

Media fans' alignment with branding: A rich and under-explored research domain

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Abstract

Purpose: Marketing research into media fans has been focused on typologies or definitions, while research by Media Studies and Cultural Studies has been preoccupied with issues of power and hegemony in fan behaviour. However, media fans are a potentially lucrative research domain, which marketing researchers have neglected. This article seeks to identify their value to marketers and align a number of marketing concepts with their behaviour and practices for marketers to use.

Design/methodology/approach: This article adopts the general conceptual goal of envisioning and proposes the new research domain of media fans.

Findings: This article identifies that the marketing concepts of narrative brands, brand attachment, brand love, brand community, brand engagement, and brand transgression align with media fans' behaviours and practices, and proposes their use by media companies to better understand and leverage them to achieve positive outcomes for their brands.

Originality/value: This article demonstrates the value of media fans behaviours and practices to brand managers of media companies and aligns a number of marketing concepts with them to use to better understand and leverage them. Also, the potential for committing brand transgressions with negative financial outcomes for media brands if media fans are misunderstood or ignored are explored and demonstrated.

Keywords: Media fans; narrative brands; brand communities; brand engagement; brand attachment; brand transgression.

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Introduction

The marketing literature has extensively investigated fans in a wide range of contexts, but has almost exclusively focused on fans of celebrity human brands such as actors (Mathys et al., 2016), musicians (Dallenbach et al., 2015), and athletes (Crawford, 2003; Parganas et al., 2015). Research contexts for these celebrity brands include: the reasons why consumers follow celebrities on social media (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016); the impact of casting a celebrity actor in a theatrical production to attract an audience (Caldwell & Nicholson, 2014); antecedents of loyalty and attachment to celebrity human brands (Huang et al., 2015; Ilicic et al., 2016); fan communities based around athletic teams (Filis & MacKay, 2014); and, more generally, what it is about the personalities and activities of celebrities that makes them attract fans (Wohlfeil & Whelan, 2011). The focus on celebrity human brands is due to the valuable brand equity embedded in them (Thomson, 2006), which can be used by marketers to create demand for other products (Huang et al., 2015; Mathys et al., 2016). However, other entities and their fans have remained under-examined or neglected, specifically the fans of media products such as television programs, motion pictures (Kozinets, 2001), and video games (Newman, 2013), who are termed media fans. These media fans' behaviours and practices align with existing and valued marketing concepts, which this article investigates and demonstrates. Media fans represent an underutilised resource for media companies, their marketers, and brand managers and a context for researchers from the marketing discipline that requires greater attention. Mishandling these fans can result in a brand transgression with negative financial consequences for media companies due to, for example adverse press coverage, and fan organised boycotts (Murray, 2004; Jenkins, 2008). This article illustrates how understanding and leveraging these media fans behaviours and practices can result in positive outcomes for media companies, their marketers, and brand managers and avoid negative outcomes such as a brand transgression and bad publicity.

Background

There have been several marketing studies that have investigated media fans, but these have focused on attempts to classify them or creating a typology (Redden & Steiner, 2000; Smith et al., 2007; Thorne, 2011), rather than examining their behavioural practices and value to marketers. The desire to classify and define these fans stemmed from previous marketing research that recommended the fan phenomenon needed a definition before it could be studied (Redden & Steiner, 2000). Kozinets (2001) and Brown et al. (2003) used ethnography to examine the meanings produced by two fan communities, one dedicated to *Star Trek* and the other, *Star Wars*, but their research focused on describing media fans, instead of their value and the implications of their behaviours and practices to marketers. Smith et al. (2007) suggested that it might be impossible to define the concept of fanaticism precisely and so media fans needed to be approached differently by marketing academics. Using different approaches may also help to dispel the negative stereotyping of media fans by academia, including the marketing discipline. This stereotype suggests that media fans are abnormal fanatics 'beyond the normal or healthy range of what is socially acceptable' (Redden & Steiner, 2000, p.330), gullible and easily manipulated by a dangerous mass culture (Fiske, 1992), and obsessively devoted to the object of their enthusiasm (O'Guinn, 1991) to the point of declaring it a religion (Kozinets, 2001). This article proposes the

alternative view that media fans are enthusiastic, creative, and loyal consumers, characteristics that academia has been slow to recognise, and can be highly valuable to marketers, if their behaviours and practices are understood and leveraged. Relationship marketing was suggested as a useful method to market to and research media fans (Redden & Steiner, 2000), but this ignores the fact that media fans have already established relationships through their behavioural practices and fandoms, rather than because of a marketer's design. Therefore, this article recommends that the behaviours and practices of media fans need to be better understood by both marketers and researchers so marketing activities directed at these fans can be better targeted and more appropriate.

Cultural Studies and Media Studies have extensively examined media fans, but with little focus on, or understanding of, their value for marketers. These two disciplines focus on the continuous social process of production, circulation, and consumption centred on media texts and products (Ang, 1990) and are often preoccupied with issues of power and freedom (Ang, 1990; Nightingale, 1996). For example, a study of the promotional strategy used by the HBO fantasy/horror television show *True Blood*, which ranged from outdoor place advertising to viral marketing, referred to these marketing practices as 'corporate (inter) textual proliferation' (Hardy, 2011, p.14), and used them to critique the power dynamics of such practices. Similarly, Johnson (2007) recognised the importance of media fans to media companies, especially in the context of marketing communication and the purchasing of franchised tie-in products, but remained preoccupied by issues of power in fandom and focused on whether fans can affect change in the media products they consume and if they can reduce the control of the media owners. Such studies have often implicitly positioned media fans as acting in opposition to, or resisting the commercial interests of, media companies through their activities (Jones, 2003). This article proposes that these preoccupations with power and hegemony have left a knowledge gap that can be filled by researching how media fans and their co-creative behaviours and practices align with marketing branding concepts.

Conceptual Methodology

This article is conceptual because it involves the process of understanding a situation by identifying patterns or connections, and the key underlying properties (MacInnis, 2011). MacInnis (2004) observed a decline in the number of conceptual articles that are published that take this approach, while Yadav (2010) demonstrated that conceptual articles are important for the marketing discipline because they often prompt new ideas and advance the field. Therefore, following the recommendations of MacInnis (2011), this article adopts the general conceptual goal of envisioning and the specific conceptual goal of identifying an approach that has been valuable to the marketing discipline in the past (Hirschman et al., 1982; Alpert, 2007). More specifically, this article aims to make conceptual advances of the domain variety by proposing media fans as a new area of study on which marketing researchers should focus (MacInnis, 2011). For an envisioning conceptual article to succeed and be convincing, evidence must be presented that the entity, in this case the domain of media fans, is both real and important (MacInnis, 2011). To make this case and establish what the marketing discipline has so far ignored, examples of documented fan behaviours and practices linked to the specific branding concepts with which they align are presented. These alignments represent opportunities for further research in the marketing discipline to better understand media fans, their behaviours and practices, and their value to media companies and so avoid the potential for adverse outcomes if they are mishandled.

Who are Media Fans?

Although this article de-emphasises the use of typologies in previous research, a description of media fans is necessary in order to understand and discuss them. This article uses a description of media fans borrowed from the discipline of Fan Studies, which was originally a sub-discipline of Cultural Studies and Media Studies, but is now an independent field concerned with researching media fans (Evans & Stassi, 2014). Using the Fan Studies' description is appropriate because media fans will often delineate the world into 'us and them' (Crawford, 2003), and much of the research concerning fans conducted in Fan Studies has been by academics who are themselves media fans and so have a better understanding of their research subjects (Brooker, 2002; Schwabach, 2011; Jenkins, 2012). Although there is no universal definition of media fans (Duffett, 2013), academics from Fan Studies have agreed upon five characteristics that they exhibit.

1. Media fans are more than casual viewers or consumers of a narrative or text. They have an intense love or emotional attachment to the narrative or text (Bielby et al., 1999; Sandvoss, 2005; Gray, 2007), termed a fan object (Sandvoss, 2005; Crawford & Rutter, 2007), and this characteristic becomes part of their identity (Brooker, 2002; Parkin, 2010).
2. Media fans will create fan works based on their fan object, which are creations set in a pre-existing fictional universe and may utilise any medium (Schwabach, 2011). Examples include stories, commonly termed fanfiction, art, called fan art, songs and videos, toys and collectables, clothing and costumes, called cosplay, and critical essays (Jenkins, 2012). The motivation to create fan works comes from the emotional attachment to the fictional world on which these works are based (Tushnet, 1997; Schwabach, 2011).
3. Media fans form communities called a fandom that is usually based on one particular fan object (Kaplan, 2006). Fandoms are interpretative and collaborative; media fans will often collectively debate and theorise about their fan object and share their fan works online, as well as in person (Jenkins, 2012).
4. Media fans often collect franchised tie-in products associated with their fan object, for example toys, action figures, posters, and stationary (Jones, 2002; Bryant et al., 2014), and often repeatedly consume their fan object (Jenkins, 2006; Duffett, 2013).
5. Media fans may derive nostalgia from objects associated with their fan object, want a tangible reminder of a fan object, or want to introduce their own children to their fan object (Lancaster, 2001; Bryant et al., 2014).

Essentially, media fans are passionate consumers of their fan objects, and their practices revolve around them. It has been suggested that media fans differ from consumers because media fans are active participants within a fandom and have a social identity as a fan, unlike more casual consumers (Jenkins and Tulloch, 1995). However, the availability of the internet and the growth of social media has meant that fandom is now easily accessible, and as a result, fan behaviour has become more mainstream (Duffett, 2013). Therefore, nearly all media fans would be expected to be consumers, which is why Fillis and MacKay (2014) termed sports fans 'fansumers', although not every consumer could be considered a

fan. Understanding the behaviours and responses of media fans to the brands to which they are devoted is increasingly important and these behaviours closely align with a variety of useful marketing branding concepts, which marketers can use to achieve positive outcomes for media companies, and their brands. These alignments and concepts are explained in the following section.

Brand Management Concepts

Narrative Brands

Narrative brands, also termed entertainment brands, are an emerging research focus in the branding literature. A narrative consists of three elements: (i) the story containing the depicted events; (ii) the plot - how these events are linked; and (iii) the narrative - the showing or telling of these events and the mode selected (Cobley, 2014). A narrative brand is characterised by an inherent narrative that continues and evolves over time, for example a successful television or novel series (Russell & Schau, 2014), and this continuity is often what appeals to fans to make the brand their fan object. *The Lord of the Rings*, *Star Trek*, and *Harry Potter* are examples of narrative brands that have had their narratives and fictional universes continually added to (Lancaster, 2001; Mittell, 2006). While many brands may use narratives, not all brands are narrative brands; only a brand whose core product involves a narrative is a narrative brand (Russell and Schau, 2014). The fictional universes and worlds of narrative brands, especially those with carefully constructed histories and characters, and narrative depth and detail (Lancaster, 2001) attract media fans who desire and need to be immersed in the fictional world of their fan object (Jones, 2003). The phenomenon of media fans and their behaviours and practices are considered to have started with the avid viewers of the television show *Star Trek* in 1963 (Jenkins, 2012). However, research has not been concerned with how consumers relate to narrative brands beyond, for example, the effectiveness of product placement within narrative brands (Olsen & Lanseng, 2012), or investigating how narrative transportation or immersion can be used as a persuasion technique in advertising (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2010). This is despite Russell and Schau (2014) noting that narrative brands offer new perspectives on consumer-brand relationships. Therefore, because media fans are avid consumers of narrative brands, they provide a research context to explore the effect of the marketing concept of narrative brands on consumers and to advance research into narrative brands.

Brand Communities

Forming communities, known as fandoms, is a central component of the behaviours and practices of media fans and these fandoms function in similar ways to the marketing concept of brand communities. Fandoms involve social interactions, a shared and co-creative culture, networks, and the sharing of fan works (Jenkins, 2006), and from these activities fans obtain enjoyment and increase their attachment to their fan objects (Schwabach, 2011). Fans join and participate in fandoms because they enjoy finding and connecting with other fans who appreciate the same fan object (Jenkins, 2012). Consequently, fandoms share a number of similarities with brand communities: they comprise of consumers who have relationships with one another, a sense of belonging, and a common interest in a brand that draws them together (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002). Consumers join brand communities because they are loyal consumers of the brand and derive entertainment from being a member of the brand community, especially one based around a hedonic brand (McAlexander et al., 2002; Gummerus et al., 2012). A hedonic brand is one whose primary benefit is pleasure (Carroll

& Ahuvia, 2006), for example a narrative brand. Media fans will often discuss with each other their interactions and experiences with their fan objects, which is similar to how members of a brand community will often share their consumption experiences of the brand, and both these activities increase their appreciation of their fan objects and brands respectively (McAlexander et al., 2002; Schwabach, 2011). Brand communities develop a hierarchy, a unique vocabulary, and mythology (Cova & Pace, 2006), while fandoms develop different languages, interpretations of their fan objects, and hierarchies (Parkin, 2010; Jenkins, 2012;). Just as fans were quick to embrace the internet as a way to find fellow fans and grow their fandoms (Tushnet, 2007), there have also been an increasing number of brand communities that were founded and designed to be accessed exclusively online (Casaló et al., 2008; Kim et al., 2008). Brand communities provide benefits for brands (Kim et al., 2008), including building relationships with their consumers (Grönroos, 2004; Story & Hess, 2006) and providing opportunities for brands to learn what it is that consumers like, need, or desire (Casaló et al., 2008). Therefore, by using the same marketing approaches for fandoms as brand communities would allow the producers of narrative brands to harness these benefits.

Consumer Brand Engagement

Consumer brand engagement is one of the most applicable brand concepts to media fans because it aligns to media fans' behaviours and practices, their best-known attributes. Consumer brand engagement occurs outside of consumption or transaction situations when a consumer meaningfully interacts with a product (van Doorn et al., 2010; Franzak et al., 2014). Although the exact nature of the consumer brand engagement concept is unclear due to the concept's relative newness (France et al., 2016), the three dimensions of cognition, emotion, and behaviour are often cited as features, and media fans exhibit all three (Hollebeek, 2013). Media fans exhibit high levels of engagement through their participation in brand communities, for example they frequently have debates and discussions about their fan objects, create detailed 'best and worst episodes' lists to categorise episodes of a television series (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998), and compile Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) lists for their fan objects. Media fans may also have personal websites and participate in blogs dedicated to their fan objects (Hunter, 2011). Some media fans also write critical essays about aspects of their fan objects or fandoms, for example documenting sub-textual evidence in support of a romantic relationship between two characters (Goodman, 2015). Media fans may also maintain what are termed 'wikis' for a variety of different media fandoms that allow fans to display and archive encyclopaedic information about their fan objects. These wikis also provide a guide for the many fans who cannot recall the vast amounts of information available about the fan objects (Hunter, 2011). An example is Wookieepedia, a wiki dedicated to the *Star Wars* narrative brand (http://starwars.wikia.com/wiki/Main_Page) that contains more than 136,000 pages of information created by media fans (Greenburg, 2015). Such dedication results from the intense relationships media fans have developed with their fan objects, which aligns with the description by France et al. (2016) of consumer brand engagement as being relational in nature, but focusing on a consumer's psychological state of passion for, and immersion in, a brand. The value of consumer brand engagement is how the concept can explore the progressively interactive nature of consumers' relationships with brands, and how these relationships increasingly develop outside of the consumption context (Hollebeek, 2011; Dessart et al., 2015), which would appear to be the case with media fans. Hollebeek (2013) reported that hedonic brands have great scope for stimulating brand engagement among their consumers. This alignment of consumer brand engagement with the behaviours and

practices of media fans can help marketers and researchers to better understand media fans and their relationships with narrative brands.

Brand Attachment and Brand Love

Media fans show a strong emotional attachment to their narrative brands. Therefore, it may be beneficial to apply the marketing concept of brand attachment also to these fans. The concept of brand attachment derives from Bowlby (1979) who investigated attachment and described it as an emotion-laden and target-specific bond between a person and a target. Brand attachment is the strength of the bond that connects a brand with the consumer's self-concept, which is the collection of characteristics, traits, and memberships that represent the consumer (Whan Park et al., 2010). Brands that consumers consider are part of themselves and reflect who they are play a significant role in shaping their identity and will generate high levels of attachment (Whan Park et al., 2010; Malär et al., 2011; Correia Loureiro et al., 2012), which aligns with how media fans consider their fan objects as being part of their identities (Jenkins & Tulloch, 1995). Furthermore, personalised experiences with a brand will create stronger emotional attachments (Whan Park et al., 2006). The emotional attachment of media fans to their fan objects motivates them to create numerous personalised experiences, for example engaging in online discussions about their fan object and creating fan works (Bielby et al., 1999; Jones, 2002; Busse & Gray, 2014; Goodman, 2015). The authors of these fan works are emotionally attached to the fictional world on which their works are based and it is from that emotion that the motivation to create the fan work arises.

The concept of brand love, which represents a deeper kind of emotional attachment, is also applicable to media fans. Brand love is a particularly intense form of emotional attachment accompanied by feelings of passion and declarations of love for the brand (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006), and media fans often express these declarations for their fan objects and it is their motivation for creating fan works (Tushnet, 1997; Schwabach, 2011). Brand love is more likely to be felt for hedonic brands (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006), which includes media products and narrative brands. Kaufmann et al. (2016) proposed that consumers who experience brand love would be more willing to engage in co-creative behaviour within the context of a brand community. This aligns strongly with the behaviour of media fans, although their model and the connection still needs validation. Therefore, value may be found in applying the marketing concepts of brand attachment and brand love to media fans to better understand their attachments to, and love for, narrative brands.

Brand Transgression

A brand transgression occurs when a brand varies significantly from the implicit or explicit rules guiding its relationship with, and evaluation by, consumers (Aaker et al., 2004). The concept's definition covers a wide range of brand behaviours, such as product changes and the addition of a new spokesperson, which might all be perceived as brand transgressions if the changes violate the norms of the brand's relationship with, and the expectations of, its consumers (Sayin & Gürhan-Canli, 2015). Media fans expect the characters in their fan objects to show realistic emotion and the plots to be consistent (Jenkins, 2012), and these expectations are considered by fans to be key indicators of the fan object's quality (Sandvoss, 2005). Media fans recognise, thanks to their attentive viewing, when the story or plot fails to deliver what they expect (Bielby et al., 1999; Jenkins, 2012). If media fans feel that their expectations have not been met, or that their fan object

no longer displays sufficiently realistic or the expected emotion, they feel entitled to protest and complain (Bielby et al., 1999), which is termed fan activism (Sandvoss, 2005; Jenkins, 2012). An example of fan activism occurred when fans of the 1987 CBS television show, *Beauty and the Beast*, protested against the show's possible axing, which resulted in it being renewed for a third season. However, the lead actress left and so the plot changed causing a loss of emotional realism for fans, which led to further fan activism, but this time the protests were critical of the show (Jenkins, 2012). A more recent example of fan activism is the ending of the final instalment in the *Mass Effect* video game trilogy that was so despised and distressing to some groups of fans that they formed the 'Retake Mass Effect 3' protest group (Reardon et al., 2017). This group used various tactics to raise awareness for their cause, such as donating to the charity Child's Play, reporting the game to various consumer protection agencies, and generating mainstream press coverage, which caused BioWare, the company that made the trilogy, to release additional ending content for the game (Jennings, 2016). These protests are responses to brand transgressions by narrative brands, and the behaviour of fan activists is similar to that of consumers who have suffered brand transgressions. Some consumers will continue their relationship with a brand after a brand transgression, but others will abandon it (Sayin and Gürhan-Canli, 2015; Tsarenko and Tojib, 2015), or even damage it by communicating negative comments online and by word-of-mouth (Donovan *et al*, 2012). Media fans who dislike the direction of the narrative of their fan object may consider this a brand transgression and protest causing damage to the narrative brand and the media company that produces it.

Discussion

This article demonstrates that a number of brand management concepts are applicable for research into media fans' behaviours, practices, and their relationships with narrative brands. This research domain has been neglected and is needed to help media companies, their marketers, and brand managers create and maintain their valuable narrative brands. The major focus of previous research into media fans has been concerned with their desire and willingness to engage with their fan objects and create fan works, and has overlooked identifying their potential marketing and economic value. Murray (2004, p.21) stated that scholarly work in Cultural Studies concerning media fandoms has failed to rigorously explore 'the commercial utility of fan communities to incorporate marketing and publicity structures'. Instead, Cultural Studies has been preoccupied with the view that because content creation is similar to work, consumers are potentially being used, or exploited by media companies, and the impact this will have on the professional workforce that would have done this work in the past (Kline et al., 2003; Kucklich, 2005; Bruns, 2008; Ross, 2009). This position ignores the fact that successful brands are not static and so cannot be created by companies and simply handed on to passive consumers (Petty, 2008). Instead, consumers are increasingly co-creators, sharers, and multipliers of brand messages (Jahn & Kunz, 2012), rather than passive recipients of these messages and information (Kristal et al., 2016). This is especially true of media fans who feel that because they have invested time, activity, and emotional attachment in their fan objects and associated narratives, they should have some degree of emotional ownership of them (Murray, 1997; Lancaster, 2001; Brooker, 2002; Jenkins, 2013), and their feelings and ideas should be taken into account by the media companies who produce them. Brand managers of media products with fandoms who can leverage and understand how best to collaborate with media fans will have a highly engaged and emotionally attached niche market as a resource.

Media fans have obvious benefits for media brands and the media companies that produce them, but rather than leveraging or collaborating with these fans, companies have often sought to stop or control their activities. Conflicts with media fans have arisen because media companies perceive a need to scrutinise and exercise control over their intellectual property to prevent any damage to their brands occurring (Murray, 2004), which is mostly contrary to media fans' intentions. An example of one of these conflicts occurred when Warner Bros. film studio acquired the rights to the *Harry Potter* series of books in 2001 and sent their standard 'cease and desist' letters to the operators of unauthorised fan websites. This was despite J.K. Rowling, the books' author, having previously signalled her support for these not-for-profit media fan engagement behaviours (Jenkins, 2008), and so this can be argued was a brand transgression. The affected fans organised into networks, 'PotterWar' in the UK and 'Defense Against the Dark Arts' in the USA, and started a petition and boycott of all the Warner Bros. *Harry Potter* products to protest against what they viewed as the heavy-handed tactics of the company (Murray, 2004; Jenkins, 2008). The mainstream press picked up this global internet based campaign (Jenkins, 2008) and generated sufficient negative publicity that Warner Bros. withdrew their threats and backed down. A similar conflict occurred with the media company and fans of the television show *Mad Men*, which ran for seven seasons and ended in 2015. Fans started and ran Twitter accounts for some of the characters from the show, and initially AMC, the cable channel that produced *Mad Men*, thought they were official accounts due to their high quality. However, when AMC contacted Twitter to ask who was behind the accounts, Twitter decided that this was a claim of copyright breach and deleted them (Jenkins et al., 2013). The fans who created and ran these accounts, many of whom were actually advertising professionals, then started a campaign to have their accounts restored, which was successful (Jenkins et al., 2013). These two examples show that media fans will launch fan activism against the creators of their fan objects if they dislike or disagree with their actions (Jenkins, 2012). Therefore, media companies, their marketers, and brand managers need to be fully aware of media fans' expectations of, and relationships with, their fan objects to avoid brand transgressions.

The widespread use and availability of the internet has made fan activism faster and easier to organise, and thus potentially more damaging for media companies and their brands if fans consider they have committed a brand transgression. Furthermore, 'cease and desist' actions are often unnecessary because media consumers can identify inferior or unofficial products and will avoid them, thus making it unlikely that any fan work or activity would cause any serious damage to a narrative brand (Eiriz & Wilson, 2006). The willingness of media fans to resist attempts by media companies to end their co-creative behaviours and practices means that it is more advantageous for these companies, their marketers, and brand managers to work with media fans, rather than against them.

Media companies that allow or even encourage media fans to produce and continue their engagement behaviours and practices, instead of challenging them because of copyright concerns, can benefit from their activities. For example, by including highly detailed fictional settings with unsolved mysteries designed to attract and intrigue fans, *The X-Files* and *Twin Peaks* television series stimulated media fans to co-creative activities, and encouraged them to purchase franchised tie-in products (Pearson, 2010). Another example of the positive contribution of media fans is to keep interest alive in intellectual properties, long after they have ceased production (Brooker, 2002). For example, *Star Trek* fans saved

the original show from its rumoured cancelation in 1968 and kept interest alive until the release of the first feature film in 1979, and the subsequent 1987 television series (Pearson, 2010). *Star Trek's* creator, Gene Roddenberry (1921-1991), welcomed the interest from media fans noting that it increased the value and popularity of the franchise (Schwabach, 2011). Media fans will continue to collect merchandise and buy DVDs, blu-rays, or downloads long after a narrative brand has ended, thereby prolonging the life and the commercial value of the brand (Russell & Schau, 2014). Fan fiction also keeps media fans engaged and enthusiastic about their fan objects, merchandise, and characters (Tushnet, 1997), which can be valuable between series or sequels and provides another benefit for media companies and their brands. Therefore, encouraging and working with media fans is not only beneficial for media companies, their marketers, and brand managers, but also for the manufacturers of franchised tie-in products.

Therefore, the attack on media fans of *Harry Potter* by Warner Bros. was ill-judged when the free marketing, advertising, and attachment to the brand that the fandom brought to the film adaptations is considered (Schwabach, 2011). When Warner Bros. finally realized their mistake, they did more than simply permit fan sites. They promoted some fans sites on the company's official *Harry Potter* webpage and shared images and other resources from the films with the fan sites' webmasters (Murray, 2004). This was done in an attempt to mimic the successful relationship that Peter Jackson, the director of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy of films (2001, 2002 to 2003), had forged with fans of *The Lord of the Rings* book trilogy written by J.R.R. Tolkien and first published in October 1955 (Murray, 2004). Jackson had conducted online interviews with fans about his upcoming film adaptations before filming started and his conciliatory and respectful responses largely pacified their concerns regarding how closely the films would align with the original books (Shefrin, 2004). Jackson, for the most part, won over *The Lord of the Rings'* fandom, which is considered part of the reason for the huge commercial success of the trilogy, and its universally positive reception on fan websites (Shefrin, 2004). Therefore, it is essential for media companies, their marketers and brand managers to understand and create and maintain a collegial relationship with the media fans of their narrative brands, which can also help them to avoid committing brand transgressions.

Conclusions

Media companies, their marketers, and brand managers need to reassess how they interact with media fans and new research is required that goes beyond typologies and the classification of these fans to focus on understanding ways to harness their behaviours and practices for commercial benefit. Media fans, rather than being maladjusted fanatics, represent a potentially lucrative niche market and resource. These fans are consumers of narrative brands who are emotionally attached and actively engaged members of their fandoms (brand communities) with a variety of co-creative and collaborative behaviours and practices. Although brand managers increasingly recognise that fans and consumers are co-owners of the social construction of brands, trademark attorneys are still being instructed to threaten legal action and issue 'cease and desist' notifications to stop their activities because of fears these will damage their brands (Petty, 2008). However, media fans' emotional attachment to their fan objects may make taking legal action a risky decision, and there is evidence that collaborating with these fans is far more financially

beneficial (Brooker, 2002; Pearson, 2010). Media fans' emotional attachments have benefits for media companies, their marketers, and brand managers such as sustaining and increasing interest that can help revivals of media franchises be successful and providing a niche and devoted market for brand extensions, such as franchised tie-in products, sequels, and prequels. Therefore, it is recommended that marketing and branding research into media fans move beyond attempting to define media fans (Redden & Steiner, 2000), or ethnographic studies of the meanings their communities create (Kozinets, 2001). Instead, research should focus on the value and usefulness of media fans for media companies, their marketers, and brand managers and this article demonstrates a number of marketing branding concepts that may be used to better understand them and their behaviours and practices. These concepts are narrative brands, brand communities, consumer brand engagement, brand attachment and brand love, and brand transgression. New research into media fans using these concepts will advance understanding of the effects of narrative brands on consumers and the importance and value of these fans to the media industry.

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