When Film Fans Become Fan Family: Kevin Smith Fandom and Communal Experience

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Abstract

In September 2009 I began an AHRC-funded audience study of online fan communities, investigating the ways in which participants negotiate and categorise their fandom and online relationships, using Kevin Smith fans as a case study. Admitting to my scholar-fandom of Smith, my methodology required entrée into the field of study, with the resultant communication between myself and Smith fans adding to my own conceptualisation of the fan "community". Initially, my virtual conceptualisation of Smith fandom placed an emphasis on fan cultural capital (Fiske, 1992: 33). However, this view was challenged during a research trip to Red Bank, New Jersey in August 2010. Based on interviews with fans taken prior and during this trip, this article will explore the way in which the communal experience of meeting fellow enthusiasts can strengthen fandom, and how collective experience can add to the self-defined notion of the fans as a family. The paper will examine how fans who attend "meet-ups" categorise themselves in relation to those who do not, as well as those not "active" online, and the extent to which Kevin Smith fandom becomes secondary to the group's family dynamic.

Following the lead of Matt Hills' suggestion that the concept of fan social capital 'must ... be closely investigated in future [fan studies] analyses' (2002: 57), this paper will take into account the way in which the Smith fan audience considers their network of fan friends as a large part of the appeal of Smith fandom, and how cultural capital regarding Smith's films is no longer necessary.

Keywords: fandom, community, sociality, Kevin Smith, aca-fandom, cult geographies, capital.

Introduction

This paper is based on a number of interviews conducted largely throughout 2010, taking into account responses to an online questionnaire (May-August 2010), face-to-face interviews (August 2010), and email correspondence (September 2010-January 2011). Informed by Matt Hills' notion of fan social capital (2002: 57), I will largely focus on the findings of my research trip to Red Bank, New Jersey in August 2010, where filmmaker Kevin Smith (a Red Bank native) had scheduled a Q&A show in order to celebrate his 40th birthday. Smith's Q&A shows, largely comprising of the director responding to audiences' questions with lengthy comedic narratives, tend to become the focal point of fan meetups –events where those from an online space can come together in order to socialise in "real life". Therefore, although the primary purpose of my trip was to interview research participants about their offline fan experiences, I was also going to be experiencing a meetup for the first time myself, meaning that the trip would serve the dual function of "professional" scholar and "social" fan experience.

In invoking Hills' work this article will question, through the case study of this specific fan culture, the extent to which different forms of capital and theoretical frameworks can be readily applied. I will examine the specific social structure of this culture, and detail how through multiple forms of engagement sociality (and subsequent hierarchy) need not follow a linear pattern. Rather, I will present the concept of an on- and offline sociality cycle – a means by which aspects of fan "community" can be measured through the (previously assumed opposite [Tuszynski 2008: 52]) binaries of "real" and "virtual". Instead, this article will question this opposition and will present a case study of a fan culture that takes the shared fandom as a starting point, before co-opting the culture to support the community itself.

Research Background

> **Untamed Aggression:** There are VERY few celebrities who actively engage with their fans on such a regular basis. Twitter has opened up the playing field to some degree, but the number that invite fans to poker games and test screenings are still the minority, in that it's mainly one. (Survey response, 12/5/2010)

At the time of my research trip in August 2010, the View Askew Message Board – the online forum dedicated to fans of filmmaker Kevin Smith – celebrated a web presence of fifteen years. Owned and operated by Smith's production company View Askew, the Board has existed in various guises since 1995, providing an official space where fans of Smith can collate and express their fandom of films such as *Clerks* (1994) and *Chasing Amy* (1997), as

well as other aspects of Smith's media output, such as his various podcasts (the *SModcast* podcast network), comic books, and live Q&A shows. Despite Smith's fondness for social networking site Twitter, where he currently has over 1.8 million followers, it is undoubtedly the Board that has been the most interactive portal for Smith fans, as it has allowed more dialogical, communicative, and personal relationships to be formed, largely due to Smith's own participation. Furthermore, the Board is the only of Smith's websites that requires a fee to join,[1] ensuring 'the assholes, trolls and flamers who populate the dark corners of the internet, armed to the teeth with bitterness, envy, and a lot of free time'[2] generally have no opportunity to post unconstructive negative feedback, and that members' 'license to post, quite like [their] license to drive ... is a privilege, not a right.'[3]

My interest in Smith has spawned from my own fandom of him and his work, and my PhD thesis concerns itself with research into Smith's online fan culture on the Board. Beginning as an exploration of what I felt was the distinctive nature of the relationship between Smith and his fans, my thesis initially took Smith's own view as a starting point. Smith notes that keeping in touch with his fans 'has made all the difference in not just my career, but my life as well.' (2007: 63), which is a stark contrast to the fan relationships experienced by a producer such as George Lucas, for example, whose fans' 'acceptance of the gross imbalance between the individual viewer and corporate producer' (Brooker 2002: 98) demonstrates the way in which 'The relationship between fan and producer, then, is not always a happy or comfortable one and is often charged with mutual suspicion, if not open conflict.' (Jenkins 1997: 512). I believe this 'mutual suspicion' appears to be largely absent from the relationship between Smith and his online fans,[4] with one possible reason being that with his frequent articulation of himself as a fan of his own and others' work,[5] Smith's online supporters view him as similarly a fan – a peer with whom they can identify with in the (initially) virtual space – rather than as part of a cultural institution.

The initial concern of my thesis was an interrogation of Kevin Smith's engagement with his fans, worthy of note because of his *initiation* of the fan community (Smith 2007: 321-3), *participation* in fan practices, and *prolonged, consistent communication* with fans. These practices, in opposition to the previous accepted gross imbalance between audience and producer as noted by Brooker, signalled an opportunity for Smith's audience to engage in fan activities alongside the object of their fandom, giving my work the chance to intervene with a study of a hitherto unexplored close relationship between producer and fans within fan studies. The nature of my fandom strongly informs my research, and although I make reference to Kevin Smith or View Askew "fans", I similarly categorise myself as part of that group. Subsequently, this paper will present research that considers the nature of social categorisation of Kevin Smith fandom from my own perspective, as well as that of my research participants.

In order to carry out my research I adopted a methodology of netnography, applying Robert Kozinets' (2010) methodological framework to fan studies. Previous audience studies have often adopted an ethnographic set of methods;[6] however my adoption of a netnographic methodology demonstrates a move into a more cyber-literate form of ethnography, for as Kozinets notes:

> Netnography adapts common participant-observation ethnographic procedures to the unique contingencies of computer-mediated social interaction: alteration, accessibility, anonymity, and archiving. The procedures include planning, entrée, gathering data, interpretation, and adhering to ethical standards. (2010: 58)

Although volumes on ethnography are useful for a methodological comparison,[7] Kozinets' methodology is acutely aware of how ethnography contends with *online* interaction, and my research will enable netnography to be applied to fan studies – a relationship that hitherto has not been explored in-depth.[8] Ultimately, I defined my methodology as a netnography – an online ethnographic research project that uses interviews and interaction with participants to present qualitative data within an autoethnographic context.

Taking this into account, and following Kozinets' recommendation of entrée into the culture, in January 2010 I began my participation on the Board, further entrenching my methodology into one of scholar-fandom. This tension between scholarship and fandom has remained a problematic issue for academic authors, with Sharon Marie Ross (2008), Sarah Gatson and Amanda Zweerink (2004), Mary Kirby-Diaz (2009), and David Lavery (2004) for example, all professing their fandom of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* whilst simultaneously noting the way in which scholar-fandom can be at times be derided by critics from the academic community.[9] Despite this however, I felt that in order to access the richest data for my research, becoming a part of the Kevin Smith online fan culture was a necessary process. In providing a template for participation, Kozinets recommends an honest (yet wary and controlled) approach for fellow netnographers, and similar to Matt Hills' caution of an "overly-confessional" approach (2002: 11-2), warns:

> Be aware as you begin your project that archiving and accessibility cut both ways. The Internet is forever. Everything you post online is accessible to everyone, very likely for a long time to come. … So, before you think about incorporating the cultural interaction of online community members into your research, consider what your netnographic incursion might look like as a part of *my* research. (2010: 93)

This distinction between "professionalism" in academic work and portraying an active fan personality is a point I have been keen to address, and something I have done elsewhere

(Phillips 2010). What I have perhaps been most wary of, however, is that in attempting to tread the line between scholar and fan, there is a potential risk of alienating myself from both groups. This tension inherent in scholar-fandom has recently been noted by Sam Ford, who observes:

> As fan communities face members who see their positions as enlightened because of their "superior" knowledge – and as academic conferences, programs, and journals are flooded with people who see fan studies as a justification to make a living writing about their hobby without worrying so much about any critical intervention or generating compelling insights – it's perhaps no surprise that the term [aca-fan] has "grown" to the point that people are now questioning whether its use has been stretched past usefulness. (Ford et al. 2011)

Through Ford's observation, it is clear that the position of the scholar-fan is one that is not easily reconciled, and adopting a position of scholar-fandom must be negotiated carefully in order to satisfy the judgements of both fan *and* academic peers – it is not just a protective label one can assume as a protective disclaimer from both groups.

The apparent risk of scholar-fandom is something I have already experienced in my research. For example, during one exchange with an (apparently hostile) fellow fan on the Board, the specificities and motivations for my research were called into question.[10] In order to defend my work, I adopted a more formal tone of language than I had previously used online, and the poster (and at least one other) reacted negatively to my descriptions of the processes of academic enquiry. Discussing my research in a candid manner within the space of research itself appeared to court controversy, and whilst negative reaction was in the minority, taking an overly-academic tone within a "casual" space seemed somewhat problematic. In contrast, allowing one's "casual" self to be made accessible to an academic audience has implicit connotations of unprofessionalism and the loss of academic authority. In so readily detailing my Board activities within my research, and with posts relatively easy to find, there is potential for my authority to be undermined when less appropriate details can be sought.[11]

Rather than a thesis solely interrogating the nature of Smith's relationship with his fans, my own fan experiences – as well as those articulated to me by respondents – acted as a springboard to launch into further debates about the nature of fan practices and the boundaries of online "community". Throughout the research process, my tandem "fan experience" has largely consisted of participation on the Board, but rather than spending time solely discussing the media output of Kevin Smith, I took part in discussions on topics such as football, *Lost*, and *Doctor Who*, and also participated in message board games. Although I adopted netnography as a methodology in order to fully understand the

motivations of posters day-to-day, rather than picking and choosing comments out of context, by participating I was able to position myself as part of a social sect of The Board. In doing this, I made what I felt were meaningful connections separate from my role as a researcher.

The data collation aspect of my research began with research participants filling out an initial questionnaire, followed by subsequent email interviews. However, it was during this process that the scope and shape of the project began to alter. It became apparent that Smith's view that 'We have a symbiotic relationship, the fan base and I … I'm the tubby kid who made it good, who comes across less like an artist and more like your buddy who suddenly won the lottery of life' (Smith 2009) was a viewpoint shared by his fans, such as that seen in Untamed Aggression's response above. In further response to my question 'Do you think being a fan of Kevin Smith is different to being a fan of someone/something else?', the responses, although seemingly split between "yes" and "no", do seem to largely agree that there is something distinctively *personal* about Kevin Smith fandom. For example Hannah answered:

> Yes and no. I think Kevin spoils [us] by being so available. We have become accustomed to having this man who keeps no secrets from us as far as his life goes. I've been to his house. No other star I am a fan of has ever been so gracious and welcoming to me so it's a lot more intense of a fandom of Kevin … it's more of a borderline friendship.[12] (Survey response, 12/5/2010)

Here Hannah identifies her own relationship with Smith as being a resolutely more personal construct, particularly in opposition to other stars of whom she is a fan. Smith's openness is a similarly appealing trait for TheManWhoLikesSMod, who notes:

> Some may argue no, that it's just being a fan of another director, but I think there is difference in being a Kevin Smith fan. It is an incredibly centered, little collection of films that not all have been critically acclaimed, yet he manages to find the right people out there for them. It is also one of the most intimate fandoms I know of. I think that Kevin's close relationship with his fans is one of the key reasons why he stands out among other fandoms. (Ibid., 14/5/2010)

In contrast to this response, Ruth's Smith fandom is less about a fondness of his texts, and more about the producer behind the texts:

> … I'm not even a crazy fan of his movies, I'm a fan of the man himself. I think because of his time online, and his open relationship with the fans, there's a bit more of a devotion from the fans, but not in a psychotic way you can see with some other fan groups. (Ibid., 14/5/2010)

Babydoll forgoes discussion of being a fan of Smith or his texts altogether, and instead focuses on what she feels is a distinctive aspect of Kevin Smith fandom – the community that has arisen from the fan culture:

> I think it's different than being fans of some things (like sports teams or whatever) but very similar to being fans of anything that has some sort of cult status (like Firefly or BSG). Kevin Smith fans have created a community based on a mutual love of him and his work. If it weren't for that, many people in this community would have never met or have any reason to be friends. (Ibid., 12/5/2010)

The thoughts of Ruth and babydoll reflect my own experience as part of the Kevin Smith fan culture. Although as babydoll notes the community is founded on a mutual appreciation of Smith's media output, my own experience has been that communication on the Board is not dependent on this topic to function. Rather, because I entered into the Board some time after it was initially established, I felt there was a potential for topics dealing with Smith's films to have already been addressed. So although my initial conceptualisation of Smith fandom placed an emphasis on fan cultural capital (Fiske 1992: 33) – the knowledge that a fan has about their object of fandom – my participation revealed that the culture was not dependent on such capital being made explicit, and instead the culture seemed to value Hills' notion of "fan social capital" – the network of fan friends and acquaintances that a fan possesses, *as well as* their access to media producers and professional personnel linked with the object of fandom – which he believes must also be closely investigated in fandom analyses (2002: 57).

As a result, it is the thoughts of Ruth and babydoll that I am going to explore with this paper: That firstly, Kevin Smith fandom is not dependent on actually being a fan of his films, and secondly, that the fan culture has established a definable community that links fans together. I will explore to what extent this community now supports the fan culture, rather than Smith's own media output, and how this community is subsequently defined by the fans themselves.

Meetups and Cult Geographies

In August 2010 I travelled to Red Bank, New Jersey, in order to meet fellow fans as part of Kevin Smith's 40th birthday celebrations. Similar to a birthday event three years prior, Smith was to perform a Q&A show in Red Bank's Count Basie Theatre,[13] rounding off a weekend filled with fan-organised meetups, hockey games, and location tours. The trip marked the first time I had ever interacted with fellow fans in an offline setting, and as well as the social opportunities, I felt it was an ideal place to conduct research dealing with the nature of on- and offline "community". Prior to the trip, my study had taken place in solely an online

setting; however in doing this research face-to-face I felt the nature of the environment would likely have some effect on responses. Kozinets summarises the distinction between face-to-face and online interviews, noting:

> Bruckman ... opines that "online interviews are of limited value" and asserts that face-to-face or phone interviews offer far greater insight. Although I agree that synchronous, text-based, chat interviews tend to offer a very thin and often rather rushed and superficial interaction, I believe that other online means such as e-mail, and of course online audio and audio visual connections, are extremely valuable. (2010: 46)

I agree with Kozinets, and feel that online questioning is just as valid a form of research interaction, particularly when dealing with online fan cultures, as I would expect those who participate in my study to already be familiarly acquainted with text-based online interaction. However, I felt the opportunity afforded to me – meeting with fans who had travelled from all over the United States to meet in New Jersey – would have particular relevance to my developing research interests of fan closeness and togetherness. What I will use in this paper is a combination of face-to-face and text based research. Although the difference in content between the two will not be interrogated directly, the methodological difference will be signalled by the choice to include all pauses and hesitations from face-to-face interviews.[14]

In summarising his own qualitative method of interviewing television industry workers, Brett Mills (2008) stated the trepidation with which he was met, noting that he felt that after the event he owed them a duty to take appropriate care and respect when presenting their responses in an academic context. The decision to proceed with a qualitative study then, is one that is wrought with difficulty when taking into account that one's academic analysis must negotiate the thoughts and feelings of research participants; the need for accuracy and respect for the subjects is vital. My own methodology has had to take this into account due to the fact that I am treading such a fine line between scholar, fan, and friend. Therefore, my approach aims to be interrogative, but takes care to preserve the goodwill afforded to me by others' consent to participate, as well as my own good intentions for researching this particular set of fans.[15]

Travelling to Red Bank was an exciting prospect for me as a Smith fan. Not only is it Smith's hometown, but also the filming location for scenes from many of his films, as well as home to Smith's comic book and film merchandise store Jay and Silent Bob's Secret Stash. Motivated by my fandom, I had previously visited some of these locations in 2004, spots that can be defined as cult geographies; the 'diegetic and pro-filmic spaces (and "real" spaces associated with cult icons) which cult fans take as the basis for material, touristic practices.' (Hills 2002: 144). The areas in New Jersey are significant to Smith's film texts as

well as his own personal history, and as such a journey to Red Bank takes the form of pilgrimage for fans.[16] In order to capitalise on the importance of these locations, prior to the trip I helped to organise a location tour taking in the Secret Stash (*Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* [2001]), Jack's Music Shoppe (*Chasing Amy*), the Quick Stop convenience store (*Clerks*, *Chasing Amy*, and *Clerks II* [2006]), the Marina Diner (*Chasing Amy*), and the car park of Spirits Unlimited liquor store (*Clerks II*). What is notable about these locations is that with the exception of the Smith-owned Secret Stash, the rest of the sites are public and generally unspectacular places – everyday establishments for non-Smith fans, but precious to those who have an interest in Kevin Smith and his work. In detailing the nature of *X-Files* locations, Hills notes that elements of Vancouver were subject to a "tourist gaze", believing that:

> [T]he "tourist gaze" of the cult fan [is] an *unheimlich* manoeuvre (Freud 1919) insofar as Vancouver can be at once both familiar … and exotic … The "tourist gaze" is thereby transformed into a focused and knowledgeable search for authenticity and "reality"; the truth is literally supposed to be found right here. (2002: 147-8)

Through my own experience, it is evident that the Red Bank locations are subject to a similar tourist gaze, with the Kevin Smith fans imbibing these regular locales – despite the fact they may be coded as an 'everyday place' (Brooker 2006: 13) – with an exotic aura readily consumed by the communal group.

It was during this location tour that much of the socialising of the trip occurred, and it was at times of socialisation that I was careful to marshal my own behaviour. My first interaction with a fan in New Jersey was with Haar, who was staying at a hotel adjacent to mine, the night before the location tour. We met with the intention of me conducting an interview, however as we journeyed to a nearby restaurant, my scholarly intentions were tempered by my desire to connect with a fellow fan on an interpersonal level, as it felt impolite to so immediately launch into a more formal interview situation. I was not entirely familiar with Haar from the Board, and as such felt I should make an attempt to know more about him before asking him to divulge his thoughts and feeling to me "on the record". However, in doing this, I was aware that although the one overriding commonality the two of us shared was Kevin Smith fandom – thus meaning we had an immediate conversation starter – by talking about our Smith fandom informally I ran the risk of the conversation slipping into areas I wanted to cover in the interview process. Therefore, my initial interaction with Haar – and subsequently the rest of my research participants on the trip – was spent getting to know him in a personal manner, separate from his Kevin Smith fandom, in a manner that reflected my own online practices on the Board. This meant that my scholar-fan behaviour on the trip was subsequently categorised in scholar "professional" and fan "social" terms.

Prior to the trip my questionnaire data revealed the notion that Board meetups held some importance for Smith fans. Although Princess Muse noted '... I guess other groups have meet ups and events and such' (Survey response, 12/5/2010), there seemed to be a general feeling that meetups were a significant milestone in Board interaction:

> **syracuselaxfan:** ... In early 2008 Kevin invited any boardie who wanted to be an extra in Zack and Miri to come down to Monroeville and participate. This was my first "meetup" with other members of the board. I'm a fairly shy person, but I introduced myself to some people and was welcomed in with open arms. It was quite a wonderful feeling. (Ibid., 27/6/2010)

> **Graham Cracker:** I think I really began to feel as part of the community after attending a meetup. And really since then I have never felt more at home with other internet people. (Ibid., 27/5/2010)

> **Fenderboy:** The board truly is an awesome group of people. I went to my first meet up back in March [2010] and it was one of the best experiences I've ever had. (Ibid., 12/5/2010)

Because of this prior knowledge, I was apprehensive about the trip being my first face-to-face offline interaction with other fans, as it seemed to be a situation where significant bonds were formed, and I felt that my research intentions may have interfered with the socialising process. Although by their interaction with me on the Board and participation in my research other fans had shown that my research was not an overriding factor to our relationship, I nonetheless felt anxious about meeting in a situation where my primary goal was research. As a result I decided to ask attending fans about their previous meetup experience, and what they expected from the weekend. Haar appeared to echo my apprehension, albeit in a different context:

> I'm kind of curious to see just the whole spread of people that show up, and see how they compare face-to-face versus online. Cos a lot of people, you know, they like to preach, go, "Well I'm the same here as I am in person", and then you see them in person and they either don't talk or they're total dicks. (Live interview, Red Bank NJ, 31/7/2010)

However, the tension shared by myself and Haar seemed to be unwarranted, as similar to syracuselaxfan, Graham Cracker, and fenderboy, I too felt welcomed, in no small part to the effort of fans such as TearsInRain who noted, '... whenever I go to events I try to make sure everybody's included, has a good time, the same way I did [at my first meetup], the same way Kevin does for all of his fans. ...' (Ibid., 2/8/2010). In contrast to my 2004 visit to Red Bank, where my fan experience had been largely insular,[17] here fellow fans went out of their

way to make others feel included in their culture no matter their motivations for being there, and as such, my tourist gaze of Red Bank became influenced by the shared communal fan experience – something I had previous not experienced. Nancy Baym notes that 'The sense of shared space, rituals of shared practices, and exchange of social support all contribute to a feeling of community in digital environments.' (2010: 86). Here we can see that the sense of digital community transfers to the physical, motivated by the communal experience of shared space, practice, and support. However, in adopting Baym's own use of the term "community", one must be mindful of the connotations of using such a word, for as David Bell and Gill Valentine note 'the term community is not only descriptive, but also normative and ideological: it carries a lot of baggage with it.' (1997: 93). Because the notion of "community" is a contested term – one that Bell notes is complex despite its 'commonsensical and commonplace' nature (2001: 93) – I instead turn to my research participants to define the Smith fan culture as they see it.

Fan 'Family'

I decided to use the same opening question to all interviewees in Red Bank, in order to gauge feeling amongst those fans who had travelled from around the country in order to meet, and to give my research data a degree of consistency. By asking 'What is the View Askew fan community?' I hoped to gain a comparative spectrum of answers that would then lead to more individualised interview narratives. My question, although ideologically problematic for those such as Bell and Valentine, was used here in order to communicate with participants using succinct, familiar language that could enable responses to be elicited in a more informal manner free from academic constraints. My initial questionnaire similarly functioned in this manner, giving respondents the opportunity to talk about the "Kevin Smith fan community", with the notion of "community" seemingly accepted and embraced as a method to describe the fan culture when asked what brought them to begin posting on the Board:

> **yzzie:** My love of Kevin Smith movies brought me to the board. My love of the people and community made it into an online home. (Survey response, 12/5/2010)

> **frick.:** When i started reading the board in the current format it was easy to read and it seemed like here was a real sense of community between the regular posters. I liked that community and wanted to see if I could be a part of it even though my KS knowledge was not at "superfan" level (Ibid., 27/6/2010)

> **Ruth:** I think the sense of community is developed via the board, and would be less developed without it. (Ibid., 12/5/2010)

slithybill: I think the Board has created a stronger sense of community and has fostered stronger friendships and relationships that will last entire lifetimes (Ibid., 12/5/2010)

When asked to define the "community" during face-to-face interviews, the responses revealed some interesting differing interpretations, particularly when focussing on the fan's individual participation and interaction. For example, JordanFromJersey likened the structure to a school's social order, noting that the community was 'everything. I mean, it's a little bit of everything. Um, the jocks, the preps, the geeks, the nerds. Mostly the nerds! But the jockier nerds, the prepier nerds' (Live interview, Red Bank NJ, 2/8/2010). Here JordanFromJersey categorises all Smith fans (including himself) as nerds – usually thought of as a pejorative term – but then applies a social hierarchy within that categorisation. Haar similarly noted the social interactions between fans, observing that 'Oh, it's like any kind of community, there's gonna be neighbours that don't get on, you know – "Your dog's shitting on my yard again, and your kid's got his radio too loud"' (Ibid., 31/7/2010). Stephanie Tuszynski believes that 'the community debate is merely the surface level of a deeper issue: the presence of an oppositional binary with "the real" on one side and "the virtual" on the other' (2008: 52), and by instilling their responses to "the virtual" with aspects of "real-life" social structures and interactions, JordanFromJersey and Haar demonstrate that the View Askew "community" need not be thought of in terms of a real/virtual opposition. Instead, the term "View Askew fan community" can encapsulate both on- and offline fan practices.[18]

In keeping with slithybill's observation that the fan community has instigated lifelong relationships, I decided to question whether Kevin Smith fandom was necessary in order for the community's continued functionality. As previously noted, my own fan experience had been that communication on the Board is not dependent on Smith discussion to function, as well as the fact that my own aforementioned Smith-free conversation in Red Bank had been largely successful from a social standpoint. Ming, webmaster of the Board, similarly noted that Kevin Smith fandom was largely irrelevant to the overall sense of community:

> The same people from the community come back [to meetups], they all become my friends, so, you know, it's like, what's more fun than seeing all your friends in one place? It's like a big party. I think a lot of people come, you know, when Kevin has a thing they come out. They don't really come out for him, it's just an excuse to come out. They just want to hang out with each other.
> …
> *Tom Phillips: Does it even matter being a Kevin Smith fan anymore?*
>
> **Ming:** No I don't think so, I think it's, they all like each other – it's just something they have in common. It's kinda, you know, when you meet your

wife or girlfriend, you have something in common initially, but you stick together probably for other reasons. (Live interview, Red Bank NJ, 2/8/2010)

Ming's response echoes my own experience of interaction on the trip, as I feel it was precisely my caution of mediating my scholar "professional" and fan "social" identities that helped me to successfully socialise and 'stick together … for other reasons'. Rather than opening exchanges with talk about Kevin Smith I was able to have "off-topic" conversation: a trait, as noted earlier, that is similarly appreciated on the Board. Ming's comparison of the fan community to a strong romantic relationship is telling, as it suggests a level of devotion to others within the community regardless of their fan cultural capital. Similarly, TearsInRain notes how he feels the relationship between fans is not entirely dependent on Smith fandom being a primary communicative structure:

> … I mean, some of them [the other fans] are like family to me – it's not just community. I flew to Ireland to stay with somebody who I've never met before – in their house. I've gone to LA to stay with people. I'll go to Florida, we go all over the place with or without Kevin. ... (Ibid., 2/8/2010)

By noting the strong relationship between fans as one of "family", and placing that term within a hierarchal structure above "community", TearsInRain demonstrates how the conceptualisation of the fan family becomes a significant appeal of the Kevin Smith fan culture. In the same manner, ima_dame also categorises her definition of the fan community in this way:

> **Tom Phillips:** *How would you define the View Askew or Kevin Smith fan community?*
>
> **ima_dame:** The community? Like a family. Totally. Um, I mean, we're a family that lives everywhere in the world and we come together for, like, reunions and, you know, and, er, it's all because of Kevin – he's like the – not the matriarch but the patriarch of the family.
> …
> **TP:** *Do you think, like, the "community" can be The Board as a whole or is it separated by like, the different threads?*
>
> **ID:** It's like subdividing it. I think everybody pretty much gets along as a whole group. And, you know, we're like a family, and like within a family there's smaller families. So, the ones that live near each other are a little closer together, and the ones that post in the certain threads are kinda like the smaller inset of the family.
> …

> **ID:** I'm really terrible with putting Boardie names and real names together … It's like those cousins you don't quite know their name but you know they're related, you know?! It all comes back to that family thing for me. (Ibid., 3/8/2010)

TearsInRain and ima_dame's continued discourse of "family" demonstrates the level of perceived intimacy between Kevin Smith fans regardless of fan cultural capital. The notion of fan family – seemingly transcending that of fan "community" in terms of intimacy – demonstrates that in this instance the general conception of the nature of community can be seen to be false. For instance, Sarah Gatson and Amanda Zweerink note that when conceptualisation transfers from the "real" to the "virtual", "strong" ties are thought to become "weak" (2004: 41), yet in the relationship between Kevin Smith fans at times "reality" in fact paves way for the strengthening of "virtual" interpersonal ties:

> **Roguewriter:** I think [off-Board communication] strengthens groups within the main community group – it enhances the relationships you treasure most among the VA community, so perhaps there's a danger that it reinforces cliques or exclusive small clubs within the whole. But overall, I think it enhances more than it segregates. It enriches great online friendships to be able to carry them away from the message board, elsewhere on the internet – and eventually out into the real world. It's an added bonus, and a great way to turn great conversations with interesting people into lifelong friendships. (Email interview, 22/12/2010)

Taking Roguewriter's testimony into account, the distinction between real and virtual in the practices of Kevin Smith fans appears cyclical in nature, with initial online relationships leading to stronger face-to-face interpersonal ties, which can then in turn pave way for the strengthening of "virtual" communication – a product of the Kevin Smith fan culture that I would term the on- and offline sociality cycle.

In attending meetups and becoming part of the fan family, Smith fans are able to build upon their fan social capital in their interaction with others. Furthermore, there is an opportunity to gain further 'access to media producers and professional personnel linked with the object of fandom' (Hills 2002: 57), by having the opportunity to meet Smith and others associated with his media output. For example, in addition to meeting fellow fans in Red Bank, I was also able to meet Smith as well as Jennifer Schwalbach Smith, Bryan Johnson, Walter Flanagan, Malcolm Ingram, and Zak Knutson – all individuals who have been involved in Smith's professional (and personal) lives.[19] Hills notes that 'it is likely that fans with a very high fan cultural capital … will therefore possess [a] high level of fan social capital. But while high fan social capital is likely predicted by high fan cultural capital, this relationship need not follow.' (2002: 57). This can be seen in the actions of frick., for example, who stated that

her 'KS knowledge was not at "superfan" level' but then later noted that 'I'm on [the View Askew Board] nearly every day and talk to the international friends I have made every day on the phone/IM/facebook/etc' (Survey response, 27/6/2010). However, more broadly applicable to the Kevin Smith fan family, fan social capital is a commodity attainable by all, rather than exclusive to a particular few, regardless of fan cultural capital. Following the lead from Smith's open relationship with his fans, TearsInRain notes the way in which he and others, as members of the Smith fan family, attempts to welcome others into that social group:

> **Tom Phillips:** *So would you say that the majority of the people who are part of this community are like Kevin?*
>
> **TearsInRain:** Yes. More than any other message [board] or any other group or any other circle. Really, it's just a lot of nice people. I mean, You get a couple of jerks every once in a while. But the majority of the people are just really friendly, good people. I mean, I'll say it over and over again but that's really how it is. …
> …
> **TIR:** I've seen some amazing displays of generosity and compassion on The Board …
>
> **TP:** *Mostly from yourself!*
>
> **TIR:** I don't think so. Again, what I do is pay it forward, in a sense. I really do. I do try to go out of way to make people happy, but it's the same stuff that Kevin, or Ming, who runs the message board, does for me, or Jen [Schwalbach Smith – Smith's wife] does for me. They've given me some of my most happy, memorable moments of my life, and in turn, why not do it for other people? It makes me happy that other people are happy, and I think Kevin and Jen are happy that people are happy. I'm happy to help continue what they're doing. (Live interview, Red Bank NJ, 2/8/2010)

The behaviour of fans, as exemplified here by TearsInRain, becomes a democratising process for the fan family, as fan social capital is extended to all, and despite this apparently only being accessible to those who attend meetups, participation is dependent on being part of the on- and offline sociality cycle, and therefore actually being a member of the Board in the first instance. TheManWhoLikesSMod notes that '... to get the full Kevin Smith experience, you should join the board and become part of the family,' (Email interview, 23/1/2011) with the "family" categorisation reflected in the questionnaire responses of Zeebadaboodee, Rocco, Graham Cracker, JaniceM, Quantum Leap, and chubtoad01 amongst others. This demonstrates that fan family is as accessible a commodity online as

off-, and that fan social capital is a malleable process that negotiates, and therefore eradicates, the supposed binaries of "real" and "virtual".

Conclusion

Throughout this paper I have demonstrated that the close relationship of Smith and his fans is mirrored in the close relationship of the fans themselves, with some, such as TearsInRain, actively attempting to emulate Smith's attitude. In doing this, the cyclical nature of the relative strength and intimacy of the fan family is exposed, and subsequently demonstrates that ultimately fan cultural capital is largely irrelevant, as members are seemingly welcomed regardless of the extent of their Kevin Smith knowledge.

In categorising the "View Askew fan community" in varying ways that suggest both on- and offline practices, the Smith fans demonstrate a repeated discourse of the oppositional binaries of "real" and "virtual" being broken down, much in the same way that my own binaries of scholar and fan, professional and social, were negotiated throughout the research trip. Ultimately, through this trip my own experience as a Smith fan contributed to my research, as my experience of meetup culture (particularly in comparison to my 2004 trip), as well as my own feelings of heightened fan social capital helped me to understand the appeal of the fan family to Smith fan culture. Post-Red Bank, thanks to the togetherness and spirit I felt at the meetup, my perception of the Smith fan "community" (as well as my scholar and fan identities) was altered, as in addition to communicating via the Board, I became friends on Facebook with a number of the people I had met, welcoming them into my online social and personal, rather than professional, life – fully cementing my own place in the fan family. KTCV noted that in meeting fellow fans in person '...You get to pick up their senses of humor and speech patterns, so online communication is easier to decipher. ...' (Email interview, 21/12/2010), demonstrating the on- and offline sociality cycle in practice, and suggesting that the perhaps the concepts of fan cultural capital, as well as "real" and "virtual", are supplanted – if not made redundant – by the experience of meetups and the umbrella categorisation of fan family.

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Biographical Note:

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Notes

[1] A one-off $2 non-refundable charity donation. 'Registration for the View Askew WWWBoard', <http://viewaskew.com/theboard/register.html>, accessed 1/11/10.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] The absence of 'mutual suspicion' has similarly been documented by Elana Shefrin in her discussion of filmmaker Peter Jackson's efforts to communicate with online fans of *The Lord of the Rings* during pre-production of his film adaptation (2004: 265-69).

[5] See, for just one example, Smith noting his appreciation for the work of Jack Nicholson, Kathy Bates, and George Clooney – Anon., 'Kevin on CNN with Paula Zahn', *View Askew Press Log*, 31/12/2002, <http://www.viewaskew.com/vapress/2002/12/31/kevin-on-cnn-with-paula-zahn-december-31-2002/>.

[6] Such as Martin Barker, and Kate Brooks, *Knowing Audiences: Judge Dredd – Its Friends, Fans and Foes*, Luton: University of Luton Press, 1998; and Nancy K. Baym, *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community*, London: Sage, 2000.

[7] Such as Vered Amit and Nigel Rapport, *The Trouble with Community: Anthropological Reflections on Movement, Identity and Collectivity*, London and Sterling: Pluto Press, 2002; Charlotte Aull Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others*, London: Routledge, 1999; and Margot Ely, Margaret Anzul, Teri Friedman, Diane Garner, and Ann McCormack Steinmetz, *Doing Qualitative Research: Circles within Circles*, London: The Falmer Press, 199).

[8] Though has been briefly touched upon in Robert V. Kozinets, 'Utopian Enterprise: Articulating the Meanings of *Star Trek*'s Culture of Consumption', *Journal of Consumer Research*, v.28, June 2001, pp.67-88; and Marie-Agnes Parmentier, *Consuming and Producing Human Brands: A Study of Online Fans of Reality TV*, York University: Unpublished PhD Thesis, 2009.

[9] The debate surrounding aca-fandom/scholar-fandom/researcher-fandom has more recently been addressed via a special edition of *Flow* (2010), a panel hosted at the 2011 SCMS conference, and a series of discussions by aca-fans posted on Henry Jenkins' blog.

[10] The exchange occurred on a previous iteration of the Board (http://www.viewaskew.com/theboard) in June 2010, but ethical considerations (not having consent from the other party) prevent me from linking to or quoting from the exchange in this article.

[11] A proclivity for a certain red-headed *Doctor Who* companion, for example: PeepingTom, 'Doctor Who', *The View Askew Message Board*, 15/4/2011, <http://theviewaskewboard.com/showthread.php?22-Doctor-Who&p=376687#post376687>.

[12] All respondents were given the opportunity to provide an alternate username for my research. "Hannah" is the only name that has been changed.

[13] Released on DVD in 2008 as *A Threevening with Kevin Smith*. The August 2010 Q&A, *Kevin Smith: Too Fat for Forty*, was broadcast on EpixHD in October 2010.

[14] I do this in order to signal the distinction between online survey responses and email correspondence, and face-to-face interviews conducted in Red Bank. As noted above, Kozinets believes that online questioning is just as valid a form of research interaction as face-to-face (2010: 46). However, particularly when dealing with online communities, I believe it is perhaps an *even more* valid approach, as it would likely be the default mode of interrogation for the research

environment. Angela M. Lee (2011), for example, details four specific ways in which the manner in which the purposes and benefits of online interviews can be seen. The pauses and hesitations transcribed here from face-to-face interviews demonstrate the shift from a non-synchronous form of text-based questioning to an instantaneous conversation where the interview can flow based on the specificities of the personal engagement of interviewer and respondent.

[15] I have previously iterated to fans that my research is 'about giving this unique, fascinating community a voice, and recognition within the academic world. It annoys me that there are so many studies of fans of *Star Trek* or *Buffy*, but nothing has been published about View Askew fans. I hope to change that, and I want to be open about needing people's help.'

[16] For further work on fan pilgrimage see Will Brooker (2006); Christine King, 'His Truth Goes Marching On: Elvis Presley and the Pilgrimage to Graceland', in Ian Reader and Tony Walter (eds.), *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993; and Nick Couldry, 'On the Set of *The Sopranos*: "Inside a Fan's Construction of Nearness', in Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington (eds.), *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, New York and London: New York University Press, 2007.

[17] My first trip to Red Bank was taken in March 2004, two years after I initially discovered the Board, where I remained a lurking non-member, before registering in 2003 and lurking until 2010 (see Phillips 2010 for further details on my entrée into the community). The "insular" feeling of my fan experience came from the fact that I was aware at this time that meet-ups took place, and although my companion on the trip was similarly a Smith fan, I had no outlet with which to further share stories about the locations I had been with interested parties.

[18] A point I consider methodologically pertinent, as in encapsulating both on- and offline interaction, definitions of the "View Askew fan community" therefore do not warrant comparison between questionnaire and face-to-face responses.

[19] Schwalbach Smith is Smith's wife and has featured in his films *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*, *Jersey Girl* (2004), *Clerks II*, *Zack and Miri Make a Porno* (2008), and *Red State* (2011); Johnson and Flanagan are Smith's childhood friends who have featured in *Mallrats* (1995), *Dogma*, and *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*, as well as starring in their own dedicated podcast *Tell 'Em Steve-Dave* (2010-) on Smith's *SModcast* Podcast Network; Ingram is a filmmaker friend of Smith's featured on *SModcast* Network show *Blow Hard* (2010-); and Knutson is a documentary filmmaker who featured in *Clerks II*.