

THE BOOK OF STARS: SOME ALTERNATIVE INSIGHTS INTO CELEBRITY FANDOM

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Abstract

While consumers have had a keen interest in the works and private lives of celebrities since the dawn of the Hollywood star system in the early 1920s, some consumers experience a significantly more intensive level of interest and admiration for a particular celebrity and, subsequently, become what are commonly known as *fans*. However, scant attention has been paid to how the relationship between fans and celebrities expresses itself in everyday consumer behaviour. This paper is taking an existential-phenomenological perspective to discuss fan behaviour as a holistic personal lived experience from a fan's point of view. By using subjective personal introspection, the lead author provides hereby insights into his private lived consumption experiences as the fan of the young and talented actress Jena Malone, which were obtained and recorded as contemporaneous data over a period of 15 months. In doing so, the paper demonstrates how drawing on narrative transportation theory may provide a deeper understanding on the nature of celebrity fandom. The study found that a consumer's fan experiences derive from one's personal engagement with the celebrity's artistic work and public persona, which is essentially the consumer's personal intertextual reading of what s/he perceives to be relevant and reliable media texts.

Keywords: Celebrity Fandom, Human Brands, Experiential Consumption, Narrative Transportation, Subjective Personal Introspection

Introduction

Since the dawn of the Hollywood star system in the early 1920s, consumers have always had a keen interest in the works and private lives of movie stars (Dyer 1998; McDonald 2000) and other celebrities. Indeed, the public demand for celebrities is so strong these days that movie actors, directors, musicians, athletes, novelists and models have without doubt become an essential part of our everyday culture (Gabler 1998; Turner 2004). However, some consumers experience a significantly more intensive level of interest and admiration for a particular celebrity and, subsequently, become what are commonly known as *fans* (O'Guinn 1991; Thorne and Bruner 2006) or *celebrity worshippers* (McCutcheon et al. 2003). And I'm one of them! Yes, you have read correctly! Ever since I bought by chance the DVD of the movie *Saved!* (US 2004) back in April 2005, I have been the devoted fan of the young, attractive and very talented actress Jena Malone, who features primarily in lesser known, yet much more interesting and challenging indie-movies such as *Donnie Darko* (US 2001), *The United States of Leland* (US 2003), *Pride & Prejudice* (UK 2005), *Four Last Songs* (UK 2007) and *Into the Wild* (US 2007). But what is it exactly that attracts an ordinary consumer like me to become and remain the devoted fan of a movie actress? What does the lived experience of being the fan of a movie actress (or any other celebrity for that matter) actually mean for the individual consumer? And how does celebrity fandom express itself in everyday consumer behaviour? Because these are very interesting questions, it is quite surprising that little research has so far sought to address them. The current study therefore aims to fill this knowledge gap by providing some insights into a consumer's holistic everyday lived fan experiences with a celebrity from an existential-phenomenological perspective (Thompson 1997). By using subjective personal introspection (Holbrook 1995), I describe and examine hereby my own private lived consumer experiences in becoming the fan of the actress Jena Malone back in 2005. In doing so, this research is not only looking for any evidence that either supports, questions or even contradicts previously held assumptions about fandom, but also draws on narrative transportation theory to explain fans' relationships with celebrities.

The Dangerous Lives of Fans

Despite a growing body of literature recently being dedicated to the study of fandom, a coherent understanding of what actually constitutes fandom is still missing. In fact, the interpretation of what a fan is often seems to be highly dependent on the underlying agenda of the researcher investigating the phenomenon. What is clear, though, is that both academic literature and popular media have placed fans consistently on the receiving end of ridicule, negative stereotyping and *bad press* (Jenson 1992). As desired, fans are hereby portrayed either as uneducated, mindless and tasteless numbs, who are manipulated by the dangerous and controlling popular mass culture (Fiske 1992; Gabler 1998; Sandvoss 2005), or as creative and subversive rebels against the corporate establishment, who poach and utilise commercial media texts for the creation of new textual products (Jenkins 1992; Shefrin 2004; Turner 2004). Some authors viewed fans as members of neo-religious cults, who worship celebrities like gods through shared rituals and the sacralisation of associated items within like-minded communities (Belk et al. 1989; Jindra 1994; Kozinets 1997; O'Guinn 1991). Others described them as geeks and alienated, lonely social misfits, who experience for various reasons deficits in their social skills and networks (Horton and Wohl 1956). While often being intelligent, well-educated and highly successful at work or in school, in their private lives these consumers feel lonely, rejected and stigmatised especially by those others, who may be less intelligent and creative, but more privileged in terms of social skills, status and/or physical attractiveness (Kozinets 2001). Fandom would, therefore, provide a means of

compensation and social interaction with similarly isolated individuals (Jenkins 1992). Some social psychologists, however, have in recent years set out to confirm sensationalist popular media reports by portraying fans as cognitively inflexible, dull and uncreative individuals (McCutcheon et al. 2003) or, even worse, as delusional, pathological-obsessive stalkers (McCutcheon et al. 2006). The choice is therefore all yours!

Yet, despite their different perspectives, all those studies have essentially two main things in common. Firstly, previous research studied only certain, more *extreme* subgroups of fans on special occasions such as Star Trek Conventions, football fan-clubs or fan-blogs (Jenson 1992; Kozinets 1997; Richardson 2004) while paying little attention to the ordinary everyday lived experiences of the *normal* fan. Secondly, the fandom literature focused either on the social dynamics and symbolic relationships that consumers have with other fans within their respective consumption subcultures (Jenkins 1992; Kozinets 2001) or on the mental states of celebrity worshippers (Leets et al. 1995; McCutcheon et al. 2003, 2006) instead of exploring the actual relationship between fans and their objects of admiration. Thus, drawing on narrative transportation theory (Gerrig 1993) may provide some explanations to fill the gap in the literature. Though primarily applied to reading, this theory suggests that *enjoyment can benefit from the experience of being immersed in a narrative world through cognitive, emotional and imaginary involvement as well as from the consequences of that immersion*, which include emotional connections with characters and self-transformations (Green et al. 2004: 311). Transportation is hereby seen as a process by which the consumer actively seeks to be taken away from one's everyday life into imaginary narrative worlds, where one could experience a different self and engage empathetically with media characters like real friends (Gerrig 1993). Wohlfeil and Whelan (2008) also found that the personal engagement with the narrative and its characters is further enhanced through out-of-text intertextuality by which the consumer connects the narrative to one's own personal life experiences. As Dyer (1998), Geraghty (2000) and Turner (2004) viewed movie stars and other celebrities essentially as living textual images or human brands (Thomson 2006), a consumer's interest and admiration for one's favourite celebrity could be interpreted as a kind of losing oneself into the factual melodramatic narrative (Argo et al. 2008) that is the celebrity's public life. In doing so, the consumer may sympathise (= feeling with), empathise (= sharing the feelings) or even identify (= feel the feelings) with the celebrity like a media character (Cohen 2001; Wohlfeil and Whelan 2008). After all, it is extremely unlikely that we would ever get to know the real, private person behind the public image in the media (Dyer 1998).

Into the Wild (or Methodology)

In order to gain truly some holistic insights into a consumer's personal everyday lived fan experiences with one's favourite celebrity, the consumer should be given a voice (Stern 1998) by focusing from an insider perspective on the consumer experience in the way it presents itself to consciousness (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Thompson 1997). But in taking an existential-phenomenological perspective, I also have to disappoint all those readers now, who are expecting to find some hard, scientific data obtained through hypothetical-deductive methods. Instead, I use a controversial research method known as subjective personal introspection (SPI), which is an extreme form of participant observation that *focuses on impressionistic narrative accounts of the writer's own private consumption experiences* (Holbrook 2005: 45). The major advantage of this method is that it allows the researcher for an easy, unlimited 24-hour access to an insider's lived experiences with the researched phenomenon without having to wrestle with ethical concerns regarding the informants' privacy (Brown 1998). Therefore, I will provide some introspective insights into my own private lived consumption experiences as a fan of the actress Jena Malone, whereby I collected three types of introspective data. My lived fan experiences in the period from April to September 2005 were collected as

retrospective data in a 36,000-words essay, which was written in September 2005 to describe how I became a Jena Malone fan. My everyday lived experiences as a Jena Malone fan from 11th September 2005 to 31st December 2006 were then collected as contemporaneous data while they occurred in real time to ensure a high degree of data accuracy. Contemporaneous introspective data field the unique advantage of providing a large pool of emotional data that would be inaccessible to any other research method that is based on retrospective recall or pure observation and, thus, inevitably lost forever (Wohlfeil and Whelan 2008). To ensure data accessibility for external review, I have recorded the data systematically, unfiltered and on the spot in a specifically assigned diary (Patterson 2005). In total, I collected more than 150,000 hand-written words as raw contemporaneous data for hermeneutical analysis. Due to the limited space, the following short essay provides a brief snapshot into a consumer's early fan experiences with a focus on some interesting insights that have emerged iteratively from the introspective data recorded in 2005. The reader may hereby be reminded that the emphasis is placed less on the recollection of factual behaviour but more on the everyday lived experiences (i.e. private feelings, thoughts, fantasies and daydreams) as THE essential elements of the fan experience. My co-author reviewed the diary separately to ensure that both the essay and its interpretations truly reflect the recorded data.

Confessions of a Jena Malone Fan

As I said earlier, it all started back in April 2005, when I bought by chance the indie-film *Saved!* (US 2004) in a 3-DVDs-for-€20 sale. I can't really explain why, but I simply had this sudden urge creeping up in me that I had to own this particular movie. And it has become one of my favourite movies ever since! Moreover, from the very first moment I watched it, I was absolutely blown away by Jena Malone's acting performance in portraying the lead character Mary Cummings – a good Christian girl who tries to save her boyfriend from being gay by sacrificing her virginity, but gets pregnant as result and is, subsequently, ostracised exactly by those, who preach the Christian values of love, tolerance and forgiveness. Although I have to admit that I was attracted to her beautiful eyes, her charming smile and her natural beauty, I was also totally captivated by her believable, natural acting performance and simply had at once to watch the DVD for a second time. But this time, I switched to the commentary of the leading actresses Jena Malone and Mandy Moore. While I listened to Jena Malone explaining how she developed her character and talking about the context of particular movie scenes, I became even more fascinated by her. Not only is she pretty and an extremely good actress, but she also seemed to be an exceptionally interesting, smart and surprisingly mature young woman. Surely, there is always the danger of mistaking the actress with her role – unless you have seen her in a variety of other roles. For me, a really good actress is therefore one, who makes each of her characters appear to be real and believable and who manages through her performance that you enjoy watching even those movies that you would have never watched otherwise. Because only a few actors/actresses would meet these criteria, I wanted – no I needed – to find out more about Jena Malone as a person and actress as well as to watch other movies with her. Hence, I started to browse the Internet for any information that I could get my hands on. Except that I could hardly find any at all! While there are hundreds of sites and articles for virtually any single talented and more often untalented wannabe celebrity on Earth, disappointingly little was available on Jena Malone. Nonetheless, on IMDb I found out that Jena Malone, at the age of 20 back then, had already featured in 20 movies, 3 TV soap guest roles and one audio recording of a theatre play¹. Armed with this list, I started over the next weeks to buy the DVDs of *Donnie Darko* (US 2001), *Stepmom* (US 1998), *Cheaters* (US 2000), *The Dangerous Lives of Altar Boys* (US 2001) and *Life as a House* (US 2001). As I

¹ By spring 2008, Jena Malone, now aged 23, has already starred in 27 movies, 4 TV soap guest roles, 2 movie voice-overs, one audio recording of a theatre play and played in 2006 for 6 months on Broadway.

could empathetically relate to each of her characters as if they were “real” people, each of her movies that I watched convinced me more and more of her exceptional talent as an actress and increased an inherent desire in me to acquire ALL her movies for my private collection. But that was easier said than done, when I soon discovered that most of her movies have only been released in the US as region 1 DVDs, but not as European region 2 DVDs. While in the past this would have been the end of my efforts, this time I started to look desperately for suitable alternatives until I could replace them with a more suitable DVD release. Finally, I purchased an external DVD drive, which I locked into region 1 to watch those US DVDs that I bought on Amazon or eBay. All the time, I also felt this strong desire to learn more about Jena Malone as a person. Hence, when I uncovered Rommelmann’s (2000) well-researched article on the Infotrac database, I was (and still am) absolutely fascinated by what I learned about Jena Malone’s personal background and my admiration for her increased significantly.

Jena Malone was born on 21-11-1984 at Lake Tahoe, Nevada, as the unplanned result of a one-night stand and spent most of her childhood growing up in the poverty of trailer parks. With her single-mother being a struggling actress in an amateur theatre, Jena wanted to be a performer from early on and responded as a 10-year old to the ad of an acting school. While this acting school turned out to be a fraud, she, nonetheless, caught the eye of Beverly Strong, an influential agent specialised in child actors, who signed her on the spot for International Creative Management and became also her personal manager. What impressed me most was that, even as an 11-year old, Jena preferred (to her managers’ frustration) to feature in those film projects that were dear to her heart rather than in commercially promising blockbusters. Thus, Jena turned down roles in *Air Force One* or *The Parent Trap* (Lindsay Lohan got the part instead) to play the lead characters in *Bastard Out of Carolina* (US 1996), *Hope* (US 1997) and *Ellen Foster* (US 1997), for which she received critical acclaim, some film awards and a Golden Globe nomination. But life in Hollywood didn’t turn out to be that glamorous for Jena and her mother. Because her mother was required by law to be present on set all the time, she couldn’t work herself and Jena became the sole breadwinner. It also meant that Jena received only home-school education – though concluding from her interviews, she seems to be very well read! But worst of all, her full income was taxed at 45%, although 25% of her gross salaries were deducted as fees for manager, agency, etc., and production companies were required by Coogan’s law to pay 30% of child actor salaries into blocked trusts, which only become accessible at the actor’s 18th birthday (Rommelmann 2000). Thus, Jena was left with barely 11% of her salaries to live on. Finally, faced with a bill of \$150,000 in back taxes and near bankruptcy, Jena filed with 14 for legal emancipation from her mother, which was granted at her 15th birthday, in order to work legally like an adult and to access her blocked trusts to pay off her debts. Since then, she is managing her own career without interference from others, which also included firing her manager and others, who had profited from her, and switching to United Talent Agency, who offered much more favourable fees and absolute creative freedom (Cohen 2002; Rommelmann 2000). Furthermore, Jena focused on portraying complex young female characters with real problems in challenging and artistically creative independent film productions (Miller 2006). She also refuses to do glamour photo shoots that would *present girls with false beauty ideals they could hardly fulfil and only make them feel inadequate* (Rems 2004) and, in contrast to other young celebrities, shunned the glamorous LA party life by moving back to Lake Tahoe, where she felt happy as a child (Calhoun 2003).

I was really impressed by her life story and how she managed to stay true to herself despite her young age and the economic as well as personal pressure she was under. I felt, somehow, inspired by her. Back in Germany, I also grew up as one of those latch-key kids in a *disadvantaged* working-class neighbourhood. Fortunately, my parents were among the very few, who were employed and earned a regular income, which allowed us to move to a better neighbourhood when I was 12. Furthermore, because movies have always provided me with a

mental means of escape, I wanted to be an actor as well and even joined the drama society in school. But due to my poor grades, my parents insisted that I had to focus only on *practically relevant* subjects and made me quit. To be fair, I wasn't probably talented enough to succeed as an actor anyway. Still, there was always something missing... Years later, the movie *Dead Poets Society* inspired me to go to university and become a lecturer instead. While reading now Jena Malone's life story, I have the deepest respect for her and how she succeeded against all the odds in doing what she wanted to do. She is not only extremely talented, but also managed to resist all the temptations of glamour, party-life and the commercial exploitation of the Hollywood machinery without losing her personal integrity. As I said, quite an astonishing achievement for a young actress! And I was absolutely fascinated by Jena Malone, because she doesn't fit the typical celebrity life-style of glamour and scandal - probably that's why the media seems to ignore her. Instead, I like her as the normal person I perceive her to be with all her positive and negative qualities. Subsequently, I also started to collect photos that Jena Malone has personally hand-signed, which have by now become my most-valued treasures, as they somehow represent her physical presence in my life.

Hope (or Discussion)

Although the introspective essay only covered the first months of my private Jena Malone fan experiences, I will discuss now one interesting insight that emerged iteratively from the data by drawing on narrative transportation theory (Gerrig 1993). While previous studies viewed fandom mainly as the social interaction between like-minded fans within consumption subcultures (Jenkins 1992; Kozinets 2001), the introspective data clearly shows that my personal fan experiences and any subsequent consumer behaviour focused exclusively on my emotional attachment to Jena Malone herself. In fact, during the entire 15 months of self-observation, I have never shown any intentions to share my admiration for her with others and preferred to enjoy it just by myself. Although sexual attraction surely played an initial role in my interest in Jena Malone, there is clear evidence that my continuing attachment to her derives from my personal engagement with her artistic work as an actress and her public persona (Dyer 1998; Geraghty 2000). However, as I'm unlikely to ever get to know Jena Malone in person, my impression of her personality is essentially an intertextual reading of relevant and *reliable* media texts (i.e. articles, interviews, etc.), whereby especially those aspects of her personal life-story are emphasised that resonate strongly with my private life experiences, ideals and dreams and, subsequently, strengthened my emotional attachment to her. This process of introjection and projection (Gould 1993) allows for the feeling of *knowing* the celebrity like a friend, whose career and life choices are then followed empathetically as if s/he was a media character in an ongoing melodramatic narrative (Argo et al. 2008). For example, I empathised with her in how she handled even so maturely at a young age all the problems she had to face and admired how she developed into such a smart, nice and interesting personality without ever losing her personal integrity. Yet, contradicting Dyer's (1998) thesis that fans would admire celebrities as *flawless, superior* human-beings, whose image is consistent across their on- and off-screen persona, my emotional attachment to Jena Malone actually derives from viewing her as a *normal* girl with all her strengths and weaknesses. My admiration is also based on her flexibility as an actress to portray a diversity of characters that also differ from her off-screen persona. But my feeling of empathy for Jena Malone is further enhanced by engaging in out-of-text intertextuality (Wohlfeil and Whelan 2008), whereby I linked her personal life-story with my very own private life experiences to an extent where I even partially identified with her. This becomes particularly evident when I admire her courage and determination in following her dreams, while I failed to do the same even under less severe circumstances. Though I don't pretend that this is the only possible interpretation of the data, this study has nonetheless demonstrated how drawing on narrative

transportation theory may provide a deeper understanding on the nature of consumers' emotional attachment towards their favourite celebrity.

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