

Best Song Ever—Forever? Exploring How Post-youth Fans Give Meaning to their Life-Long Music Fandom

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Abstract

This study explores how aging One Direction and Taylor Swift fans continue their fandom in(to) adulthood. Drawing on interviews with twenty-three female fans, this article examines what happens if one actively pursues fandom after youth. Despite having multiple solo-careers to keep track of, or adjusting to new (Swift-)‘eras’, ‘aging pop fandom’ seems to go beyond the music: results demonstrate that these young aging fans consider themselves ‘life-long fans’, having been fans for such a long time. Additionally, their current fandom is about friendships and belonging to a community (particularly prevalent during the pandemic) and illustrative of how they as young fans developed (media) skills vital to one’s current career. What this study reveals is that whether it’s through (re-)listening to music, attending concerts or themed club-nights, pop music fandom forms a soundtrack to their process of aging.

Keywords: Pop fandom, post-youth aging, life-long fandom, One Direction, Taylor Swift

Introduction

The irony is, anybody who works in music now, was a fangirl or fanboy at some point, because that’s why you went to work in the music industry (Louis Tomlinson, former One Direction, on the idea of “fangirls” and his opinion on the topic, in an interview with Austrian radio Energy NRJ, 19 October 2022).

In an interview with an Austrian radio station, Louis Tomlinson—one of the members of the British boy band One Direction—praises his fans. When asked about his fanbase he points out that they are loyal, he compliments their organizational skills for hosting streaming parties, and they make him feel good about his career. Even more so, “those following me from the band [One Direction], we’ve kinda grown up together” he mentions. Consequently, when asked about his views on the so-called fangirls admiring him, he continues to praise them by putting them in an equal position to those in the music industry, “They have similar ideas when it comes to marketing strategies on single releases”. Tomlinson even states “I do think [...] the stereotype of fangirls couldn’t be further from the truth. There’s so much passion and understanding of what they’re talking about”. Of course, as an artist Tomlinson is dependent—as he rightfully acknowledges—on and of his fandom. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see how he points out several aspects of what his adult fans are capable of doing in today’s world. His fans possess organizational skills, demonstrate a level of creativity like that of marketing professionals, and most important, have a passion for and understanding of their object of fandom. Is this interview evidence of a rare occasion in which we can find a musician taking his adult, often female, fans seriously?

Although Tomlinson might praise his fans for their capabilities and dedication, the common understanding of ‘fangirls’ in today’s world is still quite stereotypical (cf. Gerrard 2022; Yodovich 2016). Although previous research in fan and music studies illustrates how female fans indeed experience stigma and suffer from this label of ‘fangirl’ even into adulthood (i.e., Anderson 2004; Yodovich 2016; Vroomen 2004), this study aims to explore and clarify what these adult fans ‘do’ as fans. Such an examination might help to challenge the stereotypical image of the ‘screaming fangirl’ (see Duffett 2017 on how this can also be empowering to young fans), or further shed light on (or contest) claims that fandom is something that belongs to youth and is only to be revisited nostalgically (as studies by Hills 2005 and Driessen 2019 discuss). This study highlights how younger adults let fandom play a part in their lives and identities, by looking at how they continue their passion for pop music they have been attached to since their youth. To be precise, it draws on two fandoms, that of boyband One Direction (2010–2016), who are currently facing a band in hiatus, yet its solo members are releasing new music, and fans of Taylor Swift (active since 2004), who we consider a musical chameleon because she is known for releasing albums in different musical styles every few years. These ‘case studies’ are interesting for two reasons: one, although we might assume that One Direction (1D) has come to a halt since this hiatus, the solo careers of the members offer an opportunity for continuing one’s fandom. Two, Swift’s ever-evolving and ever-changing persona (from country to pop to folk, etc.)—referred to as ‘eras’—offers a continuous invitation to reassess her music and career, and potentially if one wishes to continue their fandom. Accordingly, both cases provide opportunities for retrospection (Elliot 2019) and reflection on moments at which one’s fandom could be reiterated, rejected, or even stopped (Williams 2018), making them especially interesting to scrutinize.

What we aim to learn from these fans who, whilst young, are still aging, is how they commit to their fandom in this phase of life. Having moved from their teenage years into what Hodkinson and Bennett (2014) describe as “post-youth”, they have

emerged into people who are facing the challenges and struggles of adulthood. Think about working a full-time job, starting a family, or living independently from their parents, becoming financially responsible for their own lives and household, or combining a career and family-life for example. Although there is a growing body of research on aging fans, these works discuss elderly fans (for example Van den Bulck and Van Gorp 2011) or older adults (for example Hills 2019; Anderson 2012; Vroomen 2004), while studies on young adults' continued fandom are emerging (Driessen 2015, 2018; Gerrard 2022; Yodovich 2016). More so, fandom and music play important roles in life events and milestones (Bielby and Harrington 2010, 2011; Jennings and Gardner 2016; Istvandy 2019). Plus, this can offer a sense of ontological security if a loyal fan is, for example, committed to an object of fandom across longer periods of time (Williams 2015). Therefore, we consider the focus of this article on this 'post-youth' or 'younger adults' group as a contribution to understanding aging music fans and why and how this practice can continue over time (Harrington and Bielby 2018). Moreover, this group also forms an important audience segment in times when decade parties (Van Der Hoeven 2014), club nights themed around their favourite childhood artists, or the reliving of old classics via trendy platforms like TikTok (Kate Bush's 'Running Up That Hill' due to the song featuring heavily in Netflix-hit series *Stranger Things*) are plenty.

To give an impression of how post-youth fans give meaning to their fandom after youth, we draw on interviews with twenty-three female fans with the global fandoms of One Direction and Taylor Swift. After performing a thematic content analysis on these interviews, we identified two patterns offering an understanding of how these fans give meaning to their adult fandom: first, aging pop fandom seems to go beyond the music. Our results demonstrate how post-youth fans consider themselves 'life-long fans' to whom (online) friendships and belonging to a community play significant roles. Second, being a life-long fan also comes with a practical advantage: many interviewees indicate how they, as young (teenage) fans, developed (media) skills vital to their current career paths. This study reveals how these practices, whether it is through (re-)listening to songs, attending (solo-)concerts or themed club-nights, pop music fandom forms a soundtrack to their process of aging. Before discussing these results more in-depth, we now first turn to positing this research theoretically in the realms of aging, music- and fan studies.

Post-Youth Fans and Life-long Pop Fandom

Despite more academic works on forms of continued fandom, we can still consider it an emerging topic in studies on pop music or other genres. As Harrington and Bielby (2018: 406) state, 'Fandom in youth and adolescence has received considerable attention [...] reflecting both the profit potentials of the youth market and long-held associations between fan practices and childhood development'. However, this does not mean that fandom cannot or does not continue after this youthful phase. As the authors argue, precisely the age-graded life transitions and milestones that follow this early period of one's life make it interesting to examine fandom (Harrington and Bielby 2018). Think of how fandom can help one through processes of change, or adjust to a new phase in life, like graduating and going to college, or dealing with the loss of a loved one. Kotarba (2009), in his research on

the so-called baby boomers as the rock 'n roll generation, mentions that adult music fans sustain their interest in rock 'n roll for two reasons: first, keeping up with the music offers a sense of self-security; second, it helps them to grow as parents, or friends, by working hard to keep the genre relevant to their lives.

These previous works seem to closely relate to one's identity and how this identity develops over time. Yet, this study also aims to help unpack several aspects of female adult fandom further: First, by looking at female fans who continue their fandom into adulthood, we might learn about their views, practices, and behaviours in later life. On the one hand, this teaches us about creativity at a later age (Harrington 2018), particularly how fans affectively or emotionally bond with an object of fandom over time. Being able to look at how aging stars grow older and behave, might also be exemplary to one's own lifestyle and process of aging (Jerslev and Nybro Petersen 2018; Lavin 2015). On the other hand, it might offer insights into how fans deal with stereotypes of being a female fan at a later age. Interestingly, studies have shown that the 'gender stereotype' endures and is even held in place by 'older' female fans towards younger female fans (Gerrard 2022). Referring to and deriding the younger women as 'fangirls', helps to create and establish a feeling of legitimacy for their own position as older fans, but also to make a distinction that the demographic targeted are the younger fans (Gerrard 2022). In Gerrard's study (2022) there seems to be a sense of ageism going on: framing the younger fans as controversial and doing so to generate a form of pleasure which leads to the older fan being an 'educator' of younger fans. This sense of being more 'mature' or knowledgeable as fan, also shows in Yodovich's (2016) work on adult female Star Wars-fans. Her fans (aged 18–30) define their fandom as an 'appreciation' (Yodovich 2016: 302) rather than an affection as it sounds more 'mature, reasonable and more critical, and less superficial or hormonal' (Yodovich 2016: 302). So, for this article it might be interesting to learn how 'older' fans feel about their younger counterparts, but also their younger selves and the stereotypes surrounding this phase. More so, do these labels and stigmas persist when one admits to being an adult 1D-fan or Swiftie?

Second, from previous research we know fandom links closely to identity-formation, also when aging or encountering age-graded life transitions (Hills 2019; Harrington and Bielby 2018; Anderson 2012; Lavin 2015). This study can help us learn about fandom and different life milestones, which allows us to delve deeper into the sense of (ontological or at least) self-security among this group of fans over time and how fandom plays a role in this. Harrington and Bielby (2018) mention how becoming a fan redirects one's life course. As they argue (*ibid.* 2018: 408), this development "... gives new meaning and structure to specific life stages, and marks periods of one's past". Thus, fandom helps to offer a sense of continuity (or helps to pin down where that breaks) of one's life story. Furthermore, their work states that the stigma of being an adult fan might be changing as celebrities and other role models in media performances remain visible much longer, negotiating their own aging process. And even if that practice does not immediately lead to changes, it does help to slowly change age norms of what is legitimate or 'allowed' when continuing fandom. Moreover, these changes and developments happen at a time when music fandom has been, and is becoming, more digital (Baym, Cavicchi and Coates 2017)—the age group focused upon in this study (18 to 38), is that of a truly

(assumed to be) digital-savvy generation, meaning they have grown up with the internet, yet some know a time without it from their childhood. Might nostalgia be an important mode for 'our fans', as Bennett (2017) notes in her work on Kate Bush fans, who resist and reject digital technologies to better enjoy their fandom?

Third, growing up 'digital' opens opportunities for fans to become or remain more closely connected to peers worldwide, but also for their relationship with an artist to unfold more closely and directly than was possible for previous generations. According to Baym, Cavicchi and Coates (2017), the practices fans have been doing and the infrastructures they have always had in place among themselves have now become steady elements in their digital fan lives too (e.g., sharing recordings, photos, news, or their own creative works). Before such practices and activities had offline predecessors creating vast networks of fandom across the globe—for example, the exchange economy of pen friendships via 'Friendship Books' among teen Take That fans as described by Löbert (2015). Here, Take That fans (mostly young girls in their teens) across Europe built a vast network of fans, sending around little stapled booklets with unique photos, interviews, or any other material to be shared with fans globally. They would then leave their address and reach out to a group of fans via these FB-lists, creating a feeling of intimacy (sending original photos which were difficult to get), whilst controlling and limiting who was allowed this experience (Löbert 2015). In her work, Löbert (2015) observes how this work of "female boy band practices [has] been considered as productive and creative" (p. 74). Yet, reading Tiffany (2022) on 'how fangirls created the internet as we know it' (the sentence serving as the sub-title of her book), one might believe that it is precisely the practices of young, teen, female fans online that helped to shape the internet (and its global community) as is it today. For example, fans starting *GeoCities*-pages for their favourite bands, creating and circulating memes as a secret yet global language, creating virtual communities in which information is exchanged or concert tickets are resold, having easter egg hunts for the latest news about an artist or to find hidden songs, but also fans' interest in and power of archiving of (otherwise lost) material of an artist (Tiffany 2022). The internet enabled young (female) fans to become a curator, creator, archivist, but also promotor at the same time while doing something they loved and found fun. For the fans discussed in this work, it might feel logical to consider their creative contributions as part of their fandom. This is reminiscent of Scott's (2012; 2019) fanboy auteurs: (male) fans who are writers or producers as well as being fans of the medium or genre. Scott (2012) characterizes fanboy auteurs as having deep knowledge of the medium or genre, a passion for the material they create, having a desire to connect with other fans, and a willingness to experiment with new forms of storytelling. Women can also play this role when participating in geek culture (Scott, 2019), but they often face challenges due to their marginalized position in this male-dominated culture, which makes the focus of this study on this group of post-youth female fans particularly interesting. As Löbert (2015), Scott (2019), and Tiffany (2022) noted, the contribution of young female fans to shaping and sustaining more inclusive and diverse online and offline fan networks has barely gained academic attention. So, while we theoretically might be quite knowledgeable about fandom, its transition to and workings in the digital world, and long-term music affection, there is still ground to be explored, particularly, when it comes to how these different topics

potentially merge or play a role in the fan-like lives and practices of post-youth female fans.

Methodological Approach

To understand how fans give meaning to their continued fandom, this study builds on interviews with (self-identified) fans of Taylor Swift (N=9) and One Direction (N=15). Interviews were considered the most viable option for this type of study, as they allow an open-question format that provides the possibility to study the thinking and communication behaviour of participants in depth, as well as receive “a rich understanding of human nature” (Roulston 2014: 1; Treadwell and Davis 2019). The interviews were conducted between late 2020 and early 2022. Our interviewees lived in the United States, the Netherlands, Belgium, Lithuania, Germany, the United Kingdom, and France. We approached them via X (formerly known as Twitter), where we posted an open call for interviews with (former) fans of 1D or Swift. Once we made connections with some fans, we used snowball sampling to find new respondents. This sampling style yielded an interesting mix of high- and low-profile fans. Some of the interviewees were well-known within the fandom, while others were less known but self-identified as a fan and were willing to participate in the interviews. As Pande rightfully points out in her works (2018) there is often a focus on white and western fans’ narratives and experiences in fan studies. We aimed to replicate the representation of the global communities that these fandoms are assumed to be, by interviewing fans from across the world and across different cultures (although living in the Netherlands, one of the interviewees, for example, identified as Latina). Interviewees were aged between 18 and 38, and their educational levels ranged from high school to PhD-degree. On average, the interviews lasted an hour: the shortest 29 minutes, the longest an hour and 46 minutes. Some of the participants were still pursuing their (associate, bachelor, master, or PhD) degree, while others held jobs ranging from sales assistant to financial controller, or from beautician to social-media manager. All interviewees identified as female: we did not purposely seek out only female participants, but this does seem to be reflective of the genres of the artists chosen: boy band One Direction and pop singer Taylor Swift (see Löbert 2015; Gerrard 2022).

In the interviews, a wide variety of topics revolving around the participants’ long-term fandom of the artist was discussed. This, for example, meant there was a focus on participants’ becoming-a-fan stories, what and how their fandom looked like over time, what they enjoyed about being a fan, what kind of practices they committed to, but also how they saw themselves in the future as fans of the artist (particularly if a potential come-back would happen for One Direction). The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviewees were asked for consent and were given pseudonyms to protect their identity, and to follow the ethical procedures and get ethical approval for the study. After the interviewees were conducted, they were transcribed. These transcriptions were then used for analysis.

The analysis on the transcribed interviews followed an approach called thematic content analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006: 79), a thematic content analysis is “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data, which minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail”.

A benefit from a thematic content analysis is the fact that there are no strict guidelines, yet several steps are offered to smooth this analytical process (Braun and Clarke 2006). Following these steps, for example grouping similar patterns together into larger themes, enabled us to identify the main patterns present in the data. These different themes reveal how long-term fandom is perceived by the interviewees and how and what kind of practices they engage and commit to as adult fans, but most interestingly, how the fandom and skills gained by being a fan in their youth has impacted their current adult lives and careers. The themes are further discussed in the next section.

Results

When aiming to understand how post-youth female fans give meaning to their continued fandom, a few main patterns could be identified in our collected data. Perhaps most surprising is how fandom proved to be a crucial ‘skill’ for one’s career in adulthood. Before discussing that pattern at length, we first explain how these post-youth fans consider themselves ‘life-long fans,’ having been fans for such a long time. Consequently, this reveals how their current fandom is about friendships and belonging to a community (particularly prevalent during the pandemic). Further, we discuss how the interviewees as young (teenage) fans developed (media) skills vital to one’s current career.

Life-long Fandom: from Bedroom Culture to Global Friendships

For most interviewees, their fandom is tied to their childhood. Some, like Swiftie Laura (19) have a very vivid recollection of how their fandom started. As Laura mentions, “So when I was six years old, and I heard her song on the radio, and I was obsessed with it”. She continues how Swift particularly appeals to her because she not only is a great musician, but also a great role model for teen girls like Laura:

The thing of Taylor Swift is that she's not only an excellent singer, songwriter, but she also has a great personality. And she, she's an incredible person in the way that she communicates a lot with her fans. She's always very nice, very polite, she has such an interesting story to tell. And just in general, she's a very interesting person, and she will never disappoint you.

This also resonates with Lucy (25), who also started her adoration for Swift because of the music and Swift’s personality: “I felt sort of like I was growing up with her a little bit because I mean, she's five years older than me. But it was kind of...I was going through this phase as well”. Lucy particularly points out how she felt like she was like Swift, or how Swift was showing her how ‘life’ should be done going through similar life-changes:

[...] It's just I feel like every stage of my personality development. [...] I've been able to look at her and see, this is how it works right now [...] and she's had to do it like in the full spotlight of the world. And she's kind of showing me how to do it with grace.

We consider their responses reminiscent of how Harrington and Bielby (2018) conceptualise what aging fandom could be about. What Laura and Lucy both illustrate is how their affection for Swift started, considering her a role-model and someone to learn from, which seems to become a motivating or instigating factor for their loyal fandom. Although One Direction and its members might not immediately offer a sense of being role models to their young fans, when this group of interviewees is asked about why they continue their fandom(s) as adults, the following response of Giulia (24) is telling:

I've been a fan of him [Harry Styles, 1D] for so long now. It feels different than for any other artist that I really like. I don't know why. Maybe because, it's gonna sound really cringy, but like, he's a part of like [...] my teenage years and yeah. It's like he's a part of like, who I am.

Giulia's response makes clear how important 1D still are to her (despite them being on hiatus), and along with following Harry, their presence is an important facet of her adult life and identity (also see Driessen 2018). Although these aspects are reflective of the 'becoming-a-fan' phase, as the fans age, their fandom, and what they look for in it, seems to develop into something else. Hills already stated, in his work on aging Pet Shop Boys-fans, that "what it means to be a fan can alter over time" (2019: 3). We argue this is not just about the meaning of a fandom, but also visible in altering fan activities. To illustrate our observation, consider this comment from 1D-fan Morgan (22), "when I was like 12 to 15 [...] the walls were plastered in posters [...] then my mom made me take them down when I was 15, cause she thought I was too old". Indirectly, this action reveals the stigma attached to fandom and age-appropriate behaviour. Yet, what is interesting is that many of the interviewees, whether 1D-fan or Swift-fan, indicate that their 'poster-plastered walls' found a new shape via digital platforms and online communities. So, the process of digitalisation, which Baym, Cavicchi and Coates (2017) analysed, has a major impact on continuing one's fandom. Lia (28), for example, joined the online platform Tumblr to share and repost fan-art of Taylor Swift:

[...] in 2014 with Tumblr, I realized that oh, yeah, there was this possibility to talk about her with other people [...] exploring a new side of like, yeah, of like, this hobby that I had about, like listening to her music. And I did some like arts and crafts. I painted some watercolour [images related to her] lyrics and things like that. And I would share them there. And people were really supportive. And yeah, it just became like...bigger than a hobby.

Furthermore, Lia's Tumblr—like Laura who also had created a Swift fan-account on Tumblr—gained traction from other fans because the singer started following them on the platform. Later, both Lia and Laura (at different occasions) were invited to meet Swift due to their online activities. Although they reflect positively on this outcome, even more important to both is how Tumblr offered the opportunity to meet fans across the globe, particularly if friends physically nearer to them did not share their passion for Swift. Lucy (25) shares how this online community matters greatly to her: "It's not so much about Taylor, but it's about this community that's been built up [...] we're all interacting and supporting each other". Moreover, to

Lucy this is “very valuable in terms of what fandom actually can offer”, which she reflects upon further by stating how beyond childhood it is difficult to achieve such a “friendship or sense of community” or this “shared admiration”.

The sense of community is also what counts for the 1D-fans, for whom Twitter seems to be the major platform to be a part of and find their peers. Melanie (22) even comments upon this by stating the following, “I feel like people that don’t have a fan account, it’s hard for me to think that someone is like a super fan without having a fan account”, which she further rationalizes with “the whole community is on there”. What we can take from this interviewee, is also that being involved in these on line networks is part and parcel of contemporary fandom. The importance of the online aspect is also visible in Kornelija’s (21) response:

[...] I think what has helped a lot is having friends that, um, having friends in real life and online that like One Direction as well, and whether they are active or not, um, we have always talked about them throughout the years and it like whether they are solo or not, they’re always releasing albums, releasing songs, at least one of them I enjoy all of their solo careers. And I think it helps me to keep, to keep myself engaged.

Additionally, this comment reveals how the online co-exists with the offline for this group of interviewed fans. As Kornelija mentions, for her it is a way of staying engaged with the band and fandom, despite their hiatus. However, this also presents a challenge for the aging fans, which Pascale (24) explains: “Most of the time I’m working, so I just don’t have enough time to be active, which is a shame”. Similarly, Irene (25) shares this sentiment, the paucity of time to engage in fandom, since she’s working a full-time job as an assistant manager: “I used to sometimes tweet 100 times a day, now I often skip a day or two”. Or Morgan who clarifies that in college she had less time to engage with others online, so she left Twitter for some time. Yet, when she came back, she noticed “they tweeted about their normal life, or about college, or their work, or whatever they were going through”. That also offered an opportunity to get to know these fans better, beyond their shared love for the band: “[...] it’s nice that like, we can tweet it out more, multiple things. [...] I feel like, obviously I know people a lot better versus back then”.

The interviewed Swifties also indicate they formed friendships (as illustrated in the quotes above) and mention how they now meet up or chat beyond Swift. Lia’s example here is illustrative: “We like sometimes hang out or like yeah, we go to each other’s houses and have like baked goods and just talk about Taylor or paint”. Even more interesting is Marieke’s (30) story here, as she displays Swift-memorabilia in her home, openly discusses going to concerts at work, and organizes ‘summer camps’ for fellow fans: “In 2011, I met a group of fans who I met online, because none of us knew other Taylor fans, so we decided to meet up at the concert”. Consequently, she founded the ‘Dutch fan-club chapter’ with a few other girls. With the fan club she organized fan-club days, which later transformed into a weekend away, summer-camp style in 2014. As Marieke mentions, “The fans indicated meeting up for a day was not enough, because they had to travel from across the Netherlands, so that’s how the idea of the Swift-camp was born”. About 30–50 fans meet at a certain location in the Netherlands to go camping together for a weekend: singing Taylor Swift songs at a bonfire, cooking together, and playing games.

Despite many of the fans attending for years in a row, also new fans join each year, which according to Marieke is a tell-tale sign of how friendly the adult fandom is. Furthermore, this group of fans stay well-connected to one another beyond the camping-trip, says Marieke: “When Taylor drops an exclusive, this sometimes happens when some of us are working or at our jobs, other fans buy it and sell it to you at cost price instead of asking an insane amount for it”. She finds that ‘inner circle’ of fans very meaningful, and it motivates her to remain a Taylor Swift fan over time.

For the Swifties, unlike the 1D-fans, there is an opportunity to see her perform, instead of having to visit a concert (or multiple concerts) by one of the band members. Nevertheless, Swift does not often come to the Netherlands or its neighbouring countries, so many of the Dutch fans attend concerts abroad. Maryse (32) and Lotta (22) plan their holidays in such a way that it coincides with Swift’s concert tours. Something they now, as adults, can do—having the legal freedom to travel unsupervised by parents, but also the financial means to visit the United States, Germany, or the United Kingdom for a Swift-gig (cf. Driessen 2018). This post-youth freedom (Bennett and Hodkinson 2012) is also the case for the 1D-fans. Alison (23) who tends to visit the different members’ solo concerts, explains: “Obviously, now I have the money and time to actually see them, which is very exciting because I only saw a real One Direction concert once”. And although the band might not be performing as a group, after the pandemic the so-called ‘themed club nights’ (and one-night boat cruises) appeared, where only music of 1D (or Swift, or any other pop sensation) is played (Tiffany 2022). The main motivations for going to these club nights were to have a good time with friends from the fan community, relive old times and to get a feeling of nostalgia. As May (22) explains these nights help “to have that nostalgic feeling, going together to have a good time with my friends that I met because of 1D and just dancing really hard to the music and screaming along the lyrics, that was really nice”. In their early adulthood, these fans seem to seek a sense of nostalgia, or a longing for reliving their recent past. Perhaps this is also particularly because with 1D being on hiatus, there is no other way to recreate the feeling of attending a performance by the band.

This sense of nostalgia is also present when discussing how fans used to express their fandom and how they currently make their passion visible. Alison (23) reminisces about the younger years of her fandom as follows:

Um, buying CDs, like literally this box is just One Direction, like [...] I can't even show you without spilling it, but like I have every One Direction album, every single, every DVD, every deluxe edition, like I bought everything [...] buy whatever merch I could, buy the t-shirts, buy posters, buy their books. Like, I literally have a whole like giant tub just filled up like One Direction merch from like 2012.

Now, she and other interviewees still consider collecting a common fan practice—particularly buying limited-edition fan items during “quarantine periods” during the COVID-19 pandemic (Alison). Interviewee Irene (25) indicates how this also has become easier now than in their youth through platforms and apps like eBay, Vinted, or Depop: “It’s nice to own something physical”. This feeling the fans indicate, of owning something tangible, is reminiscent of Löbert’s (2015)

descriptions of the very young group of Take That-fans' Friendship Books, although their trading and collecting happened via physical mail.

The different practices brought up by the interviewed fans unpack what they, as adult (female) fans, appreciate and find meaningful in their fandom: finding, forging, and sustaining friendships online. Additionally, some of these friendships move offline, by for example hosting physical meetups or even a camp. Such connections form an important factor to continuing one's fandom, for both the Swift- as well as 1D-fans. Of course, with One Direction being on hiatus, there is no new music to enjoy or concerts to attend, but those interviewees indicate how attending themed club nights or collecting memorabilia helps in recreating fan-like feelings. Moreover, the Swift interviewees all mention how visiting concerts is somewhat of a rare or even lucky opportunity, which means they also look for other ways to express their fandom (like the 'summer camp' or meeting up with each other to talk about Taylor or just bake).

From Fan Practices to Career Skills

An observation not yet much discussed in previous works on fandom, is how the skills learned in early fandom have come to matter in later life. Tiffany (2022) subtitled her book on One Direction fans 'Fangirls created the Internet as we know it'. She unpacks how female fans pioneered in building fan pages and forums online, to express their fandom but also to reach out to others (Tiffany 2022). However, as Cavicchi (2017 in Baym, Cavicchi and Coates 2017) argues, access to artists and the context in which this happen are not that different from before. Yet, many of these activities (getting an insight into the celebrity's life) now also happen in a digital format. As Cavicchi (ibid.: 142) clarifies, "[...] social media sites, like Facebook or Twitter, openly encouraged users to exhibit their personal obsessions, to "like" and "follow" [...] "building followers" and marketing to a niche fan base, is a far more acceptable business strategy". Following that last train of thought, that building followers or marketing to a fan base is becoming more acceptable, it is interesting to notice how many interviewees refer to this for their own career paths. Floortje, a 24-year-old 1D-fan, discusses how she decided to study music journalism and pursue a career in the music industry: "[...] they [1D] had a huge impact [...] if it weren't for like social media. I don't think I would've done this job that I'm doing right now, like trying to be a music journalist". She elaborates on how this impact of the band and being a fan of 1D then helped her take this decision:

Floortje: [...] because with One Direction we did projects and everything, and I enjoyed that so much [...] that definitely influenced the way I was thinking about making a career.

Interviewer: Are there any other skills that you've learned because of being a fan?

Floortje: Creative marketing, social media management skills, [...] editing skills when it comes to video editing... Um, I don't know if this is a skill but like understanding trends. Yeah. Um, understanding fans and like being a fan, you understand fans. And that can be very helpful insight for like the music industry

where I'm going to work in, because what does a 50-year-old man know about 21-year-old girls?

So, what Floortje highlights here is how she came to this decision because of the activities she was involved in as a fan. To fully understand her argumentation, she explains precisely what she did as a teenage fan and how she gained those skills:

[...] One Direction fans were the first ones to literally spam radio stations to play One Direction. So, so they would actually do it like, like send radio stations um, packages of like sweets and 'oh, please play blablabla by One Direction, we would really appreciate it'.

Although it is questionable if the 1D-fans were really the first ones to conduct this type of 'marketing campaign', they did succeed in carrying it out with the help of the fandom. Interesting for Floortje is that such creative ideas are now applicable and useful moments to reflect upon for her future career. As she demonstrates in her previous reflection, who knows better about reaching the right audience in such scenarios: the 50-year-old or someone of the targeted age-group? Furthermore, other interviewees, like Alison for example, illustrate how she was part of online activities or mass events to vote a solo member up for an award, or streaming parties to boost single or album releases. As she elucidates, "Another activity that I would do is voting online for stuff and like watching. Trying to break the Vevo [streaming platform] record and like watching the music video a hundred times". Besides these digital practices, fans also still commit to offline aspects like putting up posters or distributing flyers to promote their favourite 1D-members.

The fangirl-to-creative-industry career path is also pursued by Lotta, who was so inspired by Taylor Swift and her style, that she decided to recreate Swift's outfits and start a career in fashion design. Lotta praises Swift for continuously reinventing herself and thinking of new concepts to match her eras and personas, "that also is expressed in the outfits she wears". Additionally, Lotta describes how this inspired her to pick up fashion design: "The costumes from the videos and all (...) Whenever I went to concerts, then I recreated those outfits. And that's how I started [designing]". Now, in the Swift-fandom, she is somewhat of a well-known figure herself because other fans admire her creative talent and fashion creations. In a similar vein, Lia's watercolour artwork also gained ample attention in the Swift-fandom, but she considers her Tumblr fan page the true force in her current marketing-and-communication career development. To illustrate, Lia mentions different strategies to gain Swift's online attention: "Someone developed an app to see when she was online [...] if you knew she was online like five minutes ago or less, you should reblog yourself". This way, Lia's has been able to interact with Swift a few times (gaining likes on her post), and got herself and her fan page on Swift's radar, which led Lia's being invited to meet her backstage.

For most fans however, their skills development happens in two main ways: first, both the interviewed 1D-fans and Swift-fans comment on how they learned English at a very young age to understand lyrics, be able to watch and read interviews, but also to interact with fans across the globe (also see Driessen 2015). This comment by 1D-fan Giulia (24) is exemplary of this phenomenon: "That's how I know English, 100%. (...) I was listening to their song, but at the same time, we're looking

at a translation in French”, more so she mentions how she “watched lots of their videos in English. I mean, everything was in English. The fans on Twitter, everything was in English. I was constantly consuming content in English”.

Second, the skills development relevant for one’s career is practical: from learning a specific program (iMovie, or Movie Maker, or Adobe Photoshop) to navigating through social media via different platforms and their affordances (like Tumblr, Twitter, YouTube, leading to streaming parties, or creating and sharing fan-videos) to understanding the workings of fan engagement better because of hosting their own fan accounts and fan pages. Alison explains how “many people learned Photoshop or learned whatever this video software, like just to make One Direction edits. And now they’re like working in the industry”. Similarly, Sophie discusses this too: “And I think I’m not the greatest example, but I know a lot of people who actually like learned Photoshop, like during, during that time being a fan or like several other skills”, the latter referring to promotional skills, or perfecting one’s English. For Irene, now working in the industry, and Melanie, the aspect of fan engagement is a crucial skill they claim to have picked up by being such super fans themselves (cf. Baym, Cavicchi and Coates, 2017), so being a fan helped forge and foster their careers. Irene addresses how she thinks she has better “marketing skills than someone who didn’t have a fan account”, because she understands when and what she needs to post to facilitate engagement (cf. Scott 2012, 2019). Likewise, Melanie argues how being a fangirl herself really helped her become ‘team lead of fan engagement’ in the music industry:

(...) no one knows fans more than me, cause I’m a fangirl. So, in that company there wasn’t a doubt. Like I was made fan engagement, um, team lead because that was obvious. Like I’m a fangirl, I know what they want. I am them. And I feel like that definitely helped me.

Before, Melanie was responsible for her own fan account, learning what fans were looking for when interacting or following fellow fans or artists. That is why she feels so strongly about her position, but also about starting a career in the industry. As she admits, “I just loved the relationship with fans [so] much”.

As these adult fans reflect on the younger years of their fandom, they do so on an affective level, but also on a practical level. That latter aspect then also reveals how fandom, particularly the skills gained during those early years, like learning English or a getting to know the affordances of a certain social media platform, can be influential in one’s early adult career.

Conclusion

In this article, we offered an insight into how a group of post-youth fans sustain their fandom and their fan-like practices after youth. We did so by presenting our observations and findings based on interviews with twenty-three fans ‘pop fans’. Although it is a general assumption that one grows out of a ‘pop fandom’ as one ages into adulthood, these fans remain(ed) loyal to their favourite artists: One Direction (and its various solo members who are still touring while the band is on hiatus) and Taylor Swift.

Building on a thematic content analysis of the interviews we conducted, we argue that giving meaning to one's fandom in the post-youth phase of life reveals two main reasons or practices of how and why one commits to lifelong fandom. First, many interviewees reflect on how they became fans and how this currently still plays a role in their fandom (for example, considering Swift a role model for their own life, cf. Lavin 2015). Consequently, this leads to the fans emphasizing and highlighting how important they find it to share this passion with others: all fans indicate that at some point in their youth they joined or found an online network, a digital fandom (cf. Baym, Cavicchi and Coates 2017; Driessen 2018) with whom they could share and continue sharing their fandom. Although some of these friendships might have decreased over time due to getting a job or being occupied with one's studies, some have also taken the friendships offline and created new opportunities (like the Swift camp or a 'One-Direction-themed' boat cruise) to meet fellow fans in this phase of life. These new activities that the interviewees engage in (travelling to concerts abroad or attending multiple solo-concerts of various band members) can happen due to their now post-youth (Bennett and Hodgkinson 2012), socially and financially independent status. What these results demonstrate is that being an adult fan is not just about finding new ways to shape one's fandom, but also finding meaning in fandom beyond just the object of fandom and their art. So, it is about being part of a community, forging friendships, engaging in new fan-like activities that fit this phase in the life course (cf. Driessen 2015, 2018; Harrington, Bielby and Bardo 2018; Harrington and Bielby 2018; Istvandy 2019).

Second, when exploring the interviewees' continued fandom, we discovered a 'fangirl-to-creative industry practitioner' pipeline. Remarkably, for the interviewed fans, the skills they gained as teenage fangirls proved to be very valuable to their current career trajectories in adulthood (cf. Scott 2019). Many interviewees do not have English as their native language. However, they learned to master the language at a young age to be able to understand their objects of affection but also to communicate with other fans. Having online friendships form a big part of the fandom also meant one had to become skilled in the affordances of different online platforms or networks depending on changing trends (for example the One Direction—and Swift—fans moved from forums, to Tumblr, to Twitter). Furthermore, there were also offline practices to commit to as a young fan (as one of the interviewees illustrates: mailing sweets to a radio station to get airtime for 1D), which now might inspire these fans' views on marketing or social media campaigns. So, being a fangirl—for this group of interviewees—has a professional, or career, advantage.

Although these two patterns show how fandom beyond youth can exist and plays an important role in these interviewees' lives, there are also aspects of aging pop fandom that this study has not been able to tap into. For example, as Gerrard (2022) and Yodovich (2016) observe in their studies, the older fangirls seem to change their discourse when talking about being a fan. Additionally, they also belittle the 'newer' fans. This study did observe some of these aspects (for example in how the 1D-fandom does show signs of such 'solo stans' as they call them: fans who feel they are above other fans for liking a particular band member more). It would be interesting to in a future study to examine this difference between younger, post-youth, and older fans (or perhaps better stated: newer and older fans). What this

study also has not done is more actively include male fans (to be able to further discuss the gendered dimension of being an adult fan) or pursue a more diverse sample (cf. Pande 2018).

To conclude, our study highlights and addresses how post-youth fans continue their fandom into adulthood. Even if pop fandoms are not expected to go beyond childhood, they can be re-invented and sustained (or reclaimed) in this post-youth phase of life. More so, they help the interviewees with a retrospective on their own skills development, and preparation for a career. But also offer a sense of nostalgia and most of all: a community and feeling of belonging that many might not find in their everyday environment. Having a fandom that one has been a part of for many years and being able to hold onto that at a time of tremendous change (working fulltime, graduating high school or university, starting a family perhaps)—that is what is meaningful to the interviewed fans in this work. In sum, the music and fandom form a ‘soundtrack’ to the interviewed fans’ aging process.

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