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A life course perspective on fandom

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ABSTRACT In this article we explore a life course perspective on fandom, with particular emphasis on fandom and adult development. While there is growing interest in issues of age and aging within fan studies and within media studies more broadly, there is a tendency in this literature to discuss aging and the life course atheoretically, ignoring a rich body of scholarship in gerontology, sociology, psychology and human development that examines how lives unfold over time. Our goal in this manuscript is to make *explicit* what is typically rendered *implicit* in fan studies by drawing directly on life course perspectives to enrich our understanding of long-term and later-life fandom, and to suggest ways that fan studies might more fully account for fandom over time. This article thus synthesizes two bodies of literature that rarely inform one another: fan studies and life course scholarship.

KEYWORDS fan studies • fandom • life course

A 42-year-old man who has watched the US soap opera *The Young and the Restless* (CBS) since he was eight remarks: 'Genoa City [the show's fictional setting] has been the most stable "home" of my adult life.' A 50-year-old woman who has watched the US serial *General Hospital* (ABC) since early childhood muses: 'What I have learned about myself over years of viewing is that my perception of which characters I love and why has grown and changed with my life experience.' A fan of the US soap *As the World Turns* (CBS) for the past 51 years, who has been watching since she was a

teenager, explains: 'I would not have been a different person without soaps, but I am a richer person because of them.'[1] In this article we explore a life course perspective on fandom, with particular emphasis on fandom and adult development. While there is growing interest in issues of age and aging within fan studies and within media studies more broadly, there is a tendency in this literature to discuss aging and the life course atheoretically, ignoring a rich body of scholarship in gerontology, sociology, psychology and human development that examines how lives unfold over time. Our goal in this manuscript is to make *explicit* what is typically rendered *implicit* in fan studies by drawing directly on life course perspectives to enrich our understanding of long-term and later-life fandom, and to suggest ways that fan studies might more fully account for fandom over time. Given rapid processes of global aging currently under way, and thus rapidly changing demographics of media audiences worldwide, it is especially timely to bring together two bodies of literature that rarely inform one another: fan studies and life course scholarship.

In the section below we discuss life course and the media, followed by a section in which we elaborate on the conceptual gaps in fan studies' approach to issues of age and aging. In the third section we shed light on a variety of life course issues in fandom, demonstrating how explicit attention to issues of age, aging and human development can offer new insights into fans' identities, practices and interpretive capacities. We conclude with a discussion of the utility of life course perspectives to future fan scholarship.

Life course and the media

In the simplest terms, understanding the life course is about 'understanding lives through time' (Fry, 2003: 271). Life course scholars are interested in the social and historical changes that impact a particular generation at a particular point in time and come to 'govern the manner in which members of that generation make sense of a presently remembered past, experienced present, and anticipated future' (Cohler and Hostetler, 2003: 557). From this approach, based in the social sciences, the way our individual lives unfold is shaped by both internal psychological and external social processes.[2] Scholarship on the life course occurs in many parts of the academy and has resulted in multiple approaches rather than a single integrated theory. Various perspectives share a focus on issues of time and timing, intersections of social context and personal biography, interdependent or linked lives, and the importance of human agency (George, 2003: 672).

Most contemporary perspectives conceptualize the life course through general patterns of stability and transition, not evolutionary or hierarchical sequences or stages. Since life journeys do not always follow expectable paths – 'there is no career or script to follow at every turn' (Fry, 2003: 286) – the challenge for scholars is 'simultaneously [to] do justice to long-term

patterns of change and stability and to the heterogeneity of those patterns' (George, 2003: 675). Though unscripted, different life phases tend to be marked by unique developmental opportunities and our engagement with those opportunities helps shape our maturation from infancy through childhood, adolescence, adulthood and late(r) life. Moreover, each individual life course is guided by culturally and historically bound ideals of how lives 'should' unfold, offering normative pathways against which we assess and make meaning of our personal trajectories. These normative ideals are currently undergoing significant transition in the US, as will be discussed in the conclusion, but continue to offer a benchmark against which we understand our lived experiences.

Popular media are, of course, thoroughly implicated in life course processes and transitions, offering representations of normatively appropriate age-based identities and activities (and tantalizingly non-normative ones), producing so-called 'television', 'computer' and 'Facebook' generations, and thus redefining generational divides, radically altering expectations for how publicly lives can or should be lived, and transforming relatively non-mediated lives in earlier historical eras into thoroughly mediated ones today. Media texts and technologies help unite cohorts, define generations and cross-generational differences, and give structure and meaning to our lives as they unfold. For example, when J.K. Rowling published the seventh and final Harry Potter book in July 2007, critics mourned not just the end of the series but the end of a life stage:

> The sadness that many readers will experience … has nothing to do with the fate of the characters and everything to do with … the end of childhood. The readers who have grown up with this series – who have read it, as it were, in real time as it unfolds – are themselves at that end. Saying goodbye to Harry is like saying goodbye to a piece of themselves. (Jones, 2007)

Similarly, the 40th anniversary of the Woodstock concert in August 2009 presented an opportunity to revisit the intersections between generational and national identities (the so-called Woodstock Nation), the September 2009 cancellation of the US soap *Guiding Light* (CBS) after 72 years of storytelling on radio and television was seen by many as the end of an institution (as one journalist put it, it's 'like your old high school being demolished'),[3] and the high-profile celebrity deaths throughout the summer of 2009 (Michael Jackson, Farrah Fawcett, Ted Kennedy, Walter Cronkite, Patrick Swayze, Ed McMahon, etc.) caused baby boomers to:

> turn to the obituaries first, to face not merely their own mortality or ponder their legacies, but to witness the passing of legends who defined them as a tribe, bequeathing through music, culture, news and politics a kind of generational badge that has begun to fray. (Kershaw, 2009)

Over the past 30 years, fan scholars have engaged with a wide variety of life course *issues* but have rarely utilized life course *theories* to help ground

their analyses. Our already rich understanding of media fans' identities, practices and interpretive capacities can be enhanced, we argue, through a more explicit consideration of the various mechanisms and social processes that shape life course development.[4] The opening quotations from soap opera fans echo prior scholarship in suggesting fundamental changes in fan experiences over time – we aim to explore such changes from a life course/lifespan approach.

Fan studies and life course theory

We begin by clarifying what we are *not* arguing in this article. First, we are not implying that fan studies scholars have wholly ignored issues of *age* or *aging* in prior work. The centrality of fandom in (pre-) adolescent explorations of gender identity and romantic/sexual fantasy has been well documented (e.g. Ehrenreich et al., 1992; Frith, 1990; Kuhn, 2002; Williams, 1980), though as Matt Hills notes, the larger cultural equation of fandom with adolescence remains overly rigid:

> This commonsense notion of fandom as an 'all-consuming' stage in the life course that will later be abandoned, or only nostalgically revisited, finds its stereotypes in the 'hysterical' tweenage or teenage female fan of a pop band or male actor. (2005: 804)

While scholarly interest in teen fandom continues – see Melanie Lowe's recent (2004) study of Britney Spears fans, for example – there is a growing body of literature that focuses on fandom among older adults (Bennett, 2006; Stevenson, 2009; Vroomen, 2004) and on the impact of generational affiliation on the formation of interpretive communities (e.g. Brooker, 2002). In the context of television fandom, Christine Scodari explores the politics of age and aging through separate studies focusing on power dynamics among younger vs. older female fans online (1998), and gender, age and romantic fantasy in an analysis of a May–December romance on the now-defunct US soap *Another World* (CBS) (2004). Other media scholars examining older adults' fannish engagement with television in different industrial, historical and institutional contexts include John Tulloch (1989), Elizabeth Riggs (1998), and C. Lee Harrington and Denise Brothers (forthcoming).

Second, we do not mean to imply that prior scholars have ignored larger issues of *process* per se. For example, our own prior work (Harrington and Bielby, 1995) investigates how people enter into soap opera fandom and construct and maintain fan-based identities. Melissa Scardaville (2005) examines how fans enter into media-based activism and how the politics of fandom shape subsequent activist experiences. Hills (2005) considers the cyclical nature of fandom, where fan-consumers move from one fan object to another. Paul Booth (2008) analyzes MySpace profiles that fans create for media characters, arguing that media transformation engenders

fundamental changes in identity formation and thus requires change in the study of audiences (see also Grodin and Lindlof, 1996; Sandvoss, 2005a). Moreover, larger issues of process in fandom itself have been studied, including the historical trajectory of US soap fandom since the early 1900s (Ford, 2008), the emergence and maintenance of community in online fandom (Baym, 2000), the explosion in fan fiction online (Hellekson and Busse, 2006), and the mainstreaming of fandom in the late 20th and 21st centuries (Gray et al., 2007).

Third, we are not suggesting that scholars have ignored issues of *autobiography* in fan studies, particularly the crucial role of memory in shaping self-narratives. In her study of 1930s film-going, Annette Kuhn employs an ethno-historical approach grounded in psychological theories of memory and narrative construction to explore how 'personal and collective memory meet in stories of cinema and cinemagoing' (2002: 1). Through interviews with members of Britain's 'first movie-made generation', Kuhn explores how this generation managed the transition from childhood to adulthood through cinema-going, and how movie-based memories formed early in life are situated in self-narratives and sustained through current relationships. A decade later, Carol Williams (1980) explores memory and cinema-going in the US in the 1940s, focusing on her own childhood and adolescent experiences with movies as an agent of socialization into romance, sexuality and parenthood, and as a central element in her identity construction. Similarly, Bailey investigates Kiss fans' autobiographical narratives of their involvement with the band – their 'Kisstories' – as 'narratives of self-hood' sustained through 'the present reality of maintaining one's devotion to the band' (2005: 146). In the broader context of national identity, Cornel Sandvoss examines the decades-old *Eurovision Song Contest* as an 'object of retained childhood media consumption' (2008: 190), exploring how the televised contest offers long-term viewers an affective space of personal and collective belonging.

Finally, and relatedly, we are not arguing that fan studies have failed to engage with the role of the media in *self/identity construction* and *self-transformation* over time. This has been a central and powerful theme in fan studies over the past 20 years, from Daniel Cavicchi's (1998) richly nuanced account of how Bruce Springsteen's music transforms his fans, to Hills' (2005) theorization of fan identities as shaped differently by the entering *and* leaving of fandoms, to Sandvoss's (2005a) conceptualization of fandom as a form of narcissistic self-reflection, to Nick Stevenson's (2009) study of David Bowie's impact on fans' construction and negotiation of masculine identity. Analytically and experientially, these issues are of course inseparable – aging, time, process, memory, identity construction, and the formation and reformation of autobiographical narratives all implicate and inform one another – and there are any number of compelling theoretical frameworks through which to explore them in fan studies, including narrative and memory theory (Kuhn), Mead and the neo-Meadian tradition (Bailey), psychoanalysis (Hills),

social psychology (Sandvoss), William James and the psychology of religion (Cavicchi), and so on.

But what is missing from contemporary fan studies, we argue, is *explicit* consideration of life course perspectives that can help clarify and deepen our understanding of fans' sustained engagement with media objects over time and the transformations of fandom in later life. We find surprisingly little engagement with aging and/or life course theory in fan studies. For example, Cavicchi (1998) includes several paragraphs on developmental theory in his study of Springsteen fans but goes on to discuss life course processes in quite generalized terms. Hills (2002, 2007) and Sandvoss (2005a, 2008) are engaged in an ongoing debate about the meaning of adults' retained attachments to childhood transitional objects, but do not consider theories of adult development in their dialogue. Scodari (2004) describes life course approaches briefly in *Serial Monogamy* but does not fully utilize them in her analysis. Will Brooker (2002) offers a compelling analysis of the impact of generation on consumption and interpretation of the *Star Wars* text, but includes no scholarly literature on generational theory. Finally, Kuhn's (2002) examination of how cinema-based memories shape self-narratives over time includes minimal discussion of aging and later life per se. In an epilogue, which summarizes the major contributions of her study, Kuhn includes a section titled 'Aging' which reads in its entirety: 'The content and the discursive registers of the cinema memory-stories of the 1930s generation throw light on the cultural as well as the psychical processes involved in ageing' (2002: 237). While the life stage of adolescence has been explored theoretically by fan scholars, the overall aging process has been relatively neglected.

Our intent in this manuscript is not to criticize our colleagues for their choice of analytic frameworks but to highlight the utility of a life course perspective to fan studies. Given changing demographics of media audiences and the under-theorization of older adults throughout media/fan studies, we are particularly interested in exploring how life course theory might expand our understanding of adult and later-life fandom. In the next section we demonstrate the value of this approach through a synthesis that explicates life course issues in prior fan scholarship. In the concluding section we discuss implications of a life course perspective for future fan studies.

Life course issues in fandom

In this section we suggest that fan identities, practices and interpretive capacities have more age-related structure than has previously been addressed within fan studies. We discuss four age-based issues that have received varying attention from fan scholars – fandom and life milestones, changes

in the fan (self) over time, age norms within fandom, and changes in the fan object over time – and illustrate how a life course perspective sheds new light on these issues and raises a new set of research questions for future fan scholarship. Throughout the remainder of this manuscript we foreground scholarship on age and aging to illuminate new ways of thinking about fans and fandoms over time. Due to space restrictions this synthesis moves fairly quickly, but points to numerous ways that an explicit life course perspective can be beneficial to fan studies.

Fandom and life milestones

Life course scholars explore how lives unfold by examining the factors that disrupt or interrupt the stability of our journeys – in other words, the factors that cause our current path to shift direction. Scholars agree that stability in the life trajectory can be interrupted by *physiological changes* (e.g. puberty or menopause), age-graded *life transitions* (e.g. graduating from high school) or *turning points* 'in which a person has undergone a major transformation in views about the self, commitments to important relationships, or involvement in significant life roles' (Wetherington et al., 1997: 216). In terms of physiological changes, fan scholars have been most interested in the role of fandom in puberty – less in terms of bodily changes associated with puberty (e.g. development of secondary sex characteristics) than in adolescents' engagement with fan objects to help make meaning of their changing bodies, and to help explore their emergent sense of self and overall independence:

> For the 1930s generation, cinema provided a safe space for challenges to adult rules … for assertions of independence from parents, teachers and other authority figures [and for] adolescent explorations of love, romance and sex. (Kuhn, 2002: 62, 181)

> I saw *A New Hope* back when it was simply *Star Wars* in '77, and was hooked. I think it was the scene with Luke gazing at the setting suns that nailed me through the heart. As a young teenager, just beginning to explore the boundaries of my life and the possibilities ahead, I knew exactly what young Luke was thinking and feeling.… I have invested a great deal of emotional energy in the [*Star Wars*] saga and entrusted part of my 'inner child' to [it]. (35-year-old female fan quoted in Brooker, 2002: 85; ellipses in original)

Analytic focus in this body of fan scholarship is primarily on issues of identity – the intersections of fan identity, gender identity and sexual identity (orientation) – and secondarily on how specific adolescent fan practices enable identity acquisition and/or modification. Other physiological changes that might alter the trajectory of the life course – particularly those associated with aging and later life, such as changes in bone density and

cognitive functioning, decline in sexual arousal and response patterns, changes in physical appearance (waistlines, skin elasticity, hair texture/amount/color) and so on – are relatively unexplored in fan studies. There is emergent evidence that fan practices are altered over time due to bodily constraints. For example, in his study of punk fans, Andy Bennett observes older fans' relief at being 'honourably discharged from the excesses of the mosh pit' (2006: 228) due to their age and privileged status in the punk community. Explains one fan:

> It does get difficult now to go to gigs and stay at the front all the time, an' rock around all the time.... I can't do it no more. [My] body's sayin', 'it's time to slow down ... you've 'ad your fun'. (2006: 228)

Others describe changes in their physical expression of fandom over time, from the 'visual shock tactics' (2006: 226) of their youthful punk appearance (pink Mohawks, multiple piercings) to a more subtle punk aesthetic in later life that can translate more easily to employment and more formalized social settings. Music fans in several different studies say they 'paid their dues' in their youth and do not feel as accountable to the aesthetic, bodily, and/or performative aspects of fandom as they did in their youth (Bennett, 2006; Cavicchi, 1998).

If the impact of the aging *body* on fan identities and practices is relatively unexplored in fan studies, we know even less about the impact of the aging *mind*. Brooker offers a fascinating discussion of how age can shape *Star Wars*' fans' textual readings by positioning them 'in a specific interpretive community giving them a different perspective to fans of another generation' (2002: 223). While older fans make a clear distinction between the original *Star Wars* trilogy and its prequels due to the 16-year gap between the trilogy's conclusion and the prequels' launch (which was also a meaningful gap in their own lives), younger fans see both the original trilogy and the prequels as part of the same six-part story. Moreover, younger fans are more likely to have seen the six films 'in order' (beginning with the first prequel, ending with the last of the original trilogy), whereas older fans saw the original trilogy first followed by the prequels. Younger viewers thus saw/read/consumed a very different *Star Wars* text than did long-term fans – knowing much sooner, for example, that Darth Vader is Luke Skywalker's father (a vitally central story element in the overall narrative). Subsequent generations of fans can thus experience the 'same' cultural text in very different ways.

However, Brooker's discussion of the impact of age on membership in interpretive communities does not quite capture the aspect of the aging mind that most interests life course scholars – changes in cognitive capacity. Research on media engagement and cognitive functioning in older adults is situated outside of media/fan studies and reveals a lingering assumption that media consumption is a passive experience. For example, Heather A. Lindstrom and her colleagues (2005)[5] found that TV viewing is associated with a greater likelihood of developing Alzheimer's disease. Using a life-history

approach to question adults (40-59 years old) in mid-life (2005) about a range of leisure activities, the authors conclude that: 'Time spent on television viewing may reflect a desire to avoid more stimulating activities and may be indicative of a mentally inactive lifestyle' (2005: 163). The authors divided the activities into four categories – television viewing, social activities, intellectual activities and physical activities – thus seemingly obviating the possibility that TV watching can be intellectually stimulating or social. In a more genre-specific approach, Joshua Fogel and Michelle Carlson[6] focus on talk shows and soap operas in their research on adults aged 70 to 79 years old, finding that both genres 'were at least four times as likely to be associated with clinical impairment for … various cognitive outcomes' related to attention and memory (2006: 229). While the authors note that it is unclear whether watching these genres 'is a *risk factor* or a *marker* of possible cognitive impairment' (2006: 231, emphasis added), they conclude with a policy recommendation: clinicians should ask questions about favorite TV shows when conducting screenings for cognitive impairment or dementia in older adults, and 'For those patients who respond with a choice of either talk shows or soap operas, more attention by the clinician should be placed on cognitive screening at that clinical interview and also during future clinical interviews' (2006: 232). In contrast, and offering more encouraging news from a media studies perspective, Paolo Ghisletta and his colleagues (Ghisletta et al., 2006)[7] examine 16 different activities in relation to performance in two cognitive abilities among adults aged 80 to 85, concluding that higher engagement in media and leisure activities tends to slow down cognitive decline; indeed, engagement with these activities was more cognitively challenging to older adults than were religious, social, manual or physical activities.[8] While it is difficult to assess the applicability of these specific research findings to fan studies, it is clear that age-related changes in cognitive functioning do occur, that they may alter fans' engagement with media texts and thus they may transform fandom over time. Suffice it to say, this area of research is wide open in fan studies.

In addition to physiological changes, the other types of interruptions to life-course stability noted by life course scholars (age-graded life transitions and major life turning points) impact fandom as well. For example, age-graded life transitions significantly alter fan identities and practices – reaching the legal age to drive opens up new possibilities for attending formal fan events, transitions from school to work and from non-parent to parent constrain the time one has to devote to fandom (Vroomen, 2004) and retirement from paid labor allows for new time investments in personal interests (Riggs, 1998). Additionally, fandom itself (that is, entering or 'finding' fandom) is typically experienced as a major turning point that profoundly re-shapes one's identity, daily activities, and life trajectory. Indeed, becoming-a-fan narratives are central to fan studies – fans' stories of encountering media texts that resonate with them in such deeply personal ways that a fundamental transformation of the self occurs: 'becoming a fan is, for most fans, a milestone in their lives in which

"everything changed"; they tend to think of themselves in terms of being a fan and not being a fan' (Cavicchi, 1998: 153). Long-term fandom also provides structure to life narratives, as fans employ specific cultural texts to segment or divide their lives into different periods:

> many fans to whom I spoke … were able to go through all of Springsteen's albums and, as if they were looking at a photo album, discuss where they were and what they were doing at the time such albums came out. Others just as readily listed all the Springsteen concerts they had been to over the years and talked about the circumstances of their lives around each one. (Cavicchi, 1998: 154, emphasis removed)

Becoming a fan thus re-directs the life course, gives new meaning, structure and purpose to specific life stages, and marks periods of one's personal past – hallmarks of a major turning point according to life course scholars.

We have discussed above how a life course perspective on how lives unfold over time can help illuminate findings in prior fan studies. Below we explore how fandom is shaped over time by modifications in the self and how research findings in this area of fan studies may also be enriched through consideration of a life course perspective. Again, we foreground the discussion with life course scholarship.

The aging self

Life course scholars agree that while there are continuities in the self (personality coherence) from infancy to adulthood (Caspi, 2000), the self changes in reasonably predictable ways due to life course disruptions and to the concomitant developmental challenges/opportunities associated with each life phase. In Kay Deaux's (1991) formulation, long-term identity changes can transpire in the *characteristics* associated with an identity, a shift in the *salience hierarchy* of an identity, or the outright *gain* or *loss* of an identity. In the context of fandom, scholars have documented changes in the characteristics associated with fan identity over time – for example, from the shameful impact of the loser/lunatic stereotype in existence through much of 20th-century fandom (Harrington and Bielby, 1995; Jenkins, 1992; Jensen, 1992) to the contemporary mainstreaming of fandom as a widespread affective stance on modern life. One might describe this as a general historical shift from fandom treated as a 'bad' characteristic to fandom treated as a 'good' characteristic (see Gray et al., 2007). Fan identity can also shift place in one's salience hierarchy due to the emergence of competing priorities and identities (as parent, grandparent, employee), shifting patterns of interest/lack of interest in the fan object (Cavicchi, 1998; Hills, 2005), and the relative influence of age norms. As noted above and as discussed in the following section, the fan identity is always acquired (one is not born a fan) and fan studies is replete with becoming-a-fan narratives. At the same time, one's fan identity is elective and thus can be abandoned at any point – and as particular fan objects are

acquired and then discarded, the nature of one's fan identity shifts (see Hills, 2005, for a discussion of cyclical fandom).

The self also changes due to general processes of human development. While many developmental theories only address childhood and/or adolescence, adulthood and late(r) life are also strategic sites for self-examination and the very process of getting old 'poses challenges, and perhaps threats, to the self' (George, 1998: 139). One of the most well-known models of psychosocial development over the life course is that proposed by Erik Erikson in the 1950s (Erikson, 1959).[9] Erikson believed there are eight phases of life, beginning at birth and ending at death, through which a healthy human matures. At each phase, people experience a distinct conflict or challenge that represents a turning point for development – an opportunity for personal growth or failure. Of particular interest to us here are the three phases of adulthood – young adulthood (approximately 18 to 35), middle adulthood (35 to 65), and older adulthood (65 and older) – and the relevance to fandom of the challenge presented in each phase. Erikson posited that the challenge of young adulthood is to forge intimate bonds or risk isolation (intimacy vs. isolation); the challenge of mid-adulthood is to contribute to the betterment of the world through transmission of core values or culture, or to risk stagnation (generativity vs. stagnation); and the challenge of late life is to come to terms with life's accomplishments and thus achieve wisdom, or die with bitterness and regret (integrity vs. despair).

While we have hesitations about subscribing to a sequential model, we believe the challenges Erikson identifies are potentially useful to fan scholars. The intimacy vs. isolation challenge of early adulthood is implicit in numerous fan studies that examine the emotional authenticity and/or social ('real life') implications of adult fans' attachments to media objects. See the large literature on parasociality in media psychology, for example, or early historical analyses of fandom that assumed fan attachments merely compensated for loneliness or social isolation. Here, the adult fan would 'fail' the developmental challenge because emotional intimacy with cultural objects was long perceived by scholars as 'fake'. In contrast, evidence of successful negotiation of the developmental challenge of mid-adulthood (generativity vs. stagnation) is evidenced in the various mentoring practices of aging fans. For example, Brooker (2002) notes that adult fan apprenticeship is central to introducing younger persons to the *Star Wars* saga, Harrington and Bielby (1995) articulate the grandparent-to-parent-to-grandchild viewing model traditional in soap fandom, and Bennett describes how older punk fans adopt the role of 'informed educators' of younger fans, sharing personal history of classic punk performances and positioning themselves 'as playing an important part in preserving the punk aesthetic and passing this on to the next generation' (2006: 229). Finally, evidence of the developmental conflict associated with late life (integrity vs. despair) can be seen in the contemplative dimension of older adults' positioning of fandom in their life course:

> … when older punks discussed their continuing attachment and loyalty to the scene, it was clear that they were viewing this attachment *through a specifically altered lens* which facilitated their being among a crowd of people who were in most cases 15 to 20 years their junior, and in some cases more junior still. (Bennett, 2006: 228, emphasis added)

> Springsteen fans [use] both their abstract knowledge of the progress of Springsteen's music over time and their concrete memories of listening to the music to *think about and cohere* who they are and who they have been. (Cavicchi, 1998: 152, emphasis added)

> I was seven when *Star Wars* came out, and so grew up with the trilogy, and it probably saved my life. As a teen, my mother died young and unexpectedly of cancer, and my stepfather was abusive, and being an only child, *Star Wars* was my distraction, my escape, my addiction and my dreams, all wrapped up into one. As an adult, I have continued to be a fan, and it holds both the same appeal for me that it did when I was young, and an *added meaning for all that it represents of the life I escaped* when I immersed myself in that universe. (quoted in Brooker, 2002: 11, emphasis added)

Here, fans' reflection of their fandom across time – and their own aging selves within fandom – results in a gradual re-positioning of their place in various fan communities.

In the above discussion we adopted a life course perspective in considering how long-term changes in identity transpire and how those changes might impact fan identity. Below, we explore the age appropriateness of fandom in later life and age-based role modeling within fan communities, suggesting ways that life course scholarship on age norms can enrich our understandings of older fans' identities and practices.

Changing age norms

As has been well documented by life course scholars, age norms – the benchmark against which we evaluate ourselves and are evaluated by others to be age appropriate or age inappropriate – change over time. Age norms change for us as individuals (what is age appropriate for me at 15 is different than for me at 45), they change historically (what is considered age appropriate for a 15-year-old today is different than for a 15-year-old in 1920 or 1950 or 1990), and their overall impact changes over time (our adherence to age norms is more powerful in some life phases than in others). Within fan studies, age norms faced by individuals have received the most attention, with adult popular music fans perhaps subject to the greatest accountability by both scholars and non-scholars. Until recently, scholars ridiculed older adults' participation in music fandom as age inappropriate at best and 'arrested development' at worst (Calcutt, 1998: 6). As Laura Vroomen explains:

> Involvement in music-based subcultures and scenes has often been characterized as an attempt to delay adult responsibilities, as a way of resisting 'social ageing' … there is a [scholarly] assumption that intense popular-music investments cannot be carried over into adult life. (2004: 243)

This 'pathological' scholarly discourse (to use Bennett's [2006] term) is echoed by adult music fans' everyday experiences of being held accountable for their tastes. Steve Bailey (2005) interviewed fans of the rock band Kiss, many of whom became fans at a very young age (between 5 and 11 years old) in the 1970s, and who describe struggling with their adult fan identity in light of a musical culture that has long reviled Kiss, as well as 'a wider culture that tends to hold music beloved by children in extremely low regard' (2005: 109–10). As such, 'the world of Kiss fans is marked by a particularly intense set of "self-esteem" discourses' (Bailey 2005: 105). Similarly, most older Kate Bush fans are hesitant to express their fandom in public due to concerns about age norms: 'many of the fans who were in their thirties and forties … felt a certain ambivalence about their popular music investments and questioned what is "right and proper" to listen to at a particular age' (Vroomen, 2004: 242). One 40-ish fan explains her eclectic appreciation of both Kate Bush and the Spice Girls as follows:

> I find myself in regular arguments with people (only adults) about the talents of the Spice Girls and the appropriateness of someone my age liking them. I accuse them of being dull and trapped in the adult mentality of sticking with what's safe and known to be OK within the social circle. I think liking the Spice Girls is probably extreme in terms of age difference. (quoted in Vroomen, 2004: 242)

Our own prior work on soap opera fans (Harrington and Bielby, 1995) echoes these findings. In our study, many adult soap viewers were adamant about keeping their fandom concealed from co-workers, neighbors and even family members, due both to age considerations (what is acceptable for adults) and to the genre in question (the low social value of soaps). So while the last two decades have witnessed the general mainstreaming of fandom, as noted earlier, there continue to be disparities in how fans experience and express their fandom in public – and those disparities are shaped in part by age norms.

Age norms are also relevant within adult fandom in terms of the *role modeling* for later life provided by aging actors, singers, musicians and fictional characters. Writing about long-term David Bowie fans, Nick Stevenson explains that:

> Bowie has encoded the possibility of reinventing yourself and handling change over a long career. Bowie for the fans is representative of change and the passing of time.… Bowie is valued precisely because he can positively respond to change, and has done so in a way that is seen to be 'appropriate'

> for a man at his stage of life. He offers a model for how to grow old without shutting out new ideas and influences.… Bowie is valued as someone who could help you respond to change in your own life. (2009: 86)

Interestingly, as long-term fans make sense of aging through the model provided by aging celebrities, those celebrities must negotiate their own aging process in tandem with their construction or embodiment of an aging cultural text (Harrington and Brothers, 2010). For example, actress Kassie DePaiva claims that her years playing Blair on the US soap *One Life to Live* (ABC) have accelerated her own physical aging:

> Blair wears me out! I'm not joking.… No wonder where these wrinkles came from. It's not my life. It's from putting on her shoes every day because she's sad. There's something really broken in her. (Sloane, 2007: 39)

As such, media performances that might provide one kind of age-based role modeling for fans might generate very different age-based outcomes for performers, both positive and negative.

In the above discussion we employed the life course concept of age norms as a way to bring together a number of disparate findings within prior fan studies. In particular, our discussion points to the importance of attention to changes in age norms for understanding the suitability or relevance of fandom in individuals' lives. While age norms clearly operate within fandom, it is less clear how they fluctuate over time and in the context of the changing cultural status of fandom writ broadly, as well as fairly radical changes in the structure of the life course (see Conclusion). Below we explore how a life course approach might shed light on the impact of changing *texts* on fandom – just as fans change over time, so do the cultural texts that engage them.

Changing fan objects

We are interested here in how a life course perspective might aid our understanding of how *fan objects* themselves change over time, many undergoing 'profound transformations during their lifetime' (Sandvoss, 2005a: 110). From the first Harry Potter novel to the last, from one James Bond movie to the next, from the many incarnations of Batman and Superman, and across the 72-year run of the US serial *Guiding Light*, fan texts age as fans do – unpredictably. Our own ongoing fascination with US soap operas is based in part on the diachronic relationship between soap narratives and viewers, such that there is a long history of soap storytelling intimately intertwined with a viewer's history of reading soaps: 'Soap opera narratives are built around "historical" characters, in the sense that those characters themselves have both personal histories and memories of a social past – both of which are shared with and relied upon by viewers' (Allen, 2004). In many ways, soap fans' experiences are comparable to those of music fans,

movie franchise fans, serialized novel fans, celebrity/star fans, and others faithful to a singular fan object over a long period of time. They may be different, however, in that the delivery of the US soap opera narrative (five days per week, 52 weeks per year, 130 to 260 hours of original programming per year, no broadcast network repeats, and airing for decades) results in the histories and memories of soap characters, communities and viewers unfolding in a comparable (daily) temporal framework. As such, soap viewers may be at the far end of a continuum in terms of the complexity of adult development and long-term fandom.

It is a complicated task, however, to assess the interactions between self-unfolding-across-time and fan-object-unfolding-across-time – and we emphasize that even when fan objects do *not* seem to develop over time the way that soap operas do (such as original song lyrics or movie dialogue, or the outcome of sporting events), their meaning is always different because the *fan* has changed. Both Williams (1980) and Kuhn (2002) examine movie fans' memories of favorite films in later life, finding that fans' selective memory of scenes and characters reflects who they were at earlier life stages. Similarly, the *General Hospital* fan quoted at the opening of this article says that as she has changed over time, so has her understanding of specific characters. Cavicchi explains the changing meanings of specific Springsteen songs across fans' personal life trajectories as follows:

> Fans are consciously engaged with the ways in which Springsteen's music works to shape their experiences and perceptions.… [Fans'] study of Springsteen's music and the ways in which they use the music to make sense of the world around them both fit together to form a complex kind of listening: while fans interpret Springsteen's music in terms of their experiences, the music works to influence and shape their experiences.… [L]istening involves creating associations between the music and experience; in fandom, the two become so entangled that it is difficult to locate the music's meaning without talking about fans' personal lives. (1998: 109, 110, 134–5)

Sandvoss (2005a), drawing on work by Cavicchi and other fan scholars (including Sandvoss's own prior [2003] work on football fans), offers a compelling argument for the social psychological basis of fandom, suggesting that fan objects come to form 'part of the self, and hence function as its extension' (2005a: 100) rather than being a mere possession. Fans' narcissistic relationships with cultural objects, in which fans 'superimpose attributes of the self, their beliefs and value systems, and, ultimately, their sense of self on the object of fandom' (2005a: 104), become gradually more complicated as the relationship between self and fan text develops. Over time, then, 'the object of fandom … becomes a narrative focal point in the construction of life narratives and identities' (2005a: 111). To make a comparable analysis to that of Harrington and Brothers (2010) in their study of long-term soap opera actors and the aging process, we might say

that long term fans' *existence* is gradually transformed into *texistence* – the self unfolds over time in ongoing dialogue with the media object that helps define and sustain it.[10] As one long-term music fan succinctly put it, '[Now] I think in Springsteen' (Cavicchi, 1998: 109). Our observations here point to a rich potential research trajectory for fan scholars focusing on, for example, how texts age from a life course perspective (life course analysis of a media text) and how life course approaches might illuminate the duality of self-aging and text-aging.

In this section of the article we have synthesized a variety of age-related issues discussed in prior fan studies – fandom and life milestones, age norms, changes in the self over time, and changes in fan object over time – suggesting that a life course approach can deepen our understanding of the impact of aging on fandom by offering a more systematic view of the disparate findings on continuity and change in fans, in texts, and in the intersection of the two. We emphasize that each of these issues warrants more in-depth research by fan scholars who explicitly engage with life course theory.

Conclusion

Our goal in this article has been to explicate the value of a life course perspective for fan studies. Through a synthesis of life course issues in prior fan studies with particular focus on the age-related structure implicit in fan identities, practices and interpretive capacities, we have aimed to make explicit the rich developmental issues raised by long-term fandom. Our focus has been on adult and late(r) life fandom, since adult fans remain under-theorized and under-studied by media scholars. As we have suggested in our analysis, a key element of the 'storying' of media fans' lives is the integration and revisiting/revising of media texts with our own self-constructions over time (Sandvoss, 2005b) such that those texts inform our aging process – both *who* we (continue to) become as we grow older and indeed *how* it is that we grow older. Media fans' life narratives might thus be said to comprise complex interactions between our 'real' life (our biography), our autobiography (our storying of our life), and the media texts which help construct, give meaning to and guide the relationship between the two – and that age along with us.

The interplay between these elements may be experienced differently by long-term fans of a singular fan object than by cyclical fans (Hills, 2005), and differently based on genre of fan object. Kuhn (2002) was surprised in her interviews with elder cinema-goers that people were unable to recall basic information about much-loved movie characters or plots, but could remember vividly certain aspects of place: where the theater was located, what concessions were sold and how much they cost, where they liked to sit and so on. In contrast, some music fans report such deep

engagement with song lyrics that those lyrics serve as instructional guides for their own approach to life: 'fans talked about using Springsteen songs to come to conclusions about the potential circumstances of their lives, to map out where their current life course might take them and whether they wanted to go there' (Cavicchi, 1998: 129). One of the most compelling themes that runs through research on long-term fans is the extent to which fan objects serve as touchstones or 'lifelines' as fans age. Consider the quotation that opened this article from the male soap fan who reports that the fictional setting of CBS's *The Young and the Restless* has been the 'most stable home' of his adult life (see also Sandvoss, 2008; Schimmel et al., 2007). Or the fan who says her favorite Springsteen song 'gives meaning to my life.... It gives me hope when all of my hope is gone' (Cavicchi, 1998: 128). Or the *Eurovision Song Contest* fan who has been watching the show for 'as long as [she] can remember' and 'can't imagine [her] life without it!' (Sandvoss, 2008: 192). Or the Bowie fans whose connection to the singer 'acted as a relatively permanent anchor' through their life journeys (Stevenson, 2009: 85). From a life-course perspective, this emotional anchoring is crucial in an era characterized by the rapid dismantling of normative adult life, as has been observed by human development scholars. Rick Settersten (2007), for example, documents in particular the dissolution of traditional timetables for life transitions, the increasing lack of synchrony among age-related roles, and the growing absence of clear life scripts:

> In the matter of just a few decades ... the straight and narrow road into and through adulthood has all but disappeared. Roles, responsibilities, and expectations have been shattered, leaving a brand new world to navigate.... The social scripts that once signaled a single right time and order for all of life's transitions have dissipated.... The whole life course has undergone some dramatic changes. (2007: 250)

We suggest that as normative adult life destabilizes, cultural objects are increasingly providing a reference point for navigating the trajectory through adulthood and later life, and that fan studies scholars should be more attuned to the intersection between the two. The mainstreaming of fandom in the late 20th/early 21st centuries, as articulated by Gray et al. (2007), is thus in part a *result* of this radical restructuring of normative adulthood. Just as the 'ambiguity of adult life today brings brand new freedom and flexibility to live life in greater accordance with one's interests and wishes than in the past' (Settersten, 2007: 244), so have 'the particular and conspicuous patterns of fan consumption and the specific forms of social interaction that take place between fans ... become an ever more integral part of everyday life in modern societies' (Gray et al., 2007: 9). We agree with Gray and his colleagues that challenges of life in the 21st century are increasingly mediated through fannish relations, and suggest that rapid global aging partly *accounts for* and *contributes to* this transformation.

A number of intriguing new research questions emerge when we take a life-course perspective on fandom. Fan scholars might study the impact of changes in cognitive capacities on fandom over time, a comparative study of age norms in different fan communities, a longitudinal study of the impact of age-graded life transitions on fan identities and practices, a life-course analysis of a specific cultural text, or the ways in which different cultural forms shape the kind of long-term interaction between fans and cultural objects. Our analysis might also prove useful to scholars of human development who have only recently begun exploring the impact of *fictional* narratives on relationship networks over time (Harrington and Brothers, 2010). We have argued elsewhere (Schimmel et al., 2007) that fan studies would benefit from greater engagement with scholarship produced in other areas of the academy, and certainly current literature in gerontology, human development, and the sociology and psychology of aging is crucial to our full understanding of adult and later life fandom. Dramatic social trends unfolding relationally – the aging of the global population and global media audiences, the dissolution of normative adulthood, and the profound changes in the public recognition and evaluation of fandom over the past 20 years – render a life-course perspective on fandom both timely and important.

Notes

1 These quotes were collected as part of a separate project on long-term soap opera actors and viewers. For project details see Harrington and Brothers (2010, forthcoming).
2 Psychologists tend to use a terminology of 'lifespan' whereas sociologists refer to the 'life course'. Lifespan refers to the entire span of an individual's life (e.g. human development models). Life course refers to the age-structured sequence of roles, opportunities and experiences that an individual moves in and out of, and that are influenced by macro-structural forces as well as human agency. Both psychologists and sociologists are interested in understanding the processes through which lives transform over time.
3 From the *Wall Street Journal* online: 'A Veteran TV Soap Opera Executive on Why "Guiding Light" Burned Out after 72 Years', WSJ Staff, 14 August 2008, URL (consulted August 2008): http://www.blogs.wsj.com, no author.
4 While absent in fan studies proper, developmental perspectives have been utilized elsewhere in media studies. For example, see Young's (2000) analysis of the importance of film in everyday life.
5 This research team is located in the areas of neurology, memory and aging, neurogeriatrics, nutrition, epidemiology, and biostatistics.
6 The authors are located in the fields of economics and mental health.
7 The authors work in the fields of sociology, psychology, social medicine and econometrics.

8 However, we find it interesting that the broad category of 'social' includes cinema, theater and music, which implies that these are fundamentally different types of activities (i.e. *not* media activities) and that television is by definition non-social.
9 Erikson's theory is not uncontroversial, in part because it posits a sequential, hierarchical model of human maturation with successful negotiation of each stage calling on skills acquired in prior stages.
10 The term 'texistence' is borrowed from Randall and McKim (2004) with slightly altered meaning (Harrington and Brothers, 2010).

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