tweet I'm getting a full refund :(there goes getting close to Justin

picture 'Justin doesn't care about his fans' 'Justin only wants the money'

billede Wtf so now you don't even get to see Justin for the big packages.
Justin isn't showing up at all

tweet If you don't treat Justin with respect then don't expect him to treat
you with respect neither.

video Justin fell down and got back up stronger. Role model everyone!

video When a fan couldn't go to the Believe Tour because she had a car
accident so he just

video I am in tears my baby:(

picture Justin: Do you guys want photos? Fans: Yeah, but we wanna talk to
you too. *Justin takes them inside the tour bus*

tweet	"JB came outside barefoot and was like "I was so worried about you guys" because it was 3AM and cold and raining." -- Fan.
picture	Remember when Justin's friend had cancer & no hair so Justin also cut his hair off He's the best
tweet	He stole my heart, keeps me strong, taught me to believe, but overall, he helped me find my Purpose @justinbieber
video	When he surprised a fan who survived an explosion, gave her hugs and a surprise. I like his heart lots.
video	13. never forget when he broke his foot on stage and kept performing
picture	I'm so ready for Purpose tour ! #IheartAwards #BestFanArmy #Beliebers
picture	From My World tour to Believe tour Tomorrow, the #PurposeWorldTour will start Who's excited?
billede	Retweet if you're so proud of justin
video	You killed it @justinbieber we're so proud of you. I love this. #OurJustin
picture	RETWEET if you'll always be there for him ! I vote for #Beliebers - Justin Bieber #SoFantastic @radiodisney
picture	true idol. #iHeartAwards #BestFanArmy #Beliebers
gif	I made this video and it truly made me believe in myself again (:
picture	Justin and Beliebers have the best relationship
picture	let me suck your dick

video my clit is tingling im so fucking ready

billede More photos of Justin Bieber with fans at the #PurposeTour M&G tonight in Seattle, Washington. (March 9)

tweet @JBCrewdotcom why does he looks sad 😞

tweet @JBCrewdotcom He doesn't look happy 😞

conversation About people are jealous

conversation About people are jealous

conversation About how tired he was

conversation Bruh and Justin got his driver to drive these two girls home cause they didn't have a ride he's literally an angel

conversation TO THE GIRLS WHO TALKED TO JUSTIN IN THE TOUR BUS: THANK YOU FOR MAKING HIS LITTLE HEART HAPPY BY TALKING TO HIM.

picture Justin is such a kind hearted person so down to earth an he cares so much about us could have never asked for more

picture Justin was amazing last night glad I got to spend time with him on his tour bus

tweet I WAS FREAKING WITH THEM YESTERDAY AND I HAD TO LEAVE I HATE MY LIFE SO MUCH I AM NOT OLAYING

tweet "Justin: Do you guys want photos? Fans: Yeah,but we wanna talk to you too. *Justin takes them inside the tour bus*"

tweet sitting at home crying bc im never gonna meet him

Picture HOLY FUCKFNCKDB

Picture	if i was there when he said that, I would've cried a river
tweet	wow.... I'm not okay right now..
gif	3 days until the #PurposeTour starts Beliebers be like:
billede	I was saying "I haven't seen justin smoke in a while" then the pictures came out :"(
tweet	since tomorrow we will get new updates from purpose tour, videos and meet and greet pictures like every day, I'm so excited
billede	This is me for anyone who never seen a picture. My name is teanna
conversation	THEY FUCKING DID IT AGAIN
conversation	@drewismypurpose WHY CAN'T THEY RESPECT JUSTIN?! That's so sad.
conversation	@drewismypurpose the fake ones are going to ruin it for the real ones who haven't gotten a chance):
conversation	@drewismypurpose wow I don't know what they think they will accomplish. It's like their brain flies away and they forget how to think.
conversation	@drewismypurpose it's always the fake ones there make us look bad
conversation	@drewismypurpose WHY CAN'T THEY RESPECT JUSTIN?! That's so sad.
conversation	@drewismypurpose the fake ones are going to ruin it for the real ones who haven't gotten a chance):

conversation @Belieberqueenn @drewismypurpose IT HURTS CAUSE THERE ARE TRUE BELIEBERS OUT THERE WHO HAVEN'T EVEN HAD THE CHANCE TO MEET HIM

conversation @Belieberqueenn @drewismypurpose they ruin it for us and make Justin upset

conversation @drewismypurpose sorry but they're not true fans.

conversation @drewismypurpose they are so stupid. WTF is so difficult to understand that @justinbieber does not want that. Why ? It makes me mad

tweet people always ask "How did u get into the tour bus "nobody freaked , or had their phones out . we just wanted to talk n see how he was.

picture This sucked everybody was so rude he didn't meet anybody as they were all ignorant

tweet Justin can hear you so why do you scream and attack him like that? It's so fucking rude. I am so disappointed and disgusted with Boston fans

video (people mobbing him)

video Not only did this fan throw the flag in the car, but to Justin Bieber's face. Anybody would have reacted like this.

tweet I appreciate u guys and u mean the world to me but I don't like when u guys bang on my car bc its just overwhelming for me - Justin Bieber

tweet they are annoying to not respect him when he wants to talk with them and they don't listen him

tweet	all Justin wants is to be treated like the normal guy he is, so if you wanna meet him it takes patience and you need to respect him.
tweet	@skip2bieber very true! Treated him just like anyone else I would! Treat him with respect an so will he.
tweet	TO THE GIRLS WHO TALKED TO JUSTIN IN THE TOUR BUS: THANK YOU FOR MAKING HIS LITTLE HEART HAPPY BY TALKING TO HIM.
tweet	@uhtaehyungs HE WAS SO SWEET WHEN I SHOWED HIM RESPECT LIKE IF YALL JUST BE NICE HE WILL BE NICE BACK AND LITERALLY HIS EYES ARE THE
tweet	Don't want to offend anybody, THIS IS NOT shade. It's just been more constant since the tour started. My TL:
picture	yelling up Justin's face doesn't give you an award! Patience is the key! Just wait, stay calm until it's your turn
tweet	The sooner y'all realise the missed opportunities you've had trying to meet him because of mobbing the better, it won't get you anywhere!
tweet	Justin Bieber is still following Keep rt and like everything
picture	He's back, Our Kidrauhl.
tweet	@katrinalovess seriously , beliebers are family and it means a lot when u guys say that u respect us
picture	Information on Justin Bieber's "Ultimate" meet and greet changes for tomorrow's #PurposeTour show:
picture	#WeAreHereForYouJustin if you're a true believer than you'd want to see Justin smiling and not saying he's depressed

tweet	#HaleysStillBelieving #WeBelieveInYouHaley She deserves tickets more than anybody @historicalrauhl @justinbieber
video	A beautiful soul gave me a pair of tickets. But my best friend was outside for literally 24+ hours looking for Justin.
billede	Fudge jelena fudge haters it's Justin and his Beliebers forever. Jeliebers can never be broken.We are forever as one
tweet	Real Beliebers will stay by Justin's side no matter what
picture	STORY COMING LATER. GOD IT GOOD. BLESSINGS GO AROUND AND COME AROUND
picture	I'm here!! @Bkstg @JBLAZEOfficial @NickDeMoura @justinbieber @MightyMykell @DJTayJames #PurposeTourBoston
video	Me talking on the news about @justinbieber I looked like crap but I love you baby I got you.
tweet	"Justin hates his fans" "Justin is selfish"
tweet	When a OG beliebers chance gets ruined when Justin is literally right there because of fake fans, they have every reason to be devastated
tweet	Concerts should be free you should just have to complete a series of tests proving your a real fan then bam you get to see your fav artists
tweet	Justin is able to tell if someone is a true believer or just a fan within the first few minutes of meeting them.
tweet	My mom thinks its stupid that im sad about but he touched this phone... That means something to me

Tweet	I broke my home button & r replacing my phone for free but that means i have to give them the phone justin took a seflie on...
tweet	i lost my m&gs but i got a partial refund and got the fuck over it, so get over it and stop starting shit
tweet	"I used to be a Belieber" This is impossible because being a Belieber is a lifelong promise. You were probably just a fan, stop lying.
video	If you remember this song, you've been here for a long time
picture	Justin loves his Beliebers and he never wanted to disappoint us but his health comes first #WeAreHereForYouJustin
billede	Imagine Justin having a clone and his name is Derek Bieber (; dedicated Beliebers know what I'm talking about
tweet	Happy 22th birthday to Justin Drew Bieber. Thank you for inspiring millions. We'll never stop loving you. Have an amazing one!
picture	Mom: When was Justin was born? Me: March 1, 1994; 12:56AM St Joseph's hospital, 2ndfloor Room 126, AB+ Bloodtype.
billede	is this seriously trending
billede	Why is my boyfriend so hot
Picture	you know what, no. i want bkstg to die with fahlo both are shitty and irrelevant, not needed. they gotta go
billede	If we dont get this its actually embarrassing bc everyone knows we're the best. #BestFanArmy #iHeartAwards #Beliebers
billede	DO IT FOR HIM #iHeartAwards #BestFanArmy #Beliebers

tweet	YES BITCH WE THE BEST
tweet	*sobs*
tweet	COME ON PEOPLE WE NEED TO WIN THIS FOR HIM#iHeartAwards #BestFanArmy #Beliebers
tweet	We did it, Beliebers! We won #BestFanArmy at the #iHeartAwards! Congratulations. Big thanks to Ashley from JBC for representing the fans!
tweet	AWE THATS SO CUTE
tweet	Voting is closing soon #BestFanArmy #Beliebers #iHeartAwards
tweet	Beliebers! Make sure to retweet to vote for Justin Bieber/Beliebers at the @iHeartRadio Awards! #BestFanArmy #Beliebers #iHeartAwards
picture	RETWEET if you're proud of Justin Bieber !
billede	I never want that smile to fade
picture	Justin doesn't deserve this. Retweet if you agree
picture	We never left 💕 PRAY FOR JUSTIN
picture	Just my opinion @justinbieber #Bieber10BOnVevo #PurposeTour #YouAreStrongJustin #WeAreWithYouJustinBieber
tweet	He has proven to us millions of times, that he can say NO. So why are you all acting up like crazy? Wait & see.
gif	Health and happiness are the most important things in life #WeAreHereForYouJustin

picture I don't want Justin to end up like this again #WeAreHereForYouJustin

tweet Justin is always thinking about everyone else. It's nice to see how he's
FINALLY publicly expressing his feelings & putting himself first.

picture Some things never change! I will always be here for you
@justinbieber #JFCJustinBieber

tweet 'Justin treats fans like they're more than just fans but they don't treat
him like he's more than just a celebrity.' sadly the truth

tweet don't ever think you're a zoo animal. you're an amazing person inside
n out , I love you you didn't deserve this @justinbieber

tweet Would you rather have a smiling and healthy Justin Or some pics in
which he may not even be happy JUST THINK!!
😞😞😞#WeAreHereForYouJustin

tweet People need to learn respect for artists both physically and their
wellbeing. Justin is getting so tired of feeling like less of a human.

billede I'll be always here for You. #WeAreHereForYouJustin

tweet I Just want Justin to be happy and healthy. And you're crying because
you can't have a M&G which you criticize 'cause he's not smiling ..

picture Not this again. I prefer seeing Justin smiling than depressed and
unhappy. #WeAreHereForYouJustin

billede #OurJustin you have always been here when we needed you. Our
bond could never be broke. We love you Justin. They are proud
becasue he won

billede #JustinIsHuman

picture	Thank you sooo much!! I'm legit crying sooo hard! I love you
picture	I am with you, we are in this together - Justin Bieber
picture	he cares
video	THIS IS THE CUTEST THING I'VE EVER SEEN #PurposeTourCleveland
picture	Justin cares so much, he's a beautiful human being with great heart.

Appendices Part 2 (USB)

Netnographic data collection