

“A GREAT TIME TO BE A NERD”: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF POP
CULTURE ENTHUSIASTS AND FANDOM

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the significance of pop culture and fandom in the lives of local pop culture enthusiasts. Existing fandom studies focus on sports, religion, or politics whereas most media-based pop culture research involves niche fandoms. This study is important because it broadens the scope of the latter, aids to the dissolution of associated stereotypes, and contributes to a third-wave movement of pop culture fandom research. Eight individuals were selected to participate in this study using purposive sampling. In-depth, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted. By employing Colaizzi's seven-step method of phenomenological data analysis, subthemes were identified and then categorized in terms of similarity. From there, three dominant themes emerged: nostalgia, connection to media, and social belonging/self-identity. These three themes allow for better understanding as to why pop culture is integral to an individual's life.

Keywords: pop culture, fandom, nostalgia, social belonging, relatability

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“Growing old is mandatory. Growing up is optional.” –Walt Disney

Life ticks on. Years dissolve into distant, dusty blurs the shelf called memory. Despite the increasing contents on that shelf as our bodies wrinkle and minds ageing, a nostalgic spot persists within still exists for the things that helped uniquely shape each of us. These *things* emerged from media, planted in our youth and cultivated through movies, television shows, video games, and comic books as we grew. During the inevitable transition from childhood to adulthood, we are expected to trade Saturday morning cartoons, Lucky Charms, and a Batman lunchbox for the six o’ clock news, an everything bagel with cream cheese, and a briefcase. Yet, veins of our past are becoming increasingly evident in the present in the form of pop culture. This love for pop culture, this universal fandom, does not appear to carry a generational expiration date.

The concept of fandom has itself evolved from a deep fondness of an object to an integral “identity resource” - a means not only of connecting with a specific community or culture, but also of discovering oneself; finding individuality through collective values, ideas, and the like (Gray, Harrington, & Sandvoss, 2017, p. 11). Pop culture fanaticism is of no exception, yet the question remains as to why this connection persists, despite years, sometimes decades passing. Once-prominent fictional characters and worlds, some half a century old, have found resurgence, or in some cases a full-fledged revival, in the

forms of clothing, figurines, collectibles, and more. Celebrating one's childhood media has become an ever-increasing sensation, a phenomenon particular to a culture who appear to consistently appreciate, confidently portray, and courageously remain active in their fondness for this integral component of personal history (Jenkins, 2013). This connection and desire for self-identification within pop culture fandom, however, demands further exploration, and more importantly, explanation.

Purpose of the Study

Limited studies exist to explain the *why* pertaining to a fanatic's love for pop culture on a broad level. In the past, political and sports fans and their respective passions have garnered research-based attention (see Dwyer, Greenhalgh, & LeCrom, 2016; Dixon, 2011:). Other studies have pursued fandom as a whole (regardless of genre; hierarchies within each community, interpersonal communication, collective passion, and so forth), or analyzed an individual's adoration for their adopted passion. However, the former, broader perspective overlooks the individual whereas the latter is typically targets sports, politics, or other niche groups (Gray et al., 2017). For example, prior research has explored specific fandoms such as Bronys (males who are fans of *My Little Pony*), Belibers (fans of musical artist Justin Bieber), and Juggalos and Juggalettes (fans of the rap-duo Insane Clown Posse) (Robertson, 2013: Sherbine, 2013: Compitello, Lindquist, & Prezemieniecki, 2019). Although these studies as well as others like them have incorporated individual testimonies as to why fans act the way they do towards their respective, specified objects, the issue is specificity. In stepping back from such narrow markets and exploring fandom as a whole, visible gaps in understanding necessitate research. Furthermore, while elements of the aforementioned niche studies and others

could prove beneficial to a wide understanding, they remain grounded and constricted, tailored for an acutely specific audience. This study desires to transcend the small scope and widen the range, incorporating all fans of media-related pop culture, regardless of their specific objects of fandom. Moreover, in doing so, this investigation will contribute to the most current step of a successive fandom-based research movement.

According to Gray et al. (2017), fandom studies have undergone two waves, that of a defense for fandom/ fanatics (first wave) followed by an examination of hierarchies and social structure within groups (second wave). Recently emerged is a new wave, which focuses on the individual and their object(s) of fanaticism, a fitting crested white cap upon which this study will ride.

Since the emergence of this third wave around the early to mid-1990s, pop culture fandom and the representation of media both past and present has grown significantly (Jenkins, 2013). Walk into a local Walmart, stroll across the local college campus, thumb through the Facebook feed, or spend a week listening to work place conversations: Pop culture fandom exists everywhere. Perhaps more importantly, it persists in various forms, emblazoned on clothing, hanging on walls, plastered on digital screens, or as an in-office discussion topic stemming from last week's cliffhanger episode. Regardless of where or how this fandom thrives, this investigation attempts to explain *why*:

RQ: What do pop culture enthusiasts say about the meaning of pop culture in their lives?

Preview of Chapters

Chapter 2 discusses narrative form and the power within an individuals' personal story. Furthermore, the concept of intimacy and informality is also presented; expression

of one's deep interest, devout appreciation, and emotional attachment to certain pop culture objects is explored and integrated through narrative.

Chapter 3 describes the term *pop culture* as it relates to this study and examine previous methods of study applied to the term. From there, the connection between pop culture and media is investigated, beginning with a brief history, and continuing to the current state of the link, and progressing to uncover how past and present influence each other. Additional terms associated with pop culture and pop culture fandom is also conceptualized. Furthermore, Chapter 3 discusses prior fandom studies and the contributions of noted scholar Henry Jenkins, most importantly in regard to his Participatory and Fandom Theory.

Chapter 4 explains the need for purposeful sampling, the interview procedure, and data collection. This chapter also contains extensive analysis of participant interviews and the weaving of their narratives to form a collective yet diversified account to answer the research question.

Chapter 5 summarizes the study, provide conclusions, and discuss related theoretical issues. Any implications, limitations, and areas of possible future research are addressed

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

On the surface, this study appears to resemble an aging man's look into the past, filled with fondness for video games, toys, movies, cartoons, and sugar-coated cereal. Undeniably so; however, pop culture has become ubiquitous, a now seemingly ageless concept which has been cultivated and now thrives thanks to modern communication mediums and emerging marketing strategies. While American pop culture tends to reign supreme in terms of international brand and icon recognition, other countries are not without manufacturing their own highly recognizable and influential trademarks (Chun, 2012). Furthermore, as the Internet continues to digitally link together more and more communities, cities, and countries, exposure to pop culture has grown tremendously by transcending physical, metaphorical, and cultural boundaries (Pearson, 2010). The World Wide Web has arguably become a vehicle which has (and continues to) increase "new forms of cultural production" (Pearson, 2010, p. 84). Distance, be it miles or minutes, no longer poses a challenge. With the click of a computer mouse or touch of a button, near-instantaneousness communicating and viewing is possible. Sharing is *now*. Television shows originally broadcasted 50 or more years ago can be streamed today, digitally remastered in flawless quality, no less. Pop culture of yesteryear mingles with pop culture of today, transmitted in all directions across invisible channels, yet the love for every era and genre of pop culture; tangible, even. Ironed onto clothes, hung on walls, overflowing

across Reddit threads, or filling up entire convention center halls full of fans - pop culture fandom exists. Celebrating and appreciating pop culture has, ironically, become increasingly popular at time passes.

This chapter discusses pop culture and fandom respectively, breaking apart the two into several sections as to fully explain both terms, the studies involved with each, and the connection they share. Furthermore, pop culture and media entertainment are connected to further explain this study. Lastly, scholar Henry Jenkins and his Participatory Culture and Fandom Theory (2013) is described and applied as the theoretical framework to understand the meaning of pop culture within a fan's life.

Pop Culture: What's Hot and What's Not

Popular culture, or pop culture as it is commonly called, encompasses a wide range of ideas, objects, and subjects. Ranging from bell bottom jeans to Catholic wedding traditions to Pedro Alvares Cabral introducing Europe to Indian spices, pop culture is a huge blanket term (Wertz, 2010). Pop culture could be further defined as what is currently popular or "trending" among a certain culture, or rather the dominant aspects of social life in which the general public is actively involved (Brummett, 2011). Current fashion trends, vernacular, star athletes, Oscar-winning actors, a new flavor of Dr. Pepper, political agendas, musical styles, eulogies, and so on could all be considered aspects of pop culture, be it a fleeting phenomenon or timeless ritual. If given a resurgence or revival, even once trendy pop culture ideas or objects could find temporary or permanent popularity in current times. For example, Crystal Pepsi was first introduced in 1992 and discontinued in 1994 yet was reintroduced in 2016 for a limited run. Another example is synthwave, a genre of music representative of and in homage to late

1970s/1980s future-set dystopian movie scores/soundtracks. Although the idea, object, or subject in question must be popular to be considered “pop culture”, trending remains a purely subjective element of its supporting culture.

For this study, this term’s extremely broad definition will be narrowed to accommodate a more simplistic, albeit commonplace meaning: media entertainment, or rather the characters, settings, ideas, actors, etc. involved in such. Movies, television shows, video games, and the like (further described later) will be included whereas sports and politics will be excluded as those two powerhouse paradigms do not fit the context of this study.

Pop Culture: Prior Research and Application

Pop culture has been subjugated by a variety of perspectives, such as pedagogy, social setting stimulants, institutional and instructional implementation, feminism, gender roles, and deconstructionism. Given the broad definition of the term, limited yet available research seems implausible. Narrowing the scope to fit the aforementioned definition, the research still seems vast. Given that the study aims to understand why pop culture is integral to an individual’s life, and therefore relies on qualitative means to answer the research question, responses have the potential to vary, quite possibly through the lens of certain individual perspectives (e.g. feminism, gender roles, addiction). Overlap and/or the mixing of these differing viewpoints may prove beneficial to the context of this research.

Antiquity and human nature. Pop culture and an individual’s personal attachment to it may appear as a 21st Century phenomenon, with roots breaching the soil of the last decade of the 20th as well. More and more retailers have shoveled out media-

based pop culture licensed merchandise. The Internet formed an avenue for online shopping and creation of fan sites devoted to crafting unique apparel and other pop culture emblazoned goodies to anyone with web access and a credit card. Comic-Con International (more commonly referred to as San Diego Comic-Con or SDCC), a massive multi-genre and comic book convention held annually in San Diego, will celebrate its 50th anniversary in the summer of 2020. During its half-century reign, SDCC has become a grandparent to other cons worldwide, with new offspring finding foundation in not only booming metropolises, but smaller cities and suburbs as well (Salkowitz, 2012). This steadily and immensely increasing presence is not a new phenomenon, nor are our “uses or abuses of the pop past,” be they in the name of reverence or otherwise (Reynolds, 2011, xiii). Recirculating past trends is part of human nature.

Examples are found among the Romans who borrowed heavily from the Greeks, adopting their architectural style and pantheon (with alterations of course), while the Renaissance antiquated both eras’ classicism (Reynolds, 2011). Today’s family dinner theatre Medieval Times draws upon this eponymous period to delight, entertain, and to an extent, educate. History repeats itself; the placement of past into the present, be it architecture, fashion, or tradition is human nature, ingrained into our evolutionary pathways (Fisher & Salmon, 2012). Once popularized items and ideas of one culture find prominence again within another. Respect, adoration, curiosity, safety, familiarity, tradition, fear generated through adaptation, and past experiences/remedies which could be applicable to current issues - all these notions lend to this adoption, this reapplication, and nurturing of the past to our present day “biological realities” (2012, Saad, p.109). Popular culture, in its entirety, is a characteristic of human nature and the evolution

thereof. Popularized ideas, objects, paradigms, and so on have long been part of human history. Interest, love, obsession, adoration – whatever the descriptor, are all-natural phenomenon, capable of culturing a collective intrigue among the populous, be it one general or niche; collective interest, on any scale, simply happens (Jenkins, 2013).

Pop culture “-ization”: American, Japan, and global. Popular culture appears to be an almost timeless concept. The term’s actual coined date, or rather its introduction into mainstream society vernacular, remains a topic of debate. General scholarly consensus places its origin sometime in the late 18th century during the Industrial Revolution (McAdams, 2014). A surge of new and improved technologies led to creation and diffusion as evidenced by the obvious web of influence which laces the globe with an increasingly ebullient phenomenon. Currently, certain countries have incorporated their bordering neighbor’s manias or adopted a cross-global nation’s timely trends, yet arguments still insist that the United States holds prime responsibility for kickstarting pop culture sensationalism (Chun, 2012). Riding the train of commercialism and capitalism certainly comes to mind, yet such research will be reserved for later. This particular section scrutinizes the spread of pop culture starting from America outward, the echo from other nations, and how current technologies have helped create a constant, free-for-all “grab bag” of trends and media entertainment.

Many factors have attributed to the United States’ conception and growth of pop culture. Highly populated cities, the ability to mass produce, and the birth of the middle class spurred these up-and-coming trends in existence (McAdams, 2014). Cultural items could be made in bulk, allowing for a lower cost to the everyday consumer. Word-of-mouth helped spread the trends, with other forms of communication (e.g. telegraph,

telephone) becoming faster and more common as decades ticked on. The late 19th century to the mid 20th witnessed the introduction of comic strips and books, radio (more specifically serials/drama), motion pictures, and television, all vehicles which aided in the creation and dispersal of media-based pop culture. Granted, the United States was not the only nation with such advances in mass media; however, their influence was more prominent, both nationally and internationally, and this hegemonic notion continues today, thus the coining of the term, Americanization (English, 2014; Chun, 2012). McDonald's iconic Golden Arches as well as Starbucks' green and white twin-tailed mermaid logo remain universally recognizable (McAdams, 2014; Lock, 2018). 97% of the top 100 American-produced, highest grossing films of all time were a greater commercial success internationally than nationally during their initial theatrical run (boxofficemojo.com, 2019). America's footprint extends worldwide, the tread marks deepening their impact with time.

From the 1950s onward, American acculturation abroad has become extremely prevalent, as well as the focus of recent scrutiny and debate. America's globalized "sharing" of its own popular culture has been seen as a collective commercial enterprise or a bandwagon cash grab (Salkowitz, 2012). Through marketable ideas, merchandise, entertainment, etc., companies appeal to the consumerist masses while simultaneously boasting "culture-free standardization" (Chun, 2012, p. 504). Factor in advertising campaigns, commoditization, as well as a country's political and economic state, and the recipe yields Americanization which encroaches into undiscovered territory, a foreign concept which evolves into a pseudo-native standard. Regardless of

agenda, Americanization has unarguably ferried pop culture around the world, docking here and there to implant, grow, and spread.

Other countries are not without influence, either. Japan's pop culture presence has steadily strengthened since 1954, when a massive, irradiated sea monster rose from the watery depths to destroy Tokyo. Gojira, more famously known as Godzilla, originated as a reply to WWII and the Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in which nuclear warfare was symbolized by the titular *kaiju* (Japanese for "strange beast") (Anderson, 2006). Eventually, the luster of Godzilla's post-war cry faded and the creature slipped into the current of commercialism, streaming alongside the "monster movie" genre already popular in the States (Tsutsui, 2006).

During the *kaiju*'s 35-film lifespan, which still continues today, Japan heftily augmented its pop culture gamut. Varieties of anime, Manga, and Super Sentai Tokusatsu (live-action television series in which a group of superheroes use giant robotic vehicles to fight *kaiju*) entertained the masses, with many such as *Astroboy*, *Speed Racer*, *Dragonball Z*, *Fullmetal Alchemist*, and *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* (Americanized from Super Sentai) being imported to the U.S. Twenty years after Godzilla debuted, Hello Kitty made her commemorative appearance, thus prompting "pink globalization", that of a "youth-oriented, consumerist hipness" rather than the post-war reconstruction emphasized by Godzilla (Yano, 2006, p. 154). Since 1996, Pokémon has urged consumers to "catch them all," with other "monster catching" video and card games following behind the iconic red and white Pokéball (Ang, 2013). Japanese snacks, candies, and beverages such as Pocky, Kinoko No Yama, Hello Panda, and Ramune, are becoming increasingly popular, with American retailers opting to sell the original

imported product rather than a native counterpart due to consumer demand (Stevens, 2018). Japanization has definitely followed closely to the United States' global pop culture influence, allowing for a more dynamic and culturally appealing surplus of media and other native artifacts.

Although these two power house nations tend to dominate the pop culture front, many other nations and ethnic groups have contributed to this emergent phenomenon. Latino/Latina award-winning celebrities such as Jennifer Lopez, Anthony Quinn, Eva Longoria, Javier Bardem, Alejandro G. Iñárritu, and Guillermo del Toro provide creativity, ingenuity, and originality as well as astounding contributions to their respective art forms and careers (Blaze808, 2017). An argument could be made that Britain's involvement began with the works of legendary writers, that of Shakespeare, Austen, Tolkien, Dickens, and Christie, yet there is no denying the roles the Monty Python group, Dr. Who, Harry Potter, and other more modern creations have had on the global scale of pop culture. India, or more specifically, Bollywood films, are finding "booming" success in North America, raking in \$8 to \$10 million dollars during their theatrical runs spread across an average of 1,000 screens nationwide (Cain, 2017, n.p.).

Americanization, Japanization, and globalization did not *need* the Internet to happen, as evidenced by the cross-cultural influence prior to its existence; however, from its humble days of ear-splitting dial-up to its current speed of Wi-Fi 5/5G, Internet has undoubtedly contributed to the growth of pop culture in recent years (Pearson, 2010). Furthermore, other technologies have lent a hand to transcontinental exposure and sharing, including that of transmedia, digital delivery, and convergence (Salkowitz, 2012). A video game may be adapted into a movie, a television series into a mobile

game, or a comic book into a decade long, cinematic story arc. Hard copies (e.g. CDs, DVDs, bound books) are no longer necessary as digital formats prove much easier and more convenient to store and share. Social media sites create a trading ground reminiscent of a flea market or bazaar, one globally alive with the “cross-pollination” of ideas which may occur instantaneously, at any time of the day (Salkowitz, 2012, p.10). Almost limitless accessibility and digital worldwide sharing make media-based pop culture a near seamless, timeless blanket, despite distinct dates and places of origin.

Cause and effect of synthesized experience. Pop culture supplies many worlds in which to escape, as well as many characters with whom to relate and connect. Combined with story, set pieces, costumes, visual effects, and other production elements, a possibly engrossing fictional narrative may be constructed, one which has the means to influence behavior and attitudes, and shape real-world expectations.

Synthetic experience. Media, and the pop culture artifacts they create (e.g. characters, environments, stories), allow for a means in which to emotionally and psychologically connect the audience to a fictionalized reality and vice versa. The more believable the produced setting, the more invested the audience (Funkhouser & Shaw, 1990). Known as synthetic experience, this phenomenon plays to our personal “baggage”, of past experiences, prior knowledge, gender, ethnicity, social class, and so on; “mental constructs” formed by the audience in order to “make sense” of fictional realities, as well as interpret them on a more intimate, personal level and apply those elucidations to one’s own life (Daniel & Musgrave, 2017, p. 506; McGrady & Perla, 2011). Fictional characters navigate their environment, dealing with issues as they unfold. Simultaneously, the audience relates to that character’s actions, reactions, or even the

environment because of shared experiences, such as the pang of a first crush, are part of a marginalized race, or have studied the ways of an ancient culture and therefore knows truth from creative liberty or obviously lacking research. The deeper the artifact resonates with the audience, the stronger the synthetic experience.

Synthetic experiences, however, rely upon the notions that the audience accepts that some portion of the narrative is true and that they are able to distinguish fact from fiction (McGrady & Perla, 2011). Naïve sophistication, a term coined by Daniel and Musgrave (2017), states that the general public is able to discern fact from fiction, regardless the amount of fiction involved. They argue that the fictional elements serve as “glue holding separable facts together” (p. 506). For example, consider the critically and commercially successful Harry Potter series. Strip away the fictional facades (magic, dragons, Dementors, etc.) to reveal relevant, real-world issues (prejudice, political corruption, and nepotism to name a few). Audience members suspend their disbelief, accepting the environment and functionality of the Wizarding World while acknowledging and comprehending the true-to-life components weaved within the prose. Granted, suspension of disbelief proves more difficult depending upon an individual’s knowledge or the strength of their personal beliefs, yet not one person possesses such profound, wide-range knowledge or experience as to “immunize” them from all synthetic experiences (Daniel & Musgrave, 2017, p. 504). Therefore, we are all susceptible – to some extent - to the engaging and transporting allure of fictional realities.

Narrative transportation. Certain pop culture studies have analyzed how fiction is able to transport the audience through narrative. Bordering escapism, narrative transportation involves the degree to which a story “transports” the audience (Gerrig,

1993). More specifically, it concerns the area where the narrative becomes real and actual reality is pushed aside, a concept further encouraged by an individual's suspension of disbelief (McGrady & Perla, 2011). Similar to synthetic experience, the more engrossing or "persuasive" the material, the more transporting and vice versa (Daniel & Musgrave, 2017, p. 507). Arguments persist that in order for transportation to happen, a story must abide by its own laws and paradigms, a world-building consistency which seems plausibly inherent to the fiction (Bilandizic & Bussell, 2008). For instance, Tolkien's Middle-Earth could not include guns and motorized vehicles, whereas Netflix's *Stranger Things* must accurately represent fashion, technology, vernacular, and other elements characteristic of the 1980s in order to maintain and strengthen narrative transportation.

Shaping behavior and real-world expectations. "Consciously and unconsciously," media influences our choice-making behavior as we, the audience, navigate life (Tisdell, 2008, p). Much research claims that through synthetic experience and narrative transportation, behavior and attitude has the potential to be shaped, either positively or negatively. Political agenda-making, stereotyping, and swaying thoughts concerning the morality of abortion are some examples of how pop culture has affected an audience, be it a benefit or detriment (Kaplan, 2016; Goldberg & Mangold, 2000; Godsil, MacFarlane, & Sheppard, 2016). Furthermore, violence depicted in media and its effect on society, especially youth, has been the subject of controversy and study since the 1960s, with findings still split as to whether or not consuming this kind of vehement material influences such reflective behavior (Huesmann, 2007).

Media has also been known to shape real-world expectations; the outcome of a situation or consequences to actions. Romantic movies, television shows, and books may

either suggest a “true love” ideology or advocate marriage as a tragic gauntlet (Hillin, 2014). The “good guy” always defeats the villain, gets the girl, and becomes rich (Nichols, 2018). The list continues, and although reality does not unfold as depicted on-screen and in text due to the numerous variables surrounding our personal lives, not to mention the fact that media is scripted, we still consume and apply our media experience to our living, breathing world.

Contributions. Pop culture has been known to influence the advancement of technology, especially that of astronautics and space exploration. Fiction-based equipment studies have explored the plausibility of constructability as well as the item’s real-world applications (Kirby, 2014). Moreover, the technologies depicted in science fiction television shows and movies such as *Star Trek: The Original Series*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and *Interstellar* were and are inspirations for the modern-day cell phone, artificial intelligence, and long-flight space craft design, respectively (Mangione, 2018). The NASA website contains pages devoted to how science fiction/ fiction books, movies, and televisions shows as well as the creators, actors, and so forth have contributed not only to space travel, but science as whole; there exists some truth within pop culture’s fabricated realities.

Supplying and creatively enforcing knowledge. Media possesses tremendous rhetoric, a vehicular muscle-bound titan which broadened and strengthened over time due to the means and mediums as they became available. Voices are shared and heard, thoughts passed along to a consuming public, the opinion of one distributed to the minds of many, or hard facts presented to an awaiting audience. Entertainment, hard news, critiques, or media in any other form holds a natural tendency and obligation to persuade

(Tisdell, 2008). Using this mode to communicate ideas and thus educate individuals is an ancient concept, well in practice today and much more immediate than days of old.

Despite age, media remains mere transportation where its passenger, or content, proves extremely valuable. How *it* (the content) arrives is important, yet the *it* itself is even more so; breaking news, a movie review, a new line of mascara, United States' foreign policies, and so on – all significant topics intended for a specific audience. While all of these examples are considered pop culture per se, a more modern educational movement has sought to harness the culture-creating power of media entertainment-based pop culture (Devaney, 2017).

Research argues that pop culture is a valuable, and more importantly, relevant resource to incorporate within the classroom. “Pop culture is on the minds of the masses,” a valued phenomenon rich in examples, values, metaphors, attractions, and distractions which apply towards education (“Integrating Pop Culture in the Classroom,” 2015). Morrell (2002) claims that embracing pop culture, and analyzing it via a critical lens, has the potential to strengthen or fashion lessons in order to educate others or oneself; rather than reject, accept. As pop culture mediums, content, and the surrounding fandom grows, competition for student attention becomes a fiercer challenge. To combat that growing threat, researchers and instructors claim that integrating pop culture into academia has become “one of the main and most effective bridges between what our students know and what we want them to know” (“Integrating Pop Culture in the Classroom,” 2015, para. 5; Jackson, n.d.; Devaney, 2017; Curletto, n.d.). For instance, a student studying cognitive dissonance may better understand the psychological state by analyzing the titular character in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, or Walter White, the main protagonist of the

acclaimed A&E television series, *Breaking Bad*. A foreign language may be more efficiently learned through karaoke; students translate the lyrics of their favorite pop songs, then sing and perform the unfamiliar words (as if in a music video) to aid in pronunciation, inflection, and meaning comprehension (Jackson, n.d; Zaraysky, 2009). Molses Vazquez, a Teaching Assistant at the Faculty of Science of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), dressed as the wall-crawler because Peter Parker, the character who wears the suit in Marvel comic book, taught science in later installments. Vazquez claimed that adorning the red and blue costume kept his students' attention, garnered more engagement from them, and provided a sense of wonderment to the sometimes tedious, albeit monotonous tasks associated with the subject matter (E. Garrido, 2016). Such instrumentation may seem wild or ludicrous and therefore highly dismissible, yet research suggests that broadening and equipping a more diverse selection of instructional tools proves more beneficial to student learning and participation as compared to traditional teaching methods (Devaney, 2017).

The means and process of how an individual effectively retains information differs from one person to the next. Furthermore, intelligence is not assigned to one specific region of the brain, rather it is found throughout the organ's entirety, a collective network spanning every lobe, with the connections (i.e. communication) between them reaching from most vital to basic intellect (Adolphs, Colom, Damasio, Glascher, Paul, Rudrauf, & Tranel, 2010). Our memory "banks" store ideas and knowledge, and as we experience the world (in whatever way that may be), we connect what is happening with our cognitive archives and thus exercise our basic intelligence which then fuels creativity (Lee, 2016; Wolf, 1996). The more we experience and learn, the more we prime and

strengthen those links, which in turn generate new ideas, as a product of “combinatorial creativity,” a term coined by award-winning literary and cultural critic, Maria Popova (2012). Ironical to this study and section, she uses LEGO as a metaphor for her term, in that the more we enrich our minds with “diverse, eclectic, cross-disciplinary pieces,” the more we are able to “equip ourselves with a bag of colorful bricks of various shapes and sizes,” granting us the resources to synthesize grand, imaginative ideas and enhance critical thinking skills (para. 7). Learning and creativity perform a cognitive quid pro quo by means of connecting experience with prior knowledge. Integrating pop culture into the classroom exemplifies and reinforces this notion, and furthermore, is a proven method to help improve student comprehension (Devaney, 2017).

Additionally, pop culture has inspired prominent and authoritative individuals to consider real-world possibilities portrayed in fictional media. For instance, Presidents Reagan and Clinton were influenced, respectively, by the film *War Games* and the novel *The Cobra Event* (Daniel & Musgrave, 2017; McGrady & Perla, 2011). The former incident prompted the first U.S. document concerning cyber defense and the vulnerability of U.S. computer systems while the latter brought to light the political and social dangers of biological terrorism. Further research has analyzed how pop culture may sway or influence prejudices, constitute world politics and diplomatic proceedings, mirror current real-world social, political, and economic issues, or project an outcome to an otherwise unexperienced event (e.g. the aftermath of nuclear warfare) (Schatz, 2008; Weldes, 1999; Clapton & Shephard, 2016; A. Smith, 2011). Although the source material may be fictional, the underlying messages, imbedded commentary, or proposed outcomes may contain sound suggestions for reality.

Consumerism and capitalism. Pop culture and capitalism go hand-in-hand.

Merchandising proves to be a prime opportunity to make some cash, not to mention allow the consumerist to inadvertently advertise for the company. Not much of a surprise, but necessary nonetheless, children's shows and films are created with the intention of marketability in the form of toys, licensed clothes, and other retail goodies (G. Smith, 2018; Hartlaub, 2007). In some cases, the idea was reversed, where the toy line launched the television series (e.g. the original 1987 cartoon incarnation of the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* or *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe*) (Fisher, 2017; Stern & Volk-Weiss, 2017). Either way, creators must consider a target audience and exactly what merchandise would best appeal creatively and, in the case of children, morally and safely to them. Although kids have been the primary target for action figures, themed bedding, and diapers stamped with a fictional character's face, late teens and older consumers have become an increasing focus within the marketing crosshairs.

Research suggests that the amount of pop culture merchandise purchased by both old and young adults is on the rise (Bobila, 2018). This may be attributed in large part to a new marketing strategy which appeals to the consumer's nostalgic inclinations (Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003). "Retromarketing" (or brand revival) exploits an individual's bittersweet emotional yearning for the past by reintroducing items or brands which resemble or represent their genuine counterparts and/or original source material from prior years/decades (Brown et al., 2003).

Other marketing schemes target more recent adult-orientated productions, such as *The Office* (U.S.), *Gears of War*, and *John Wick*, which have become commercialized and idealized into tangible, collectible objects. Profitable marketability is no longer reserved

wholly or mainly for children's media (Wood, 2016). Moreover, pop culture seems to possess an inherent here-and-now need for themed merchandise (coffee mugs, hoodies, figurines, posters, and so on); pop culture is no longer about entertainment, it is about catering to consumerism (Wood, 2016; J. Taylor, 2009). Brick-and-mortar stores such as Spencer's Gifts, Hot Topic, Walmart, Target, and F.Y.E., not to mention the countless online retail sites, all aim at selling to the adult (or rather, the child within). Licensing ranges, from early media creations to the most popular to the cult classic to the "soon-to-be-released", regardless of year the material originated.

Pop culture consumerism and capitalism do not solely involve merchandise. Conventions, or more commonly known as cons, are amassing more and more popularity since humble beginnings in 1964 New York (Lofgren, 2017). SDCC, the largest comic book convention to-date, has become a summertime mecca for pop culture enthusiasts, retailers, publishers, artists, entrepreneurs, and the like for decades, drawing in an estimated 130,000 individuals and pumping the local economy with an estimated contribution of \$163 million during the con's week long run every July (Salkowitz, 2012). Cons vary in theme, some broad such as E3 and PAX (video and board games), Comic-Con (comic book and pop culture), and CinemaCon (film). Others are more niche such as the Walker Stalker Con (*The Walking Dead*) and BronyCon (males who enjoy the *My Little Pony* franchise). Regardless, cons are no longer limited to major metropolitan areas, and some cities host many cons, despite similar themes and target audiences.

Pop Culture and Media Entertainment: The Connection Between

Media entertainment has always existed in some form or fashion. Be it written, inscribed, acted out, played, composed, recited, or sung; we humans have entertained

others in a variety of ways. As civilizations and technologies advanced, so did the means in which we presented these ideas. Music was captured eternally, turned into a visually expressive form, and is now instantly shared across the world with the click of a mouse. Classic theatre led to feature films and television programming. The human race concocted these ideas, found solutions to create them into real, sometimes tangible things, and continue to do so in order to captivate, relate, and enrich our lives (Fisher & Salmon, 2012). Essentially, it is human nature to not only imagine and therefore create but also to consume.

To entertain may seem top priority, and in some mediums that could be argued as truth, yet commentary and relaying those thoughts to the public has proven most vital. In an age when reading was generally available to those with access to education and reading materials (money helped, too), the literary underprivileged sought to communicate concern and urge change through creative, guarded ways. Thus, media was used to inform others about social, political, and environmental issues, an influential vehicle to enlighten and advocate for reform (Sugiyama, 1996).

Media entertainment includes but is not limited to television shows, movies, video games (PC, console, and mobile), comic books, graphic novels, books, music, select grocery items (e.g. Lucky Charms, Hi-C Ecto Cooler, Twinkies), toys, streaming service content (e.g. Netflix, Hulu, Amazon), and web-based series/movies (e.g. YouTube). Fictional characters, actors, directors, musicians, album covers, movie poster designs, famous quotes, food mascots, licensed merchandise (e.g. Mr. T cereal, *The Lego Movie*, the James Bond film-turned-video-game *Goldeneye*) and anything directly tied

with the prior mentioned media entertainment will also be considered pop culture for the purposes of this research.

Anything pertaining to real-world politics and religion will not be considered. Professional sport teams, players, coaches, and other associated acts will be omitted; however, professional wrestling as well as wrestlers will be included

Nostalgia. Coined by Swiss physician Johannes Hofer (1669-1752), the term nostalgia meant homesickness and was considered an actual, mental disease complete with physical symptoms such as nausea, lack of appetite, and anxiety (Merriam-Webster, n.d.; Arndt, Routledge, Sedikides, & Wildshcut, 2008, p. 304). Today, however, the term has taken on a less pathological definition, and instead has become intertwined with, and “expressed...through pop culture,” and “triggered by” one’s adolescence (Reynolds, 2011, p. xxix). A common misconception is that a pop culture artifact, such as a television show or a toy, is nostalgic. This is false, in that nostalgia is not tangible; nostalgia is a bittersweet “universal emotion” generated by the artifact’s historicity as experienced and/or created by the individual (Reynolds, 2011, p. xxvi; Braniecka, Dowgiert, Trzebinska, & Wytykowska, 2014). In other words, the movie *A Land Before Time* is not in itself nostalgic, yet the nostalgia stems from the stirring mixed bittersweet feelings upon connecting the film with one’s own childhood. The movie is a symbol of individualized adolescence. Furthermore, as the worldly paradigms evolve and change, nostalgia may also be used as a coping mechanism (S. Garrido, 2016). As the present accelerates into the future, and as ageing inevitably occurs, nostalgia tends to strengthen and deepen in its sense of continuity and personal meaning; a profound longing for the

“good ol’ days”, reluctance to listen to current pop hits, or lacking desire to learn new technology.

Vintage. For this study, vintage will be used to describe objects which are authentic pieces from the past rather than current reproductions meant to reflect older styles (Kane, 2019). For instance, toy manufacturer Playmates released a line of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (TMNT) action figures, vehicles, playsets, and accessories during the run of the original cartoon adaptation series from 1987 to 1996. For the 25th anniversary of the TMNT cartoon, Playmates released modern day replicas of the original figurines. The former toys are considered vintage, whereas the latter collection is considered retro.

Retro. Retro is often confused with vintage, but is different in that retro imitates the past, be it a specific product or brand, or as a “love letter” to yesteryear (Phin, 2014). The reproduction of classic best-selling vinyl records, the modern-day popularizing of former fashion and design styles, or glamorizing the aesthetic essence from a specific time period (the 80s as romanticized in *Thor: Ragnarok*, *Stranger Things*, and *Glow*) are all ways to define retro.

Classic. From classic rock to classic cars to classic fashion, the lack of clearly defined lines have caused debate as to the category of classic and what to include in it (Ryken, 2014). The definition used in this study will follow three points: (1) the artifact must have resonance even after its prime, (2) the artifact must possess a historical and/or societal importance, and (3) the artifact must possess a distinctive, unmatched quality (Hare, 2019; Delbridge, 2019). Point one merely analyzes what emotional, physical, or cognitive significance the artifact imprints upon an individual or culture. Point two asks

what impact the artifact had during the time of its conception and how the artifact represents, at present, that time period. Point three discusses an artifact's unique characteristics which stood out at the time and have maintained an unrivaled and unwavering match in quality. Furthermore, point three implies a timelessness, despite having a distinctive origin date (such as classic rock or classic cars).

Entertainment. Entertainment can be conceptualized as a means of “diversion, escape, gratification, or relaxation” (Sullivan, 2009, p. 178). Merriam-Webster further defines the word as something that engages, amuses, or provides enjoyment (2018). Moreover, given the term's Latin roots of *inter* (together, among) and *tenere* (to hold), entertainment literally means “to hold together” (Rokade, 2014). One could interpret this as holding the attention of an individual, or rather, holding together the attention of a crowd. Either way, attention is focused on that which is entertaining.

For this research, media entertainment will be under scrutiny, in which media includes print, film, television, radio, music, online videos, photography, and the like; therefore, media entertainment is a communication channel which provides a means of diversion, amusement, or other gratification (Business Dictionary, n.d.). However, given the number of variables such as an individual's sense of humor, preference of genre/actor/director/etc., or mood during the time in which that person partook of the entertainment, it could be validly argued that what constitutes as entertainment is purely subjective.

Admiration. Admiration is best defined as “wonder,” a word taken directly from admiration's Latin root (Davis, 2011). In relation to a media-based pop culture artifact, admiration may include “awe” or “respect,” yet the emotional extremity of either is

dependent upon an individual's attitude towards the subject. For instance, if a celebrity gives to cancer research, one individual may admire that celebrity's actions while another expresses greater admiration because they have a parent suffering from lymphoma. Furthermore, if one admires a person (fictional or real), the individual may be "drawn toward that person through" a "desire to be like if not better in" their "own way than that person" (Davis, 2011, para. 3).

Adoration. The term adoration stems from the same basic emotion as *admiration*, yet the former is "more intense" than the latter, demanding more involvement from an individual due to an intensified reverence towards the subject (Lowenbruck, Paech, & Schindler, 2014, p. 292). For example, in reference to this study, an individual who admires Star Wars, appreciates and respects the film(s) and/or television series yet does not delve into researching more about the science-fiction epic. An individual who adores the franchise knows more about the characters, cast, fictional universe, lore, and/or production history, etc. That person may dress up during Halloween or comic book conventions or decorate their home with Star Wars merchandise. However, an individual may also move beyond adoration and into the realm of obsession.

Obsession. Obsession can be conceptualized as "thoughts, images, or ideas that won't go away...and cause extreme distress" (Kelly, 2019, para. 1). These obsessions may be wanted or unwanted desires that remain due to our own attitude and behavior or because they are generated and maintained by means beyond our control (Scott, 2019). In positive terms, goals are set and may be accomplished, such as performing extensive research or earning a lean and fit body. Either way, the positive may bring about "creativity and ingenuity," where the drive pushes an individual to adapt, conquer, and

learn (Lickerman, 2010, para. 9). This definition will be used for this study as it parallels with another term, fanatic, which will be defined later. However, the “good” cannot be stated without acknowledgement of the “bad” aspect of obsession.

In negative terms, obsession is a “mask that permits us to gaze in only one direction at one thing,” leaving a mind void of all other concerns (Lickerman, 2010, para. 5). Such narrow focus, or “tunnel vision,” may lead an individual to go out of their way to see a person (e.g. a “crush”) which could lead to stalking or continually purchasing or collecting items (e.g. figurines, Ty Beanie Babies, original Thomas Kinkade paintings), which could lead to disorganized priorities and debt. Simply doing nothing, meaning to not engage in the desires, is rare; typically, the obsession drives an individual to achieve fulfillment (Lickerman, 2010). Furthermore, obsession may also be deemed as a psychological malady known by the name of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, or OCD (National Institute of Mental Health, 2018). Someone suffering from OCD has overwhelming, reoccurring thoughts (obsessions) which lead to repeated behaviors (compulsions).

Cosplay. Coined in 1984 by Japanese journalist Nobuyuki Takahashi, the word cosplay, or costume play, is the act of dressing up as a character from a movie, television show, video game, manga, or other work of fiction (DeCiccio, 2017). While this sounds like the definition for a Halloween costume party, there are notable differences between cosplay and dressing up for trick-or-treat. For instance, individuals who participate in cosplay typically emulate a character, from voice to gait to other mannerisms (DeCiccio, 2017). Furthermore, cosplayers invest hundreds if not thousands of dollars as well as countless hours perfecting their costumes or their own physical self, making certain to

include every detail whether it be the battle-worn look of Master Chief, the rusted, diving-suit of a Big Daddy, or Superman's Kryptonian physique. Cosplayers also dress up for comic book and other pop-culture conventions, either apart from or in conjunction with Halloween and other costume parties. Essentially, a cosplayer is "more involved," more invested, and extremely dedicated; not to a costume, but to a character they revere (DeCiccio, 2017).

Fanfiction. Some fans of certain fictional works actually create literature about an object, known as fanfiction. In general, these are continuing, alternative, or new stories of already established creative products, penned by fans of the original source material (Medland-Marchen, 2015). Fanfiction may contribute to the canon, be disregarded completely, or become a published piece that sparks a multi-million dollar franchise; the latter was the case with E.L. James' Fifty Shades of Grey, a fanfiction of Stephanie Meyer's Twilight saga (Steiner, 2015).

Fanatic/fanaticism. A fanatic is an individual who holds immense interest, respect, or esteem for an object (Jenkins, 2013). This fanaticism, or "the degree of intensity to which one is a fan" is differentiated from adoration in several ways (Dwyer, Greenhalgh, & LeCrom, 2018, p. 62). Fanatics show "extraordinary devotion" which resembles a "cult-like" following for an object in which the members are more actively involved in their attachment; rather than passive consumers, fans are active members (Beverland, Chung, Farrelly, & Quester, 2008, p. 333).. Extraordinary in this instance means going beyond the average degree or usual level (*adoration*) whereas devotion is conceptualized as commitment, closeness, and passion (Pichler & Hemetsberger, 2007: M. Taylor, 1991). The object may be a person, place, film, television show, toy, brand, or

other form of consumer activity/ product. Furthermore, the object may hold a duality of reality and fiction such as Arnold Schwarzenegger's (real) role as the T-1000 in *The Terminator* franchise (fictional) or specific locations in New Zealand (real) where some scenes from *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* (fictional) were filmed.

Fanatics possess a "unique form of loyalty" illustrated by intense degrees of commitment, dedication, enthusiasm, and extreme "emotional attachment" (Beverland et al., 2008, p. 333). According to Thorne and Bruner (2006), fanaticism includes four distinct characteristics: that of *internal involvement*, in which a fanatic shows strong inclination to be associated with a fan culture; *a desire for external involvement*, in which a fanatic desires involvement in related fan-based activities; *a wish to acquire*, in which a fanatic collects items related to the object in question; and a *desire for social interaction*, where the fanatic wants time to socialize among other individuals who share the same fanatical devotion.

To expand upon the costume example used within the conceptualization of *adoration*, a fanatic spends countless hours and dollars to accurately recreate the attire and accessories of the character and emulate their accent, mannerisms, and the like through costume play, or cosplay for short (DeCiccio, 2017). Fanatics strive for authenticity and total representation, to understand and know anything and everything about that to which they are loyal, whether it is a sports team, electronics brand (e.g. Apple or Android cellular device), or, in the case of this study, a fictional universe such as Gene Rodenberry's *Star Trek* (Dwyer et al., 2018). They attempt to collect all merchandise involving that actor/character, musician, or toy designer or even the franchise as a whole; the fanatic may attend conventions (or cons) in order to find rare

items, pay for photo opportunities (or photo ops), and obtain an autograph or take part in a meet-n-greet session (Stromberg, 2011). Fanaticism not only promotes and increases knowledge about the object, some individuals may even add to the object of their loyalty, or more specifically to the franchise through fanfiction (Steiner, 2015). Essentially, a fanatic immerses themselves into that which they are devoted and at times and may coincidentally contribute to their own fanaticism.

A fanatic's devotion, however, does possess certain aspects that may be construed as negative. Such fierce loyalty has been known to ignite altercations, physical, verbal, or both, as well as spark countless hours of debate over an object that is seemingly a matter of opinion (i.e. who or what is the "best") (Dwyer et al., 2018). Relevant to the current study, certain franchises and actor portrayals have their dedicated fans who participate in an embattled this-or-that, where a line is drawn and fans take a side to defend the artifact and their loyalty to it (Marimaa, 2011). For example, arguments have risen as to which science-fiction universe is "better," Gene Rodenberry's *Star Trek* or George Lucas' *Star Wars*. Heated debate may even occur concerning which actor gives the "greatest" performance of Batman's nemesis, The Joker. Fanatics tend to assert prejudice in that "their ideas are the correct ones, ignoring any facts or arguments" which may prove contrary or clash with their views and mindset (Beverland et al., 2008, p. 333). This begets a closed-mindedness, and at times a contradictory/hypocritical standpoint due to their unwavering devotion and their inability to "think like normal people" (Redden & Stenner, 2000, p.337). In turn, the fanatic may take on a "missionary role" by enlisting others through their conviction that whatever they think and believe is the "best" (Beverland et al., 2008, p.333).

Fanatics have been branded negatively in literature and other research, partly due to the dogmatic attitude, their lack of critical thinking in argumentative situations, and the possible threat they pose if they feel “defrauded” or betrayed by the object to which they are loyal (Beverland et al., 2008). In relation to this study, the latter incident may include constant underwhelming entries to a franchise (e.g. the *Halo* saga) which lead to critical and financial failure or warrant fans to petition a new movie be made to correct or replace an existing one (e.g. Star Wars Episode VIII: The Last Jedi) (Ahmed, 2017). Furthermore, certain research suggests that fanaticism is a psychological disease on par with alcoholism, and that those addicts are in need of immense psychotherapy and other treatments (Sherman, 2014). Others suggest that the term *fanaticism* and its definition does not uniquely exist on its own (Toscano, 2006). Rather, it is a synonym of *obsession*, carrying along with it the negative connotations of the word.

Fanaticism, along with obsession, can be seen as “either good or bad depending on how and for what reasons someone acts fanatically” (Marimaa, 2011, p. 34). This research suggests that fanaticism should not be skewed negatively, but rather this behavioral phenomenon should be viewed with from an open-minded approach. Many fanatics earn a living and receive respect as go-to-sources for product reviews, movie critiques, and other pop-culture related media; this in turn has brought attention to certain objects and increased the fan base (e.g. cult-classic) (Paul, 2015). Incidentally, increased loyalty promotes capital gain, and also improves the chances of objects’ continuous value over time (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Others have become notable collectors of past and present pop-culture licensed merchandise with some acquiring such a large collection that they have opened their own museums, e.g. the National Video Game Museum in Frisco,

Texas and Rancho Obi-Wan in Petaluma, California (*Star Wars* collectibles). Pop-culture fanaticism deserves to be studied.

Fandom

Personal identity. In Lewis Carroll's classic novel, *Alice in Wonderland*, the hookah-smoking caterpillar asks the curious-seeker Alice, "Who are you?" (2012, p.48). As we navigate our passing years, we not only are asked the same questions by friends and family, but we also tend to ask that query of ourselves. According to recent research, fandom is a way to contribute to and answer that journey of self-identification (Craig & McInroy, 2018; Groene & Hettinger, 2014; Ledbetter, n.d.)

Being a fan of media-based pop culture allows an individual the opportunity to "discover" oneself, a concept once reserved for religion, sports, and travel. Based upon the self-expansion model, close relationships help shape an individual's identity through self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation (Konrath, 2012). Now, as the advanced world hurtles through and has grown accustomed to the instantaneous sharing and access of the digital age, pop culture fandom has become a vital and more prominent resource for maturing individuals of all ages (Gray et al., 2017). Bauman (2000) describes this changing world and the paradigms within as liquid modernity. Self-identifying through fandom is a way to cope with and ease the turbulence of a flowing, fluctuating reality. According to Gray et al. (2017), "traditional markers of high modernity" are increasingly challenged, therefore making their foundations increasingly unstable (p. 11). Gender, race, sexuality, marriage, religion, political affiliation – all are communities in which someone could self-identify; yet, due to these communities' unpredictable place within

modern society (not to mention their future), attaching oneself to an object of fandom proves a more constant option.

Admiration play a vital role in self-identity and social belonging, in that it evokes emulation of another's behavior, actions, language, and the like, wherein the individual models their own behavior, actions, and language after that which they admire (Konrath, 2012). Additionally, admiration may be collectively shared by feeling strengthened through the acknowledgement that others experience it as well (Menninghaus, Schindler, Windrich, & Zink, 2013). This bond, on the surface, would be the collective liking of *Star Wars* or *Johnny Bravo*. Further down, this connection stems from both personality traits and childhood experiences (at least in terms of media consumed) (Menninghaus et al., 2013)

Family and culture. A response to investigative fandom culture research can best be summed up by quoting Sister Sledge: "We are family!". Be it media-based pop culture in general, a more widely recognized following (e.g. Harry Potter), or a niche fandom (e.g. Bronys), the common reply to their undying commitment and continual growth can be attributed to the social and cultural paradigm of "family" (Gray et al., 2017). In this case, family does not refer solely to "blood" or pedigree, rather it can be defined as a close-knit group of individuals who share a common passion and unique experiences (Schulten, 2013). Some studies have examined the strong dynamic and relationships between fans, even those who had little to no prior contact before assimilating into their respective fandom (Robertson, 2013; Compitello et al., 2019; Bell, 2016). Most studies have looked into a specific culture's/subculture's longevity; more specifically, why the fandom has persisted and expanded despite the end of a franchise/series (e.g. theatrical

run, television, final book installment) (Bell, 2016; Urbanski, 2013; Katsuno, 2006). Whatever the case, findings suggests that this shared fanaticism creates a undying, unyielding bond, with the potential to transcend ethnicity, gender, race, religion, and other prejudices (Gray et al., 2007; Jenkins, 2013). Furthermore, fans, in regard to their involvement with a fandom, feel their opinion matters; that they have a voice and a significance among their culture, and contribute meaning to their life (Jenkins, 2013). Pop culture fandom is not only a way to self-identify, but also to find social belonging, a participatory place where ones' ideas and actions have bearing and hold merit.

Fan Theory: Henry Jenkins' Fandom and Participatory Culture

American media scholar, Henry Jenkins, explores fan theory and studies participatory culture, most evident in his 1992 book, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (although the 20th anniversary edition published in 2013 is used for this thesis research). He argues that rather than be the idle consumer, fans play an active role in their fandoms and consume many "texts," or media as they relate to the pop culture artifact (e.g. Superman comics, movies, television shows). Sports, politics, and music fandoms have certain essentials of participatory culture, yet media-based fandom inspires fans to contribute through creative expression and artistic production. Media influences fans, whereas fan fiction, fan art, and cosplay are all ways in which fans influence the media. In some instances, fans bolster additions to the canon or instigate stylization changes to a beloved fictional character; the latter case is exemplified by fans' reactions to the *Sonic the Hedgehog* movie trailer. Fan backlash concerning Sonic's initial look caused Paramount Pictures to delay the release date in order to redesign the titular character (Russian, 2019).

Jenkins (2013) also analyzes societal conceptions and stereotypes as associated with media fandom. Gray et al. (2017, p.1), state that “most people are fans of something,” with *something* referring to anything, be it food, sports, video games, etc., which strengthens Jenkins (2013) argument. He argues that certain fandoms, sports for instance, are widely accepted as legitimated cultures within mainstream society; however, fandoms of fictions/media-based pop culture harbor societal misconceptions. *Geek* and *nerd* have become synonymous with pop culture fandom, as are the conjured images attached to those words (e.g. horned rim glasses, pocket protectors). Gray et al. (2017), outlines three waves of fandom research, which were discussed briefly in Chapter 1, yet must be mentioned again. The first wave (dubbed the “resistance wave”) attempted to eradicate such stereotypes. The second studied the hierarchies and social networks within fandoms. The third and most current wave has taken on an intrapersonal perspective, a qualitative look at why a fan is a fan, targeting aficionados and other pop culture experts or “superfans.” Jenkins (2007) worries that such focus will prove detrimental and even regressive in reflection to the issues the first wave studies fought to dismantle (Gray et al., 2017). Digital technology and media have a tendency to indirectly create “representational othering,” a notion which could occur if focus remains on the individual rather than whole (Gray et al., 2017, p. 8). Jenkins’ (2007) concern is sound; however, this particular study wishes to argue that a qualitative query concerning interplay between a fan and their artifact, as well as their participatory relationship with fandom as a whole, proves beneficial to this emerging third wave. Therefore, the investigative aim of this study ask:

What do pop culture enthusiasts say about the meaning of pop culture in their lives?

Chapter Summary

Pop culture and fandom research is extensive yet far from exhaustive. The former is a constantly growing mass, ever changing and moving more so thanks to digital technology. Although the core descriptor of fandom will never change, surrounding studies will continue to take different perspectives, explore both up-and-coming and established niches, or speculate the future of the cultures. By employing Jenkins' Fandom and Participatory Culture examinations, riding the third wave, and being mindful of Jenkins' concerns, perhaps this study may illuminate the reasons why fans love what they love, and why pop culture continues to be an integral part of their live

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized Edmund Husserl's descriptive phenomenology to investigate and elucidate the lived experiences of certain individuals (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Through personal reflection, this involves examining "the nuances, the contextual underpinnings, the emotiveness, and the actions that were evoked in consciousness" by the individual in order to better understand their motivation and involvement with pop culture objects and the accompanying worlds of fandom (Barr, Christensen, & Welch, 2017, p 117). To capture these experiences, one-on-one interviews were recorded (audio and video) for a documentary film while audio was transcribed through Otter, an online transcription service. Processes for the interviews and collection of additional footage for the documentary are explained below.

Ink and paper is not enough to contain this research. This thesis is accompanied by a documentary film, shot and edited by me, the researcher. The documentary is not a complete recreation or exact video representation/adaptation of the written thesis; however, it complements the work. Either piece may stand independently yet they remain stronger if studied and experienced together. Much like pictures in a book or diagrams alongside statistics, the documentary is meant to enhance this experience. I could write several hundred pages about video game or Anime fanaticism, yet if I were to show, through video, the thousands that flock to conventions, those words take a deeper

meaning. The only way to truly achieve comprehension of this case is to visually showcase the act.

Participants

Eight to twelve subjects, within the age range of early twenties to 53, were interviewed one-on-one, face-to-face (one subject did not disclose her age). Participants are composed of four males and four females, and were recruited through email, text message, Facebook Messenger, or face-to-face interactions. Each individual operates and therefore provides tailored insight, criticism, and facts about a specific field (e.g. video games, conventions, cosplay) which provides insight into personal psychology and intimate devotion regarding pop culture fandom. Experience in a broad range is vital to explore all pop-culture related aspects of this study.

Anonymity was not be used. Participants agreed to show their face, likeness, actual name, and occupation in order to be included in the documentary. Their status and reputation are what attracted the researcher to seek them out as candidates for the documentary. If they chose to remain anonymous, their involvement would be useless to the study; therefore, they would have been thanked for their time, but not considered to participate.

Interview Procedure

The full scope of the study was disclosed to all participants prior to each interview. If they wished to progress, they were asked to read and sign a series of waivers pre and post interview.

The interview consisted of ten pre-composed, open-ended questions and adhere to a semi-structured format (questions included in appendix). A semi-structured interview

does not strictly follow a prepared set of questions or a traditional question/answer format, but rather permits the interviewee to talk freely and engage in discussion (Shosha, 2012; Doyle, 2019) A "rabbit trail" may be followed if the researcher sees fit: if the subject answers a question, and their response raises more questions, then those questions shall be asked.

Video and Audio Production

Video and audio equipment were used to capture the interviews. All pre and post production was done by the co-investigator.

Supplemental video footage (or b-roll). As for the other portions of the documentary, the researcher personally took photos and video from AMACon (pop culture convention in Amarillo), a Harry Potter event at the Don Harrington Discovery Center, and The Vault (Local area network gaming center in Amarillo). Permission was granted by directors/owners to shoot at all locations. Use of any clips from movies, television shows, etc., fall under the Fair Use Act.

Data Analysis

Written Portion. Audio taken from the video interviews were transcribed using Otter, an online transcription software program. The investigator labeled speakers appropriately, cross-checked the transcription of Otter with the original audio in case of mistaken dialog, wrong words, or other errors. Transcriptions were downloaded and printed for coding convenience and organization. Quotes were analyzed, and those specific in answering the research question were incorporated into the paper. Answering, in this sense, means that the subject's response describes and explains the relationship they personally share with pop-culture and why it remains significant in their life.

Individual testimonials, behaviors, and attitudes were used to define culture characteristics and to generate an understanding of experiential fanaticism.

This study employed Colaizzi's seven-step method of phenomenological data analysis. The steps (tailored for this study) are as follows (Sanders, 2003; Shosha, 2012):

Step one. The investigator read and reread each transcript in order to fully understand the contents, while bracketing his own feelings, thoughts, and ideas in regard to pop culture and fandom. Doing this helps keep focus on the participant's experience through an unbiased lens.

Step two. 194 unique statements which closely or specifically answer the research question were identified. These statements were recorded on a separate document, annotated with time stamps and page numbers for easier reference.

Step three. Meanings were extracted from the aforementioned statements and recorded on a separate document with annotations marking the statements from which they were derived. Some of the meanings include but are not limited to depth of a story, reflection of past media, generational sharing, obsession, reality brought to life, maturity, and growth

Step four. From the derived meanings, twelve subthemes were generated: personal attachment, emotional experience, influencing nostalgia upon others, childhood experiences, character relatability, stories, personal investment, escapism, creative outlets and events, family bonding, friendships, and self-identity. Those sub-themes were categorized and clustered together under an umbrella theme, meaning an idea which incorporates the essence of all the sub-themes. Themes are discernible from one to the

next, without overlap, yet are contextually connected to the research. Three themes were generated: nostalgia, connection to media, and social belonging/self-identity.

Step five. Extensive description of each theme were given and integrated into the basis of this phenomenological study of “what do pop culture enthusiasts say about the meaning of pop culture in their lives?”. These themes, along with exhaustive descriptions, should accurately reflect and represent participant discourse.

Step six. Repetitive, redundant, or broad descriptors under each theme were eliminated in order to simplify and streamline further analysis. Additionally, augmentation was necessary in order to clarify connections between themes and their underlying clusters.

Step seven. Through member-checking, the research findings were presented to the participants in order to validate their (the participant’s) meaning. Each participant was sent via email a list of their own statements (pulled from the interviews) along with the investigator’s notes as to what those statements mean and what subthemes/themes were generated. Validation was achieved when all participants agreed upon the findings (however, one participant did not respond).

Documentary Film Portion. Since a documentary tells a story, it is fitting to use quotes which carry or enhance that story. Much like the written portion, selected quotes from the subjects’ interviews were edited and incorporated into the video portion of this research. Although some quotes were used for the written portion as well as the documentary, the two components are intended to complement each other while achieving the same conclusion, or rather answering the same question; essentially, climbing the same mountain yet doing so by different paths. While the written portion

takes a more direct, analytical approach, the video utilizes a creative, storytelling angle; therefore, the data used in each element will differ slightly.

A DVD of the documentary is available as a hard copy inserted into a sleeve located within the inner cover of this thesis. For further inquiries about the documentary, please contact the author.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Eight individuals were interviewed to examine why pop culture is integral to their life. Participant responses revealed that media/pop culture has played a significant role in influencing to various degrees their childhood, teen years, and adult life. By employing Husserl's descriptive phenomenology and Colaizzi's seven-step method of phenomenological data analysis, the researcher determined themes and sub-themes (Lopez & Willis, 2004; Sanders, 2003; Shosha, 2012). The themes are as follows, which each respective sub theme in parenthesis: nostalgia (personal attachment; emotional experience; influencing nostalgia upon others), connection to media (character development; character relatability, stories, and personal development; escapism), and Social Belonging/ Self-Identity (family bonding and friendships; self-identity).

Nostalgia

The term nostalgia carries individualized meaning. Although the word possesses a general definition, its effects vary from one person to the next based on our memories and experiences as well as differences in how we process those experiences (Martin, 2014). When asked about pop culture in relation to nostalgia in their lives, participants responded in supported of this claim, and two subthemes emerged; personal attachment and emotional experience, and influencing nostalgia upon others.

Personal attachment and emotional experience. Nostalgia is a bittersweet feeling evoked by memory, wherein the memory/past typically becomes romanticized and is associated with an object, be it tangible or intangible (Martin, 2014; Batcho, 2017). When asked about pop culture and nostalgia, Ben Wilting spoke of “simpler times,” while Gabrielle Reed mentioned “good memories...playing video games with my dad.” Megan Wilson answered “remembering shows and the way you remembered them as a kid,” but more importantly, “being able to remember *how* you felt about it as a child” (emphasis added). Reminiscing and attempting to conjure past feelings was further demonstrated by Robert Dueñes, who said:

Everything that happens just gives you those same things, feelings that you felt when you were six years old, seeing it for the first time. And that’s why we keep going back to that well, because we want to try to recapture those feelings.

The descriptor “bittersweet” appears more commonplace among definitions of nostalgia, whereas terms such as happiness tend to be overshadowed; yet they play a vital role in how we process and place memory, and more importantly, how we feel in present situations (Leardi, 2013). Pop culture is of no exception, in that, according to Stuart Runberg, it has the ability to cause an “endorphin rush and the happiness takes over and you’re back in whatever it is.” A psychological transportation tends to exist in such scenarios. As Josh Wilson says, there exists a shift of past feelings to present:

Think about football fans that want to relive the glory days of the '84 [Chicago] Bears. That's no different than when people think back about their Saturday morning cartoons in the '90s and the *X Men* come on. And you hear that theme song? You're thinking of it right now. That's nostalgia. See how happy you feel?

Nostalgia and the happiness it brings may seem like an occasional, fleeting moment; however, that powerful associative feeling may be harnessed to enrich one's life constantly (Leardi, 2013). Mandi Ried mentioned "looking back and remembering the things that I love to do back in the day when I was younger, and realizing that I still love those things now even as an adult." Furthermore, Stacy Yates recounts that "if you're enthusiastic about science fiction or anime or comic books as a teenager or young adult, chances are you'll still be enthusiastic about them later in life"; continuing to both appreciate and utilize nostalgia can be a way to maintain happiness and joy. Furthermore, a present-day adoration of childhood pop culture may be a way to make a monotonous, tedious life exciting as emphasized by Josh Wilson:

If growing up means going to the same old job and doing the same thing and eating the same breakfast, and putting away things that make me happy, screw that. I don't want any of that. I enjoy still being passionate about the things that excited me as a young kid and as a young adult.

Stuart Runberg recalled his grandparents in their later years, almost stagnant in life, and those images have influenced him to keep his aging mind busy and active:

I decided at a very, very early age that I was not going to wither away and get bored, that I would find new and exciting ways to be entertained. And while the older we get, the more responsibilities we get. . . I still try and make time for the things that I care about, that I'm interested in.

The experience of nostalgia is more than just trying to grasp a fleeting bittersweet memory from yesteryear. While time cannot be rewound, and we cannot physically relive moments from our past, remembering what made those moments happy, joyous, or exciting is an extremely doable act. Experiencing those feelings in the present is possible with pop culture/media, thanks to modern technology; reruns, DVDs, game cartridges, emulators, vinyl repressing, streaming services, the Internet, YouTube, and the like. Objects of our past adorn an almost timelessness while new content further adds to libraries of interest.

Influencing nostalgia upon others. Nostalgia may be an individualized experience, yet it has the potential to be created for others, and shared. Typically reserved for parents, this concept entails promoting or otherwise directly influencing what might be nostalgic to children (Adams, 2014). Influencing nostalgia upon others is about “passing on our love to other people,” said Mandi Ried, who loved the cartoon Scooby-Doo as a child, and now “my kids...being inducted into the Scooby Doo atmosphere.” Megan Wilson recalled on of her earliest nostalgic memories about her mother sharing pop culture/media with her:

I remember watching my mom play Magic the Gathering, and listening to her and her friends tell stories when they were playing D&D [Dungeons & Dragons], and watching them watch anime, and all these things. I don't actually remember any of it. I just remember the feeling of it...Basically, all of my pop culture and all of those references comes from being with her.

Robert Dueñas had a similar experience, yet his spanned multiple generations:

I remember being five years old, on a Sunday morning, sitting in my grandpa's living room, watching [professional] wrestling with him and my dad. I remember just that feeling of "all the grown-ups are doing it, now I'm doing it so I'm cool like them." Because that's the stuff that you remember being some of your happiest memories.

Adams (2014) states that sharing nostalgia upon others does not necessarily mean it will become nostalgic to them (e.g. children), due to the lack of control over an individual's perceived experience and to what extent they will connect with said experience later. Those objects or ideas, however, may retain some nostalgia-like qualities, as evidenced by participant responses.

Connection to the Media

Many participants expressed a connection to media and/or pop culture, be it a specific reference or a general acknowledgement. Connection may be comprised of a simple attraction to the material, something ineffable, while other instances are deeper,

involving a more concrete reason why pop culture remains integral to the participant's life, such as relatability to story and/or characters (Leigh, 2016). Moreover, pop culture is a form of entertainment, a possible outlet in which to escape from the everyday work world or one which inspires creativity and, at times, a career.

Childhood experiences. As an adult, remembering or experiencing pop culture/media today possesses the unique ability to stir up memories about one's childhood; nostalgia as explained prior. However, some instances, such as Ben Wilting related, are comprised of personal value and past familiarity with the material, in that "I'll play it again . . . I know what I'm doing. It's less nostalgic, and more of 'Oh, I know I can have fun with this'" (in reference to video games). Additionally, Josh Wilson described that "when I pop in this DVD or watch this show on a streaming service, I've seen it 100 times. I know what's going to happen in the beginning, and the middle, and the end." Conditioning and prior knowledge of media/pop culture objects and ideas help differentiate this type of connection from that of a nostalgia-based association, yet it remains nonetheless significant in a pop culture enthusiast's life.

Character relatability, stories, and personal investment. As we consume more media and further absorb pop culture, we will more than likely discover a relatable character, or a storyline which is absolutely, repeatedly entertaining (Gottschall, 2012). Stacey Yates expressed how pop culture has provided such, stating "a good story well told, whether it's set on Mars or on Earth, whether it's in the 1800s or the 2400s, is something that brings me joy," Gabrielle Reed supported this by stating that these are "stories that you connect with, characters that you just love the designs of, or their background." Josh Wilson, an avid reader, always "wonder[ed] what kind of adventure I

was going to go on” and shared “even if our good stories don’t always involve Caped Crusaders, a good story is a good story.” In regard to Harry Potter and J.K. Rowling’s Wizarding World, Mandi Ried said:

It wasn’t about the magic. It was more about the relationships. . . I love the fact that it’s about love and hate and success and failure and all the little stories inside, of having best friends you have arguments with.

Video games are no exception in regard to story or character relatability, as Gabrielle Reed explained:

It’s storytelling. It’s like reading a book, but you get to be the character . . . it’s a great way to bond with these characters. You experience their stories through your actions and you are doing it; you feel for them, you develop this relationship with the character. What happens to them hurts you.

Some pop culture fans become so engrossed in their video game fandom, that, as Stuart Runberg said, they’re “not just playing it, but learning the lore and the deeper story of it . . . and actively caring about it.” Investing such extreme amounts of time and money into media/pop culture may seem odd, ridiculous, or “nerdy”; however, we, as humans, are all individually unique, and our tastes and interests differ, such as Robert Dueñes’, who stated:

I was already too invested. I had all this money invested in all the pop culture stuff that I adored, that I would never get rid of. And sure enough, it's some of the stuff that makes me the happiest, especially when you talk about TV and movies.

Using hard earned cash as well as valuable time towards such objects may seem wasteful and “geeky,” Josh Wilson felt that passion is passion, regardless of the object:

If you like crunching stats and numbers and having eight fantasy football leagues, man, go for that. And you can tell me pass completion, interception rates, yards gained, yards lost for like 15 different quarterbacks and who their second and third strings are and when they were drafted; you can't tell me that's not geeky. That's super nerdy. But it's great! It's not any different than someone who can tell me the Infinity War saga and the cycles or they can rehash the plot of *The Killing Joke*.

Embracing a television show, video game, fictional character, or the licensed merchandise that comes along with pop culture/media may appear an inefficient, and in some cases, expensive way to navigate reality. However, for certain individuals these imaginary worlds and figures within provide avenues in which to learn, empathize, and connect. As humans, we want others to listen to our life stories, and to understand us. These fictional characters and how they interact with their settings allow us to divulge in that innate desire, and to better comprehend the actual world in which we live.

Escapism, creative outlets and events. Escapism has been a widely debated topic, in that it may serve as a way to take a mental break or totally distract from real-world issues and responsibilities (Yahr, 2017). Participants leaned more toward the positive aspects of pop culture as an escape from the everyday. For example, Stuart Runberg describes pop culture/media as “a form of relaxation, is a form of mental recuperation. It’s a form of leisure.” Furthermore, in the case of books, Josh Wilson claims they may undoubtedly help individuals to “perform better academically” but may also be used “just for a pure escapism.” Megan Wilson felt that pop culture is “an escape” that gets her “away from the day-to-day, the mundane” because she “enjoy[s] being a part of those worlds.”

Pop culture may also provide an avenue for a creative outlet, as exemplified by social media website DeviantART or online retailers such as Threadless.com (Mason, 2016). Pop culture also inspires cosplay, as explained by Gabrielle Reed:

Cosplay has been just a creative outlet for me to be able to make something, and getting that little bit of magic to make it happen. . . I like to be the characters that I love and bring them into fruition.

Megan Wilson commented that she “dress[es] up as my childhood heroes” because “it’s very exciting to create those characters and then see, especially little kids at conventions, [how] they light up, and they get so excited.”

Furthermore, pop culture may influence others to build a means in which to gather pop culture fandoms under one roof - that of conventions (cons). This is the case

for Megan Wilson and Josh Wilson, who direct various cons in the state of Texas: “I really love putting all of the pieces together and creating the event that everybody’s going to remember,” a place where “thousands of people from all over the world come to celebrate everything about that fandom” (in regard to Kameha Con, a Dragonball Z-themed convention).

Pop culture as escapism and a creative means is a personal experience, both needed and wanted, yet it can also be shared with or inspire others. Internal and external forces are definitely at play, engaging the self as well as the collective, promoting a dichotomous fulfillment to fulfill desires of the individual while being actively involved in a fandom.

Social Belonging/ Self-Identification

Media/pop culture, or more specifically the attached fandom, has the potential to influence social belonging as well as promote self-identity (Jenkins, 2013; Konrath, 2012). The latter was either hinted at or explicitly stated by the participants. As for the former, participants expressed social belonging in two ways: family bonding and friendships.

Social belonging: family bonding and friendships. Family bonding differs from nostalgia. For this section, bonding means the relationships established and strengthened through media/pop culture, rather than nostalgic feelings associated with the object/idea and the person with whom they were experienced (Miranda, 2011). From birth, a parent is their child’s first friend, and other family members such as older siblings, grandparents, cousins, etc., have the potential to establish long-lasting friendships at an early age (Stern, 2011). Pop culture is an avenue in which to pull those relationships together.

Stacy Yates recalls that “My parents read to me all the time. My mom taught me how to read a book called Pig Can Jig.” Furthermore, Mandi Ried said “I’ve already read the first Harry Potter book to my daughter and she’s already in love with it.” Teaching a child life-skills such as reading and phonics is extremely beneficial to their cognitive development, and to foundational relationship building as well (Canfield, Cates, Dreyer, Huberman, Johnson, Mendlesohn, Seery, & Weisleder, 2018).

Bonding over pop culture is not exclusive to rudimentary learning, it may involve simply sharing an experience with media. Participant Robert Dueñes connected with his grandfather and father by watching professional wrestling together with them. He also experienced the “same thing with comics” because his “brothers were comic books fans” and they bonded over the current issue, storylines, and lore.

Video games were also a popular response in terms of parental bonding, such as Megan Wilson’s childhood experience:

I’ve always watched gaming with my mom . . . and then when we started playing together, we would play like Spyro. And I remember being so angry, because I didn’t have fine motor control and making him fly from one thing to another. I always had to give the stupid controller to my mom.

Gabrielle Reed had similar moments, yet with her father, in which he introduced her to a few different fandoms:

Playing video games with my dad (he introduced me), or sitting there with him and going to his D&D session, and sitting at the table and trying to play with the dice. And then reading comics with him, and then just talking about superheroes in general.

Participant consensus, however, echoes that of Jenkins (2013), in that pop culture helps promote social belonging and construct friendships. Participating in fandoms, or rather being a fanatic, does not carry the extremely derogatory connotation it once did, nor does it mean an individual must possess extensive knowledge about an object or idea in order to be a fan (Mohr, 2019). This widening of the definition allows for social inclusion. Stacy Yates claimed that “we both love Star Trek . . . you can build a friendship on that.” Gabrielle Reed testified to the more experience-based relatability of cosplay building in that “you’re making it come to life with just foam and hot glue . . . I empathize with people that do it because I know what you went through. I know the burns on your fingers.”

Megan Wilson confess that “I built my whole social circle around pop culture” and “everybody that I choose to hang out with or to connect with on a deeper level is somebody that I’ve met through pop culture”; but more importantly “the biggest reason pop culture is important to me is the people in my life.” “It feels from an outsider’s point of view,” said Ben Wilting, “almost cultish. . . but these people feel . . . [have] . . . such a strong relationship to these other people around them.” “You’re part of that brotherhood,” claimed Robert Dueñas. Pop culture and fandom becomes a community, a place that

“helps brings people together” as Josh Wilson stated, and “even if the only thing we’ve got in common is that we love Batman, we can work with that.”

Common interest and adoration tremendously help in spurring relationship, but events and places such as cons and gaming centers aid by providing a centralized location in which to build these friendships. For the former, Megan Wilson explained, “having that common ground [pop culture interests], especially at conventions makes it really easy to connect and make friends. Gabrielle Reed further supports relationship-building by saying:

You see them [other cosplayers] at conventions, and then you hang out and you go get dinner and then, three years later you’re friends. I mean, best friends that I couldn’t imagine living without now. But I would never have met them if I had not gone to comic-con or even tried to cosplay. And it’s just been literally a way to everlasting friendships and a whole bunch of happiness.

Electronic sports (esports) is becoming more and more prominent, with cable channels such as ESPN airing national and worldwide video game tournaments, such as *Fortnite* and *League of Legends*. Local gaming centers provide a more condensed version of this as well as a place in which to simply play some video games and make friends. Stuart Runberg, co-owner of The Vault, a gaming center in Amarillo, TX, said the business was created because:

We're trying to really push for some of these kids who are maybe not athletically inclined, but could definitely benefit from the aspects of teamwork and sportsmanship that their athletic counterparts in school have been experiencing since early grade school. The athletic component does not make you a better adult; it does not make you a better member of society. Learning how to communicate and interact and deal with the positives and the negative of life in a constructive way, being on a team, those will help you in life.

Self-identity. Individuals may find pop culture and fandom as a way to self-identify and answer the question “who am I?” (Konrath, 2012). For Megan Wilson, she “was always very quiet and antisocial” but pop culture gave her the opportunity to be more “open and have interesting conversations with strangers.” Her behavior, attitude, and personality changed from a reserved individual to one of self-confidence. Stuart Runberg was involved with pop culture at an early age and it helped determine his career in the gaming industry: “that strong social aspect really kind of pushed me into where I am now with what I’m doing with my life.” Furthermore, at The Vault, he says “it’s been nice seeing some of these kids kind of crawl out of that shell, and open up and seem to improve and be happier.” These individuals are learning who they are by engaging in social activity centered around pop culture.

Josh Wilson spoke the most about the correlation between pop culture fandom and self-identity:

These characters that have come to life in print and in media and film and TV, have helped shape my decision making on how I can treat people who are different than myself, how I interact with people, with bullies; how I interact with people who are helpless. What can I do for those who could never repay me in return.

He went on to describe how pop culture/media has impacted the various aspects of his life, and effected the many roles he has since acquired:

These pop culture stories, especially the superhero stories, have given me a lot of time to reflect on who I am as a person, as an employee, as an employer. It's helped me become a better father and a better husband. All just by vicariously experiencing and living all of these stories of conquest and triumph and tragedy.

Lastly, he describes how his childhood television shows aided in making sense of reality, and media, or more importantly, the lessons within, can be passed along to other generations:

I love the Power Rangers. I had a bad home life. Things were bad. But I knew every day when I came home, I was going to see Jason and Trinnie and Billy, and I knew that Zac was going to come in there, and there's the Power Rangers and they are going to defeat Rita...[and] we want to share that to our children and say

“Hey, this was the best thing out there. It really helped me get through some tough times.”

Not only has pop culture helped these individuals uncover a sense of who they are, but these moments may also be shared in hopes of promoting the same within others. Self-identity is a personal experience, one of discovery through adventure, exposure, and contemplation (Wilner, 2017). In the case of the participants, pop culture has proven to be that vehicle.

Chapter Summary

Pop culture and fandom mean different things to different people; however, these meanings tend to run parallel to one another. The eight participants interviewed for this study provided varying responses and distinctive perspectives. However, these differing viewpoints reached the same conclusion. First, nostalgia and sharing that personal attachment and emotional experience. Second, connecting in some way to fictional realities, characters, and pop culture in general and how that affected them in the past and in the present. Last, these participants discovered themselves, regardless of what media or specific pop culture object was consumed, and found a means to belong to an idea greater than themselves.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Eight participants were interviewed in order to understand why and how pop culture is integral to their life. Foremost, it was clear pop culture has been a pillar throughout their entire lives. For some, video games, television shows, movies, etc., of their childhood have found resurgence and permanence in their adulthood thanks in part to the Internet, home video, and conventions. Additionally, some of the fandoms to which they attach themselves to involve media from various countries and ethnicities, e.g. anime and manga from Japan. A fictional story and characters created a thousand plus miles away have become instrumental to someone's life here in the Texas Panhandle.

Synthetic experience has tremendously affected all of these participants, allowing for relatable characters and issues as well as sweeping, adventurous stories in which to escape. Some found solace within the material, incorporating a television series' episodes moral undertones (or overtones) into their own personality, behavior, and attitude. Lessons, typically those involving coming-of-age or other life skills, were learned from cartoon animals, colorful martial arts warriors, or wizarding students. Other participants discovered friendships and strengthened family relationships by talking about pop culture, playing the hottest video game, or watching the latest Marvel Cinematic Universe installment. This was and still is their social gateway and glue; a way to belong to

something greater than themselves. Through an active and participatory fandom, these participants are enriched socially and personally, but also provide a valuable voice to the ever-changing climate of pop culture.

Results of this research may help those unfamiliar with pop culture and fandom to better understand the extensive impact of both on an individual's life. Sports, religion, travel, and other fandoms are ways in which to "find oneself", to make friends, and to learn certain necessary aspects of life (social skills, critical thinking, teamwork). Pop culture and fandom are of no exception and should be taken just as seriously, providing the same means and results as other methods of achieving such results; they are different paths to traverse the same mountain to traverse, so to speak.

Limitations

In executing this study, several limitations arose. Please note, since this written portion is accompanied by a documentary film, that these limitations will be relevant to either/or, or both.

Ages for this study ranged from early twenties to 53 (one participant did not disclose her age). Perhaps increasing that range would have helped broaden the view of pop culture and fandom, e.g. teenager to mid-fifties or older. Expanding the generation gap would possibly allow for a look into the perspective of youth today compared to the youth of half-a-century ago. Furthermore, examining what was "popular" then versus today may have added more robustness, especially in terms of mediums (e.g. radio or television serials)

Another issue was lacking communication, or miscommunication. Many of the eight participants of this study were not part of the original planning phase. The

investigator had in mind other individuals, such as local business owners (whose business is media-based pop culture related in some aspect), a pop culture merchandise collector, and a museum director. Despite attempted contact through various mediums including in-person visits to businesses, the investigator made little to no progress in recruiting the aforementioned individuals for the study. Better planning or outreach techniques may have affected the outcome. Those interviewed, however, provided great perspective and authentication, though more common persons (those who do not work for, own, or operate a pop-culture related business) might have given a more rounded view.

More, or perhaps, different questions could have been asked. Although the research question was answered by the participants, rephrasing or generating new questions might have proven more effective, or at least provided more details and additional insight into why pop cultural is integral to their life. For example, a question tailored to possible negative incidents in their life in which their love for pop culture was ridiculed or the individual was bullied because of it. Another example would inquire “What would your life be like without pop culture in it? Or rather, what if you had never become a fan of anything pop culture related?”

In terms of shooting video and recording audio, an assistant or two would have been helpful. The investigator may be tech savvy and able to perform a video/audio recorded interview, however an extra person’s involvement might have proved useful in location scouting, framing, chasing rabbit trail interview questions, editing, and setting any aesthetic elements which would prove beneficial for a video.

Suggestions for Future Research

Pop culture and fandom is an extremely wide and deep information pool. Regardless if research goes beyond the “third wave” or maintains a steady beat in its current form, pop culture and fandom could benefit from future research. For instance, narrowing the scope of the study to cosplayers, convention directors, collectors, etc., would help understand why they do what they do and why is their focus on pop culture.

Another study may compare pop culture fandoms of various generations, such as what fandoms do teens associate with as compared to thirty-somethings. This investigation could look into specifics, such as video games, movies, television shows, as well as how they access content, time spent, and how it was introduced to them. Findings could help bridge the generational communication gap, or at least, better understand it, considering most younger generations are born into a technologically advanced environment.

Future research may also look into a layman’s perspective about pop culture and fandom. Layman, in this instance, means someone who does not associate with a pop culture fandom, nor considers pop culture integral or a mainstay in their life. Consuming the occasional television show, movie, novel, etc., is fine; the individual simply does not claim that pop culture had influence on their childhood or contributes any significance to their adult life.

The researcher of this study would like to ask the same research question yet apply it on a national scale, seeking YouTube celebrities, museum curators/directors, award-winning authors, and television/film stars who have made a contribution to and/or established a career of pop culture. This study gave a local perspective; expanding upon

that might give pop culture and fandom studies a more defined edge considering nationally if not globally recognized names would be attached to the research.

Closing

Pop culture fandom is a phenomenon which has been growing throughout the last century, partly due to the advent of the Internet and increased content production (e.g. streaming services, independent creators). Regardless of the logistics behind boosted volume or assimilation, looking at the individual helps better understand what pop culture means from the consumer perspective. While some people may see cartoons, video games, and movies, these participants experienced family bonding, childhood, friendship, and self-identification through these mediums. Moreover, it remains a vehicle in which to strengthen existing relationships and to discover new ones, or a way to establish a career, exercise a creative side, or to simply escape for a moment from the pressures of the real-world.

What is relevant to an individual's life is subjective; we all have different objects, ideas, beliefs, etc. To the participant, pop culture is of no exception, in that it is important in shaping who they've become, who they are, and who they will be. Findings from this study attempt to support that claim, in hopes to show the personal relevancy and lifelong impact media-based pop culture has upon an individual.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: WAIVER (PRE-INTERVIEW)

Waiver of Consent: Pop Culture and Nostalgia Study

I, _____, acknowledge that this study seeks to understand and evaluate the continuing obsession of pop culture, and that by signing this document, I agree to a recorded (video and audio) interview in which I will answer questions pertaining to the focus of this research. Furthermore, I also understand that:

- My responses may lead to further questions not listed on the sheet made available to me prior.
- I will answer to the best of my ability and knowledge of the subject matter.
- The video and audio recording will be used for a documentary film.
- The researcher and editor have full control over what portions of my interview will be used for the documentary.
- The researcher and editor will not use my video and audio in such a way as to create, instigate, or elude to anything negative, derogatory, racist, sexist, or otherwise offensive. Essentially, they will use my interview in a neutral, albeit positive way.
- My participation is purely voluntary. If I wish to back out or extract myself from the study, no harm or other consequences will follow. If video footage or audio were recorded, I will witness the deletion of said media.
- After the interview, a second waiver will be presented to me. If I sign it, the recorded footage will be used for the documentary and written portion of the thesis, i.e. I cannot withdraw. If I DON'T sign it, I am able to withdrawal from the documentary and written portion of the thesis entirely. As per the previous bullet point, all recordings will be erased in my presence.
- I will not receive any monetary compensation or otherwise. All expenses (airfare, hotels, meals, etc.) will be paid for voluntarily out of my own pocket. The researcher will not be held liable for any financial incentives or reimbursements. This includes the distribution of the documentary.
- The researcher cannot and will not sell the documentary or acquire any capital gain on the product. Therefore, he is not liable, obligated, or lawfully required to give money or pay me monetarily before, during, or after the film at any time.
- Again, this is a strictly volunteer interview.

- For further information, questions, or concerns regarding this study, please contact:
 - Dr. Noah Franken – Primary Investigator/ WTAMU Professor of Communication
 - nfranken@wtamu.edu
 - 806.651.2803 (office)
 - Dane Glenn – Co-Investigator/ WTAMU Graduate Student
 - dtglenn1@buffs.wtamu.edu
 - 806.340.4906 (cell)
 - Dr. Angela Spaulding - WTAMU Dean of Graduate School
 - aspaulding@wtamu.edu
 - 806.651.2731 (office)

By printing and signing my name below, I have read and understand the statements within this document. These statements have also been orally explained to me by the co-investigator.

Print Name:_____

Sign Name:_____

Date:___/___/___

Witness Print Name:_____

Witness Sign Name:_____

Date:___/___/___

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Questions:

1. What does nostalgia mean to you?
2. What are some of your earliest memories in regard to media? For instance, the first television show you remember watching.
3. How does the love for your childhood media affect you now as an adult?
4. Why did you choose your profession? (NOTE* THIS QUESTION WILL BE TAILORED DEPENDING UPON THE PERSON'S CAREER, e.g. if the subject is a YouTube celebrity who reviews old video games, then the researcher will ask "Why did you choose to make a living by reviewing old video games?")
5. Walt Disney once said "Growing old is mandatory. Growing up is optional." When did you first realize that you wouldn't "grow up", that you couldn't give up your love for pop culture?
6. In your opinion, what started the phenomenon of integrating past pop culture within the present? Why not leave it in the past? Why merchandise it now?
7. In your opinion, what factor or factors contribute to the growing obsession with pop culture? For example, the increasing number of pop culture conventions.
8. Why do you think TV and film companies create reboots, the reimagining of older material, revivals, or set present day produced media in past decades (e.g. Stranger Things)?
9. Do you feel this obsession is a generational thing and thus will eventually pass or do you feel it is the start for generations to come?
10. Is there anything else you'd like to add, like a personal story, experience, or knowledge you would like to share?

APPENDIX C: WAIVER (POST-INTERVIEW)

Waiver of Consent: Pop Culture and Nostalgia Study

I, _____, acknowledge that this study seeks to understand and evaluate the continuing obsession of pop culture, and that by signing this document, I agree to a recorded (video and audio) interview in which I have answered questions pertaining to the focus of this research. Furthermore, I also understand that:

- My responses may have led to further questions not listed on the sheet made available to me prior.
- I have answered to the best of my ability and knowledge of the subject matter.
- The video and audio recording will be used for a documentary film.
- The researcher and editor have full control over what portions of my interview will be used for the documentary.
- The researcher and editor will not use my video and audio in such a way as to create, instigate, or elude to anything negative, derogatory, racist, sexist, or otherwise offensive. Essentially, they will use my interview in a neutral, albeit positive way.
- Upon signing this document, the recorded footage will be used for the documentary and written portion of the thesis, i.e. I cannot withdrawal or retract my statements.
- I will not receive any monetary compensation or otherwise. All expenses (airfare, hotels, meals, etc.) will be paid for voluntarily out of my own pocket. The researcher will not be held liable for any financial incentives or reimbursements. This includes the distribution of the documentary. However, upon request, I may be given a hard copy of the completed film free of charge.
- The researcher cannot and will not sell the documentary or acquire any capital gain on the product. Therefore, he is not liable, obligated, or lawfully required to give money or pay me monetarily before, during, or after the film at any time.
- For further information, questions, or concerns regarding this study, please contact:
 - Dr. Noah Franken – Primary Investigator/ WTAMU Professor of Communication
 - nfranken@wtamu.edu
 - 806.651.2803 (office)
 - Dane Glenn – Co-Investigator/ Graduate Student
 - dtglenn1@buffs.wtamu.edu
 - 806.340.4906 (cell)
 - Dr. Angela Spaulding - WTAMU Dean of Graduate School
 - aspaulding@wtamu.edu
 - 806.651.2731 (office)

By printing and signing my name below, I have read and understand the statements within this document. These statements have also been orally explained to me by the co-investigator.

Print Name: _____

Sign Name: _____

Date: ____/____/____

Witness Print Name: _____

Witness Sign Name: _____

Date: ____/____/____

APPENDIX D: MEDIA DELETION FORM

Witness of Deletion

I, _____, am withdrawing from the study. I have witnessed that all audio and video of me in regard to the interview has been deleted and therefore cannot and will not be used for either the written portion or the documentary film of this study. Furthermore, I will not receive any monetary compensation or otherwise. All expenses (airfare, hotels, meals, etc.) will be paid for voluntarily out of my own pocket. The researcher will not be held liable for any financial incentives or reimbursements.

Print Name: _____

Sign Name: _____

Date: ____/____/____

Witness Print Name: _____

Witness Sign Name: _____

Date: ____/____/____