

## **Resolving identity ambiguity through transcending fandom**

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**Abstract**

Identity construction involves accumulating cultural, social, and symbolic capital, with initial endowments being accrued through socialization into one's habitus. This research explores the experiences of individuals that feel a lack of capital, which leads to ambiguity regarding their identities and places in the world. Through in-depth interviews, this interpretive research shows that such individuals may turn to fandom for gaining status and belonging. Fandoms are consumption fields with clear, limited forms of cultural capital. Through serial fandom and engagement with fandom in different ways, individuals were able to learn the skill of identifying and accruing relevant cultural capital. The skill became decontextualized and recontextualized, allowing individuals to transcend fandom and accrue general forms of cultural capital. Learning the skill aids individuals in dealing with the simultaneously debilitating and empowering freedom of contemporary consumer culture. Moreover, gaining cultural capital could be altogether developing into the form of the process we describe.

**Key words:** identity, fragmentation, fandom, identity ambiguity, cultural capital

Individual identity construction is a central concern of contemporary life (McCracken 1988; Giddens 1991; Slater 1997; Hetherington 1998; Holt 2002), yet it becomes an increasingly complex project, as traditional cultural institutions weaken and fragment (McAlexander et al. 2014), and the variety of identity resources available to consumers proliferates (Gergen 1991; Firat and Venkatesh 1995). Many scholars in the consumer culture tradition suggest that the responsibilities for identity definition have shifted from socializing institutions to individual consumers (Holt 2002; Thompson 2004; McAlexander et al. 2014), possibly leaving individuals without clear guidelines in a context of overwhelming choice (Slater 1997).

Identity construction is largely other-directed and requires interaction and negotiation in its social context (Slater 1997; Üstüner and Holt 2007; Barnhart and Peñaloza 2013; Saatcioglu and Ozanne 2013). But what if that social context remains mute, hostile, or ambiguous? Forced to navigate identity construction in a maelstrom of meanings (Varman and Vikas 2007), where do young consumers turn for insight when the maps of social context are unreadable to them?

This research explores how young individuals that lack a sense of belonging and connection in their contexts of primary socialization may resolve identity ambiguity, that is, a lack of understanding of who they are and how they can relate to other people. We approach these issues through exploring the experience of fandom, which can be described as the extreme, affect-laden investment in a particular object or idea (Thorne and Bruner 2006; Chung et al. 2008). This research began with a broader goal of exploring how individuals engage in the negotiation of their identities through fandom. Numerous studies have shown that fandom aids identity building and self-reflection (Spigel and Jenkins 1991; Jenkins 2006a, 2006b; 2007; 2014 Sandvoss 2005; Smith, Fisher, and Cole 2007; Chung et al. 2008), thus extending the value of fandom outside its limited consumption context. Recent studies have theorized that fandom can

teach fans to function better as members of society (Kim 2015) and can provide models for social practices by reconciling tensions of private and public lives (Yockey 2013). Hence, individuals gain both personal and communal meanings through fandom, but what do they do with them? Following Jenkins (2014) and Hills (2014), mapping out how individuals re-imagine themselves through fandom may allow us to bridge our understanding of fandom and the social processes beyond it, thus helping us comprehend fandom as a part of its broader cultural context. While not elicited, the topics of identity ambiguity and lack of belonging emerged strongly in our interviews with fans. The themes were consistently brought up by our interviewees, meaning that the topics are relevant for understanding how identity and fandom are tied into one another. This led us to the more particular research question of how individuals use fandom to resolve identity ambiguity.

In line with previous literature, this study reveals that individuals use fandom as a resource for identity construction and for making their place in the world. We find that individuals engage with fandom in different ways from the point of view of identity development and belonging, which results in a process of learning to overcome identity ambiguity. Based on the analysis of life narratives of self-avowed fans engaging with various fandoms, we show that through the accrual of limited, field-specific capital individuals can learn the decontextualized skill of cultural capital accrual, which aids them in constructing coherent identities. As one might predict with Bourdieuan theories of fields and capital (Bourdieu 1986, 1990), field-specific capital is largely not transferable to other fields. The learning associated with processes of capital accrual, however, *is* transferable and becomes a valuable form of cultural capital in its own right. Learning to accrue cultural and social capital helps individuals to establish comprehensible and satisfying identity positions in previously bewildering social contexts. We do not suggest that

status and identity are one and the same. However, a big part of identity ambiguity is a felt lack of status among one's peers. Gained status, or symbolic capital, legitimizes and contextualizes identity construction, alleviating the stress and anxiety associated with identity ambiguity. We ground our research in studies of postmodern identity challenges, the roles of cultural capital, and fandom, to which we turn next.

### **Postmodern identity**

Understanding identity, that is, individuals' subjective perceptions of who and what they are, looms large in contemporary society (Hetherington 1998). Identity is also a central concern in the study of consumption, as people turn to products and brands for meaning in their lives (McCracken 1988; Giddens 1991; Holt 2002; Bauman 2013). Brands are chief conveyances of meaning in contemporary consumption-oriented culture and, as such, are important resources for interaction and understanding one's social context (Bengtsson and Firat 2006).

Postmodern identity challenges emerged in the wake of the fragmentation of contemporary culture (Clarke 1998). Slater (1997) explains that individuals are no longer dictated an identity position by governing institutions. Instead, they have become free in terms of defining who they are. Lacking prescribed patterns or benchmarks, identity construction becomes a continuous individual project (Bauman 2013), an ideal that every individual should strive for (Slater 1997). The resources for building identity and status are commoditized (Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Slater 1997), yet identity or status in themselves cannot be bought. Identity construction is an existential project that continuously changes based on consumers' freedom to choose from various alternatives (Thompson and Hirschman 1998).

In a fragmented culture we might expect individuals to end up with multiple, fragmented selves, but Gould (2010) argues that we still strive for and retain feelings of being unique entities with coherent identities. One common perspective in research holds that a unified, unchanging self exists at the core of every individual (Belk 1988; Ahuvia 2005). From their need to connect, to belong, and to authenticate, individuals experience an urge for a coherent, unified identity (Gergen 1991; Hetherington 1998; Ahuvia 2005; Beverland and Farrelly 2010; Gould 2010). However, achieving a stable and unified identity may have become nearly impossible in contemporary consumer culture where people are surrounded by a richness of material resources with shifting and malleable meanings (Markus and Nurius 1986; Gergen 1991; Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Hetherington 1998; Bahl and Milne 2010; Bauman 2013).

The freedom to construct identity through individual choice becomes a trap in that every choice has implications and risks (Slater 1997). Clarke (1998) argues that as individuals question each identity choice, they also forfeit a sense of security, becoming anxious about their identities. Smith, Fisher, and Cole (2007) similarly find that individuals are unsettled by the sense that there is nothing anchoring their identities. The superabundant availability of identity resources is thus not necessarily liberating (Slater 1997). In a sea of possible meanings, the combination of responsibility and choice may create a sense of being lost and adrift (Hetherington 1998; Holt 2002; McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013). In such cases identity may remain ambiguous, disconnected, and unfinished (Firat and Venkatesh 1995).

Goulding, Shankar, and Elliott (2002) sum up two perspectives on postmodernity: liberation from conformity and alienating fragmentation. Varman and Vikas (2007) point out that, while research tends to focus on the former, postmodern freedom can both empower and incapacitate individuals. They further point out that freedom and unfreedom do not exist on a

continuum, but can emerge alongside one another. It remains unclear how individuals construct their identities in such circumstances of simultaneously debilitating and empowering freedom. Individual identity construction has ascended to paramount cultural importance and yet, at the same time, the blueprints are lost, the guidelines are ambiguous, and the building materials are increasingly difficult to specify.

Slater (1997) stresses that while contemporary identity is individually constructed and personal, it is also inherently other-directed. In lacking templates for coherent identity, individuals turn to their surroundings for meaning. Barnhart and Peñaloza (2013) as well as Saatcioglu and Ozanne (2013) have shown that successful identity construction involves the negotiation with and affirmation of one's individual context. Üstüner and Holt (2007) have further found that a lack of cultural capital can result in severe identity problems. To better understand the contextualization of identity, consumer research has drawn on Bourdieu's (1986, 1990) concepts of fields and capital.

### **Consumer identity and cultural capital**

People are active agents in creatively producing identity, but that does not mean they are autonomous in doing so (Barnhart and Peñaloza 2013; Saatcioglu and Ozanne 2013). Identity emerges through socialization into the meanings of a cultural group, learned recognition of its symbolic boundaries, and conscious effort to achieve status within it (Kates 2002). Abrahams (1986) further proposed that identity is formed on the basis of authenticating acts and authoritative performances. An authenticating act is the expression of identity as we see it ourselves, which is based on "the creation of a personal belief system through which the individual acknowledges themselves" (Arnould and Price 2000, p. 146). Authoritative

performance is the portrayal of identity as perceived by others, as well as the display of unity of oneself and community (Arnould and Price 2000). The success of such performances requires cultural capital, that is, an embodied understanding of the rules by which a society operates.

Following the logic of Bourdieu (1986, 1990), identity construction makes use of both generalized and field-specific cultural capital, the latter of which is the aggregate of actual or potential resources that allow individuals to function in a particular field, gain recognition and respect within it, as well as build relationships with its members. Bourdieu's contention was that a person's place in society is largely determined by the initial endowment of cultural capital bestowed by primary socialization, that is, one's upbringing, education, and inherited networks within society (Bourdieu 1986; Holt 1998; Allen 2002). Subsequent studies support this and suggest that field-specific capital can only be converted with difficulty, if at all, to more generally valued forms of capital (Holt 1998; Üstüner and Holt 2007). Failure to fit in one's context may relate to cultural fragmentation. Adrift in a world structured by consumption rather than traditional socializing institutions, some people may have a hard time identifying and amassing cultural capital.

It is possible to overcome limitations of primary socialization. Consumer research echoes Bourdieu in finding that cultural capital can be exchanged for other forms of capital, such as social connections, economic rewards, and status (Holt 1998; See also Bernthal, Crockett and Rose 2005; Arsel and Thompson 2011; McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013; McAlexander et al. 2014), and that its value lies in this exchangeability (Bourdieu 1986; Holt 1998; Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013). Bourdieu (1986) proposed that the rate of exchange differs according to the individual's inherited place in the overall socioeconomic or class hierarchy. Yet Khan (2011), studying the experiences of minorities at an elite boarding school, tackles the issue of



how some youth, lacking in the cultural capital of the dominant society, might be re-socialized to a new habitus that is far above their inherited places in society. Scaraboto and Fischer (2013) similarly describe how marginalized consumers can gain legitimacy and inclusion through identifying collectively and focusing on institutional logics. The key in these cases seems to be a legitimizing and re-socializing institution. However, it remains unclear how individuals can overcome their failure to fit in without the direct help of such an institution or community. Bourdieu does not address this issue, and consumer researchers have found that consumers' efforts to raise their own cultural capital are likely to fail. Üstüner and Holt (2007) document a case in Turkish society where young women, attempting to rise above their primary socialization, lack the necessary cultural capital and result instead with more deeply ambiguous identities than before. Such cases reinforce the notion that the cultural capital of subordinate or marginal fields has a lower rate of conversion than that of dominant or higher-status fields (see also Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013). Extant research offers little hope for people that suffer from a lack of cultural capital relative to their peers and, as a result, struggle with ambiguous or problematic identities.

Identity becomes an increasingly complex project in the context of contemporary culture, as it is a shifting landscape of consumption fields, which are characterized by their own norms, meanings, and values, and which use consumption objects as status markers. Operating in consumption fields entails the accumulation of field-specific capital, which can support, challenge, or be completely inconsistent with one's primary socialization (Holt 1998; Arsel and Thompson 2011; Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013). People choose their field associations according to their individual preferences, learning to calibrate their tastes to the selected fields, and gaining (sub)cultural capital through their engagement with the fields (Arsel and Thompson

2011; Arsel and Bean 2013). Developing new field-specific capital helps consumers create, preserve, enhance, or even undertake major shifts of identity (Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Kates 2002; McAlexander et al. 2014).

In a traditional view on cultural capital, identity takes on a specific form in each field, born from status play among communities similar and equal in status (Holt 1998). Because fields overlap and conflict, individuals may face complex and contradictory identities in their lives. Identity emerges from field associations as a dynamic phenomenon that continues to be shaped in adulthood (Saatcioglu and Ozanne 2013). Multiple identities can emerge (Saatcioglu and Ozanne 2013), allowing individuals to take on new roles, change fields, and even challenge primary socialization (Üstüner and Thompson 2012; Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013). Following this logic, identity is malleable and multiple, constructed from various kinds of generalized and field-specific capital, and contextualized within given consumption fields. It's not clear, however, how individuals deal with this malleability and multiplicity when they do not feel a sense of belonging in any field, including their fields of primary socialization. We begin to tackle this issue by introducing the context of our study.

## **Fandom**

Fandom is an extremely affect-laden form of investment in the liking of or interest in a particular object or idea (Thorne and Bruner 2006; Chung et al. 2008). The practice of fandom is associated with extraordinary levels of loyalty, passion, devotion, and enthusiasm (Thorne and Bruner 2006; Smith, Fisher, and Cole 2007; Chung et al. 2008). Fans tend to have heavy usage patterns and extreme consumption drives, and may go to great personal and financial lengths to support the objects of their fandom (Smith, Fisher, and Cole 2007; Chung et al. 2008). Through its

connection to addictive and compulsive behavior, fandom has often been stigmatized within society (Kozinets 2001) and viewed negatively in research (Smith, Fisher, and Cole 2007). However, Smith, Fisher, and Cole (2007) as well as Chung et al. (2008) stress that fandom has many positive aspects, such as feelings of belonging and aiding the construction of identity, which we also focus on in this research.

Fandom is an excellent context for our study, as it is deeply intertwined with identity construction. Moreover, as a consumption field, a fandom is tightly bounded and well-defined. Fandom should be especially attractive to individuals that have a hard time integrating into society more broadly, as it provides individuals with a clearly defined focus (Jenkins 1992; Bennett 2012), as well as an accepting and supportive context (Redden and Steiner 2000; Thorne and Bruner 2006) that is often easy to find and join (Smith, Fisher, and Cole 2007). Lastly, fandom is set apart from “regular” consumption by the potency and intensity of the fan relationship (Grossberg 1992; Thorne and Bruner 2006), which makes it easier to distinguish from other experiences. Fandom engages emotions and senses, and it contrasts with everyday life spatially and temporally, foregrounding particular relationships and processes in a way that characterizes a productive research context (Arnould, Price and Moisio 2006).

Fandom has been strongly linked to building and understanding one’s identity (Spigel and Jenkins 1991; Jenkins 2006a, 2006b; 2007; 2014; Sandvoss 2005; Smith, Fisher, and Cole 2007; Chung et al. 2008) through its strong affective state (Grossberg 1992), its connection with values (Tulloch and Jenkins 1995), and the support it lends to generating, articulating, and understanding meaning (Jenkins 2006a, 2014; Kim 2015). Its limited context makes emotions and experiences easily accessible, shapes behavior and norms (Jenkins 2007), and allows individuals to form relationships (Jenkins 2006b). Smith, Fisher, and Cole (2007) propose that

fandom helps individuals anchor identity in a society that causes them anxiety over identity construction. However, it remains unclear how this anchoring takes place. Jenkins (2014) similarly writes that we need to map out how the anxieties of the ‘outside world’ feed into fandom. We address these issues in our study.

Fiske (1992) finds that fans are “active producers and users of cultural capital,” and the highly organized structure of fandom “echoes many of the institutions of official culture” (p. 33). Fandom involves its own rules, norms, terminology, and status games (Schreyer 2015), which reflects the idea of a cultural field. Jenkins (1992) further demonstrates that fans actively share and exchange knowledge, creating a collective intelligence around an object of fandom. This has been greatly aided by technological developments that allow faster and wider distribution of information (Bennett 2014). What’s more, sharing and interpreting knowledge in a ‘correct’ way is central to fandom (Jenkins 1992; Bennett 2014). This is commonly referred to as ‘canon’, and involves strict and articulated adherence to a shared narrative or comprehension of the fandom, which is negotiated and enforced by fans themselves.

The concept of habitus has also been used in studying fandom, mostly to discuss the similarities and differences between fan culture and ‘normal’ culture, the former of which usually takes on the role of the ‘other’ (e.g., Fiske 1992; Kim 2015). Jenkins (1992) criticizes this point of view, stressing that the division between fans and non-fans creates a negative, disempowering image of fandom and supports its reigning stigmatization. Following the work of de Certeau, Jenkins (1992) argues that fans should rather be seen as textual poachers, that is, they actively build on mass culture through reinterpreting its meanings. This blurs the difference between producer and consumer, allowing freedom from the dominant culture through criticizing its structures and resisting it by creating a different one (Giles 2013).

Jenkins (2007, 2014) further suggests that fandom may actually be a prototype to how individuals interact with brands and media in contemporary culture. In line with this, McCulloch (2013) describes fandom to be a negotiated form of brand ownership. Hence, fans no longer take a marginal position in culture, as everyone develops knowledge communities around specific phenomena or brands, pooling their knowledge and shaping each others' opinions. Jenkins (2007) argues that if fandom becomes the normal way that consumers interact with brands, it ceases to be a meaningful category for analysis: we are now all fans. However, we would argue that, from a subjective point of view, fandom is still distinctly differentiated from other activities. Our informants clearly juxtaposed fandom and their 'real life', making the category different on an individual level. Similarly, Grossberg (1992) as well as Thorne and Bruner (2006) have suggested that fandom activities are set apart from and contrasted with 'regular' life and interaction. This is because individuals engage in a different set of norms, meanings, and possibly even identities within fandom (Deller 2015; Johnston 2015). Johnston (2015) further points out that the stigma of fandom is still strongly present in contemporary culture, often setting the activity apart. Consequently, while it may be unsuitable to differentiate fans from 'normal people' and allot them a lower status, it is undeniable that fandom does form a separate, limited-scope consumption field. It is important to note that while fandom is a limited field because of its restricted and clearly defined context of interaction, it is not necessarily marginal.

Research has shown that media can become a great source for learning (e.g. Freedman et al. 2013). Fandom can similarly provide models for social and cultural practices through its ties to mainstream culture (Johnston 2015), and its ability to reconcile tensions between one's private and public lives (Spigel and Jenkins 1991) as well as individual and collective memory (Yockey 2013; Kim 2015). This allows meaning creation (Jenkins 2006a, 2006b), reflection, self-

projection (Sandvoss 2005), and self re-imagining (Jenkins 2014). But how and what do individuals learn from fandom, and how might this knowledge transcend fandom? Can fandom help individuals carve out their own place in life? Pursuing these questions, this research aims to understand how people resolve identity ambiguity through fandom.

Research on fandom crosses various consumption contexts, usually focusing on only one phenomenon (Hills 2014). Chung et al. (2008) as well as Fuschillo and Cova (2014) studied fans of various brands and products, resulting in consistent findings regarding fandom and identity. We similarly explored our research questions with self-avowed fans, regardless of the focus of their fandoms. As per Bennett and Booth (2015), we are interested in fandom as particular behavior. We thus explore the practices and experiences of being a fan from the point of view of the individual, not the idiosyncrasies of fandom associated with a particular brand or community. All but two of our informants reported serial devotions to various consumption phenomena, framing the different fandom experiences within a trajectory of personal development. While previous fandom research has not taken particular note of this, based on personal introspection and our data, we suggest that serial fandom may be a common occurrence.

### **Cultural context**

To be able to explore the lives of individuals with ambiguous identities and deficiencies of cultural capital, we must grasp what it is they are lacking and in what social context. As Askegaard and Linnet (2011) have stressed, we need to be more attentive to the broader cultural contexts of the social contexts of our research. Our study was conducted in Finland with individuals that have all grown up in the Finnish cultural context. Interviewees included both native Finns and immigrants who have resided in Finland since childhood. Having grown up in

this Nordic country, individuals would be expected to have specific inheritances of cultural capital.

Finland has a small, relatively homogeneous and non-hierarchical culture (Hofstede 1980; Tainio and Santalainen 1984; Nishimura, Nevgi, and Tella 2008). Finns are individualistic, have a tendency to introversion, and rarely emphasize strong family ties (Nishimura, Nevgi, and Tella 2008). The absence of large class differences relative to other Western cultures, as well as the relative homogeneity of language, education, and consumer experiences result in individuals sharing a similar primary socialization. Moreover, Holttinen (2014) found that social class does not influence consumption in Finland. Such a cultural background provides a backdrop of relative homogeneity against which to examine differences in inherited cultural capital.

### **Research methods**

Our study focuses on subjectively felt cultural capital and status, as this allows us to tap into the personal social construction of identity and the ambiguity felt around it. Fiske (1992) shows that cultural capital and its lack cannot “be measured by objective means alone, for lack arises when the amount of capital possessed falls short of that which is desired or felt merited” (p. 33). Hence, our study focuses on individual accounts of fandom and its meanings, and we honor our informants’ judgments of their own subjective positions within Finnish society.

We used an interpretive approach with an ontological position in hermeneutics as theorized by Heidegger (1962) and adapted by Arnold and Fischer (1994) for consumer research. Hermeneutical methods have proven especially suitable for analyzing consumer narratives regarding fields, capital, and identity across varied individual contexts and experiences (see, e.g., McAlexander et al. 2014). We collected data by means of largely unstructured in-depth

interviews, asking informants to give accounts of their experiences as fans. It is noteworthy that while we focused on how fandom and identity are tied into one another, nothing in the interview protocol was designed to elicit narratives of identity ambiguity or personal development. Those issues arose from informants' own determinations about what was relevant to their fan experiences.

Informant selection followed McCracken's (1988) suggestion for the long interview method, namely that the individuals interviewed should be few in number, should have no specialized knowledge of the theoretical framework, and should vary in age, gender, and occupation. The data set consisted of 15 depth interviews conducted with self-described fans in metropolitan Helsinki, Finland. Because fandom means different things to different people (Kozinets 2001; Thorne and Bruner 2006), we did not provide informants with a definition of the concept, leaving them to define fandom and being a fan for themselves. Nevertheless, many similarities could be found in these definitions: being a fan required being passionate about and having an emotional link to, as well as investing time, effort, and money into the object of fandom. It is also important to note that fandom tends to have a strong and somewhat stigmatized meaning in Finland, with individuals rarely using the term casually. Since the approach to fandom is subjective, it makes no sense to analyze or compare informants' narratives for objective characteristics, such as longevity or quality. Each informant gains the status of a fan by defining themselves as such.

As the original aim of our study was to understand experiences of identity and fandom generally and not within a specific group or community, we chose informants from very diverse fandoms. Informants described being fans of TV-shows, book series, sports teams, video games, brands of cosmetics, musical instruments, and musicians. The diversity of contexts facilitated the



identification of themes that transcended particular fandoms. The first author recruited three informants from among personal acquaintances that identified themselves as fans and were willing to participate in the research. Some prior familiarity was thus brought to these interviews. A pre-existing relationship of the interviewer and informant can ease anxieties and enhance emotional openness in interviews, especially when the subject matter is sensitive and personal (Atkinson 1998; Price, Arnould and Curasi 2000). A further six informants were recruited through an email announcement to a university mailing list asking for volunteers who felt themselves to fit the described fan category. The remaining six informants were recruited by referrals from the initial nine by asking them to name acquaintances that could fit the research criteria. Seven females and eight males ranging from 22 to 41 years of age made up the informant pool. Their lifestyles and professions were somewhat diverse, ranging from full-time students to IT professionals and one unemployed volunteer. All informants were college educated or becoming so, and all were suitably reflective and articulate about their personal experiences as fans.

The first author conducted the interviews over a five-month period. The interviews lasted from 45 minutes to a little over two and a half hours. The goal was to make the situations as comfortable for the informants as possible. Their confidentiality was assured and the interviews were held in settings familiar to them, allowing them to feel at ease and to describe their experiences more freely (Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1989). The settings were mostly the informants' own homes. One interview was held at the informant's place of work and two were held at their places of study.

The overall goal of the interviews was to attain first-person accounts of experience by helping the informant tell a story and reflect on it. Consumer research has shown that narratives,

that is, stories, accounts, and descriptions, are a fundamental form of human communication and thus become a good way of gaining rich understanding of lived life and consumers' sense of identity (Shankar, Elliott, and Goulding 2001; Ahuvia 2005). The interviewer supplied the opening question of the interview, but follow-up questions largely relied on informants' own wording and were chosen to encourage thoughtful, descriptive answers, and to support an atmosphere of equality between interviewer and informant (Atkinson 1998; Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1989). The interviewer allowed informants to set the course of dialogue and determine what events were important to report. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, transforming them into a 497-page typed double-spaced text.

Data analysis consisted of a hermeneutic approach through the use of a part-to-whole process, where data are interpreted and reinterpreted in order to develop a sense of the whole (Thompson 1997) and to abstract etic findings from emic perspectives. The goal of this iterative process was to gain a holistic understanding of the consumers' life stories from data that consists of descriptions of actions, events, and experiences (Thompson 1997).

We conducted the analysis at two levels, which overlapped with one other. The first was an intratextual level, during which we read individual texts, relating separate passages to the overall content in order to gain understanding of each narrative. This process resulted in 15 distinct stories of fandom from which we generated thematic categories. The second, intertextual phase involved comparative examinations of the individual narratives. We identified common goals, motifs, and issues as well as patterns of development and important influences (Atkinson 1998). As we studied the texts for common themes and important differences, we returned to the individual texts as necessary in order to retain contextual understandings of the emergent categories. We continued the part-to-whole process iteratively until we had gained a holistic

understanding of our data and could account for individual differences in experience. The interpretations relied heavily on the informants' own words, with the goal of being faithful to individual understandings while also abstracting to more theoretical levels.

## **Findings**

In recounting their narratives of being fans of various phenomena, our informants described gaining help in constructing their identities through fandom. Many described a time before they first engaged in any fandom as filled with confusion over how to fit into their social surroundings. Several described poor understanding of their own identities, and others described deep unhappiness with who they were. They cited feelings of marginalization, social ineptitude, not belonging, and being left out or even bullied by their peers. As we did not deliberately elicit or search for narratives of identity ambiguity, the strong and continued emergence of such themes led us to believe that these play an important part in understanding fandom as part of our informants' lives and identities.

Michael, a 24-year old student, says: "This is kind of sad information, but before [I started being a fan] I hated my life. I hated school ... I was alone a lot. I counted days until school would be over." Michael recounts that, prior to becoming a fan of anything, he was "lonely" and had little understanding of "what I am". He further describes that he had "no social environment" in which to engage, thus feeling left out from by the people around him. He had "few friends", and he reports that, "there was a lot of bullying going on". He says, "I was really insecure about everything ... I just wanted to be accepted somewhere." Michael desperately wanted to become a part of something, and to gain a better understanding of who he was, but he didn't know how to achieve it.

Liz, a 25-year old student and office assistant, recounts a story similar to Michael's: "It was kind of like ... I didn't really ... I didn't have many friends, and I kind of did not fit in or like anyone." Liz says she often wondered why she couldn't fit in and what she was doing wrong. Sarah, a 22-year-old student, describes her life before fandom in the following way: "I was odd ... I sort of felt myself to be really lonely and stuff, and I mean, as a background to that, I was bullied at school." Like some others, Sarah blamed her experiences of alienation on her own personal attributes, that is, her self-perceived oddness. Literature on bullying ties the phenomenon to a lack of cultural capital on the part of victims, and to a lack of mechanisms for developing it within traditional social structures (Klein 2006). Lacking status or cultural capital, individuals feel that they don't belong, and that feeling is reinforced by their social interactions. For explanations they look inward, wondering what's missing in them.

Ellen, a 23-year old student, also felt a nagging sense of incompleteness: "I felt like something was missing, and I actively looked for things that would fill that. ... I could not really imagine what it was." This sense of something important missing drove our informants to embrace fandom as a possible means of acquiring the missing pieces.

We do not propose that fandom and alienation go hand in hand. However, prior to engaging in any fandom, many of our informants clearly recalled experiences of not belonging in worlds their peers inhabited comfortably. They spoke of personal incompleteness, of something missing, and of limited understanding of their identity. Our informants did not have an understanding of or satisfaction with who they were and how they related to other people. What's more, they did not seem to have the tools to begin to attain that understanding. In other words, they lacked the cultural capital necessary to engage with their context in such a way as to resolve identity ambiguity.

It is difficult to pinpoint what exactly caused the alienation expressed by informants, as they themselves lacked that understanding. Some part of the problem may derive from the widely reported lack of traditional templates for identity in contemporary consumer society (Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Firat and Dholakia 2006; McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013; McAlexander et al. 2014). If that is the reason, then it certainly appears to have affected most of our informants more than it affected their peers. As research has shown, individuals create identities through placing themselves within categories and communities that are largely defined by family and other immediate social groups (Marion and Nairn 2011; Parmentier and Fischer 2011). Our informants seemed to be unable to engage successfully in this process. While it may seem at first glance that our findings describe the normal development of a child or adolescent, it is important to keep in mind that the individuals we cite herein felt that they, in particular, were singled out as not belonging to any social group.

While the source of their identity ambiguity was unclear, it is clear that our informants wanted to overcome it. We will show this next through describing three different ways in which individuals engage with fandom in order to construct more satisfying identities. We categorize these as (1) popular, other-directed fandom, (2) personal, self-directed fandom, and (3) transcending fandom. These involve different ways of engaging with the object of fandom, the surrounding fan community, and one's identity in the context of these other actors. We find the different types of engagement to be generally sequential in that they appear to build on one another. Not all of our informants experienced every type of engagement that we describe, but all passed through some of the types, and always in the order listed above.

Table 1 lists our informants and their fandoms, organized according to their experiences with the various fandom types. For continuity, we organize our findings around Michael's story, using other informants' experiences to support the narrative.

<< Insert Table 1 about Here >>

### ***Popular other-directed fandom***

Our informants' first experiences of fandom focused on phenomena that were popular in their immediate social groups, especially in school or their neighborhoods. Such phenomena could be described as fashions or fads of the time, but it is important to note that our informants engaged in them at a level of fandom, not just appreciation, and they admitted this despite the somewhat stigmatizing connotation of fandom in Finnish culture. Such fandom was mainly driven by a desire to connect to others. The object of fandom itself, while extremely important, was most often secondary to the aspiration to belong. This popular, other-directed fandom provided individuals with glimpses of belonging and status, but ultimately failed to address underlying identity problems.

Michael became a fan of the *Pokémon* phenomenon because of its popularity among his peers at school. "*Pokémon*," he explains, "was a game and a TV-show, and you collected things around it." Michael's experience with the entertainment franchise "started in the classroom, really ... it was a huge phenomenon." His earliest engagement consisted of imitating what his peers were doing. It turned out that *Pokémon* provided a language through which he could finally connect with them: "At school, I could talk about it to people and play the game and look at the cards and stuff like that." Michael noticed that *Pokémon*-related possessions and knowledge

were tradable for a certain amount of status and social acceptability. Material elements in themselves did not confer cultural capital, but their amount and/or quality did transfer into symbolic capital. For instance, owning more *Pokémon* cards or specific, rare cards raised one's status. Field-specific cultural capital emerged as knowledge about the fandom, understanding its terminology and jargon, and being able to engage in discussions and other practices inherent to it, which entailed knowledge of particular rules.

Noting this source of cultural capital, Michael started investing into it more heavily, beyond what his peers were doing. He accumulated cards and figurines in a deliberate fashion. "I had a concrete list," he says, "where I would tick things off, like, where I'm going with, like, the *Pokémon* cards." He also worked hard at developing knowledge and competency in the field. He read about *Pokémon* on company and fan websites, he immersed himself in fan guides and books, and he learned any trivia he could get his hands on. Michael says:

I would sit with my eyes glued to the computer screen and go through stuff and go through stuff and go through stuff. And like, I wouldn't learn it by heart, but I think it says something that, like, I can remember the first 250 Pokémon by heart probably. ... It was almost like hoarding information in a sense. I couldn't get enough of it. I could read for hours, like, read the same things, and totally irrelevant things. With that I could prove and, when necessary, show others that, "Hey! I know stuff about this and I'm a huge fan of this, a bigger fan than you!"

Michael invested a significant amount of time, effort, and resources in order to learn elements of the field and become proficient in it. The rules of fandom were much easier to grasp than the larger cultural context he lived in, as its limits, elements, and commendable competencies were

extremely clear. Hence, in the limited realm of *Pokémon*, Michael was able to connect with his peers and gain status in a way that he previously could not.

Unfortunately for Michael, the popularity of a phenomenon often fades. Michael's interest in *Pokémon* started to wane as the franchise became less popular among his peers, who were turning to what he described as “more adult” things. He says:

I started feeling ashamed. I felt like it was really childish at that point, even though I guess some people continued being a fan anyway. I knew my parents would have said something negative, because I got that from, like, other people. But it wasn't like ... plus ... nobody would have understood. Nobody was really my friend at that point. And, like, school days basically consisted of trying not to get beat up.

Michael turned away from *Pokémon* when the related cultural capital became a social liability. This reflects Johnston's (2015) findings of fans having to edit their identities because of associated stigma. Michael fell back into the identity ambiguity and relative alienation he had experienced before engaging in the fandom. In retrospect, he points out that being a fan of *Pokémon* was mostly “about wanting to belong” and was never “really my own thing”. The object of fandom was less important than the connections it had facilitated.

Sarah's first fan experience focused on the girl-band *Spice Girls*, which was immensely popular in her age group at the time. Like Michael, Sarah had been unpopular and bullied at school. Becoming a *Spice Girls* fan seemed like a possible remedy.

It was really just about being a fan with other people. So everyone in my class was a huge *Spice Girls* fan or something, and you had to have a favorite [member of the band]. And it was absolutely shocking when we got a new girl and she didn't like *Spice Girls*. It was terrible. And



what was worse still, no one would believe that she didn't like *Spice Girls*. Because if you are a girl you had to like *Spice Girls*.

In her words, being a fan of *Spice Girls* helped Sarah “belong to a group” and it “made communication with other people easier, as you could do it through that”. Much like *Pokémon* did for Michael, Sarah's *Spice Girls* fandom constituted a consumption field that was popular and accessible, and in which she could easily identify and accumulate the field-specific capital necessary for fitting in with her peers. As a *Spice Girls* fan Sarah found temporary resolution to her problem of alienation. Like Michael, she put significant time and effort into that capital accrual. This emerged through learning lyrics and dances by heart, studying background information of the artists, and performing and discussing elements of the fandom with others. Products once again had an indirect role in capital accrual. “I had posters and photos and whatnot,” she says. “There was a movie too ... we watched that.” The central form of cultural capital that Sarah equates with being a *Spice Girls* fan is something she calls “girly-ness”, by which she means feminine behavior and looks. The *Spice Girls* phenomenon, Sarah says, “promoted girly-ness, but I've always been a tomboy”.

It all ended when the fad had run its course. Sarah says, “It just suddenly became really lame and embarrassing to be a fan of *Spice Girls*. ... It just went out of fashion. So I stopped being a fan.” She continues, “I went right back to being a tomboy, because I don't think [girly-ness] was natural to me and I don't really know how to be like that.” While engaging in the fandom, Sarah had been able to emulate the required femininity, through which she “belonged better”. However, during that time she also did not feel like herself. In retrospect, she feels that she was acting out “other people's compulsory meanings”. The object of fandom lacked personal relevance, and therefore it failed to provide her with lasting identity resources.

Our informants were trying to engage with and connect to their cultural contexts by building up cultural capital in a more limited field. McAlexander et al. (2014) have similarly shown that consumers whose identities are destabilized by a falling-out with their field of primary socialization may begin to reconstruct identity by seeking to build cultural capital in other fields. What seemed to be especially helpful to our informants was the articulated ‘correct’ way of interacting with and within fandom (following Jenkins 1992; Bennett 2014), which was much easier for them to figure out than the rules of their broader social milieu.

Through the other-directed, popular fandom, our informants also engaged in attempts at authoritative performances (Arnould and Price 2000). If successful, authoritative performances integrate individuals into the community and provide a sense of belonging, meaning, and identity (Arnould and Price 2000; Healy and Beverland 2013), which were exactly the things our informants missed. The context of the fandom did become a source of cultural capital, but, unfortunately, an authoritative performance could not take place. Firstly, while our informants engaged with the same phenomenon as their peers, they engaged on a more intense level and thus ascribed it different meanings. This resonates with what Slater (1997) has described as consumer culture reduced to autonomous individuals, in which collectives are created through each person’s connection to objects of consumption, not to one another. In a similar vein, Scaraboto and Fischer (2013) have shown that marginalized individuals can gain legitimacy through identification around a shared object of consumption. Our informants reached a shared understanding of the object of fandom with their peers, but not of its meaning to them as individuals and as a community.

Secondly, like Michael and Sarah, our informants spoke of a lack of personal relevance in fandom directed at phenomena popular in their dominant social context: the fandoms “lacked

something of your own in it” (Liz) and were thus “alien” (Ellen) and “not authentic” (Tina). Individuals gravitated to popular fandoms to seek inclusion, but found that the fields did not necessarily have personal relevance for them beyond their possible function as social connectors. This contradicts previous consumer research, which has indicated that consumption communities subsume individual identity (Celsi, Rose and Leigh 1993; Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Cova and Cova 2002). This lack of personal connection may have aided the failure of the authoritative performances, as individuals could not connect to the meaning and unity they were meant to be expressing. Moreover, individuals did not engage in another crucial element of identity, authenticating acts (Arnould and Price 2000). The result was a lack of understanding of identity on both individual and communal levels.

While these experiences of fandom failed to provide lasting resolution to our informants’ needs for belonging and understanding of identity, they did provide something important. Our informants had tasted the fruits of cultural and symbolic capital, even if in very limited ways, which led them to try fandom again. Michael, for instance, after giving up *Pokémon*, went on to be a fan of a number of other consumption fields popular among the people surrounding him, including the TV-show *The Smurfs* and *Gogo’s Crazy Bones* figurines. Similar to *Pokémon*, these fandoms were short-lived and failed to solve his problem of alienation among his peers. Nevertheless, each fandom provided a clear structure for amassing cultural capital within it.

### ***Personal self-directed fandom***

The experiences of our informants with fandom in popular, but short-lived phenomena taught them some valuable lessons regarding subcultural capital. They learned how to identify and amass elements, which conferred some status within the narrow consumption fields. That

learning constituted a breakthrough for them. However, our informants also learned that those status benefits evaporated with the decrease in the general popularity of the fandom, and that the connections they made with peers in the fandom context were transitory. The next breakthrough came when they learned to engage in fandom in a way that was more resonant with their own sensibilities and interests. Such fandom was not necessarily popular with their peers.

Michael became aware of the *Harry Potter* book series because of its general popularity. However, unlike his previous objects of fandom, *Harry Potter* was not popular in his regular social milieu. He says, “People at school never found out ... They would have picked on me.” He decided to give the books a chance and was instantly bewitched by the fantasy novels. “Around the third book,” he says, “it really got going. I hadn’t read them at that point. And I was just like, well, ok, people are reading these a lot, maybe I should as well. And so I read them and I was just totally hooked.”

As Michael became more and more immersed in *Harry Potter*, he started, once again, to read all available materials, look up information online, and buy related products, reflecting similar patterns of cultural capital accrual as we saw in his previous fandoms. He describes learning new terminology and rules, engaging in discussion and debates, becoming established in an online community, and building status through commenting and interacting within it.

When I had read the books, I would just surf for information, and so I found this online Hogwarts, which was really interesting. So I joined it, and there I found a lot of other people that were just bonkers for it. And it sort of sucked me in. I got to know people and they became my friends.

Through the community, Michael felt, for the first time in his life, resonance with other people through the shared meanings and values associated with the fandom. This is clearly exemplified

in the fact that he had not used the term “friends” to describe any of his prior peer-group relations. In his “real life”, Michael continued to be bullied and feel marginalized. He remained disconnected from his everyday context and the people in it, describing himself as “socially awkward” and “nerdy”. The *Harry Potter* fan community thus became a place of refuge where he found friends and felt accepted. For Michael, “the community was pretty much a last lifeline”. He continues:

It became my own community that I didn't have at school ... It was nice because there I felt appreciated and needed. It was a different world. The community was kind of like a savior to me ... If I had never ended up in those crowds, I don't know how... I would be a much more depressed and outcast person.

Michael's tone here is similar to that of Fuschillo and Cova's (2014) informants' statements on the theme of 'this brand saved my life'. To his *Harry Potter* fandom Michael attributes salvation from a life of isolation and depression.

Fearing negative social repercussions in his “real life”, Michael did not tell anyone outside the fan community about his *Harry Potter* interest. He felt that other people would perceive his fandom as “weird”, “childish”, and just about “goofing around.” He feared the association with the fandom would make his already vulnerable situation even worse. This reflects Johnston's (2015) research, in which she shows that fans often edit or limit fandom-related elements of their identities to avoid the associated stigma. As we will show later, this seclusion in fandom may be a crucial element to resolving identity ambiguity.

Michael kept the worlds of fandom and everyday life clearly separated. “It was a different world,” he said. “It was like my own life, my fan life, and it was outside of everything else ... I didn't even tell my parents.” The *Harry Potter* fan community became a place where he

felt himself to be “appreciated” and an “important member of a group”. He became “more social”, “confident”, and “brave to try new things.” Michael became a moderator of the online community and found his confidence bolstered by the “high status” that he gained. All in all, in the context of the *Harry Potter* fan community, Michael felt that he was genuinely connecting with other people, not just sharing a common interest in something fashionable among his peers.

Removed from his everyday social context, Michael was able to gain acceptance and status within a community. This allowed him to relax and begin learning how to develop his identity. He says, “It sort of drove me towards, like, my own kind of, I don’t know if I can say identity, but like the person I am today ... through the fact that my confidence was growing. I could be myself.” Michael explains that the safe space of fandom allowed him to engage in “active self-expression”. He especially highlights “learning to be creative”, that is, interacting, behaving, and expressing himself as a “creative persona”. Consequently, he could become someone different from his socially awkward self as well as to take on a more interesting and fun identity. He says:

This type of self-expression ... it really resonates with me, and like, on the other hand, I want to show other people and I want to be that which I was not when I was in school ... I’ve been thinking that I really wanted to become as much as possible like an antipersona to what I was before. I was quiet and didn’t talk to anyone.

Michael began to actively remake his identity in the context of fandom. The activities allowed him to build subcultural capital and to test how it worked, linking it to his newly constructed identity. He describes this process as finding his “own thing”, and no longer conforming to “other people’s meanings”, but rather finally creating his own identity. As Michael notes:

“Retrospectively, [Harry Potter] had such a huge influence on my life. Like for myself and my growth as a person. It allowed me to become who I am ... It showed me that creative self-expression is really important for my identity.” Johnston (2005), Sandvoss (2005), as well as Smith, Fisher, and Cole (2007) have similarly suggested that fandom allows individuals to more easily recognize aspects of identity. This seems to be supported by the clarity of a ‘correct’ way of interpreting fandom (Jenkins 1992).

Despite his progress with identity construction, Michael only experienced belonging, acceptance, and the understanding of his identity in the context of the fandom. “I was really proud that I knew so much about [*Harry Potter*] and, like, being in that community and being a moderator and stuff ... but I couldn’t talk about it to people outside of it.” Michael’s alienation and identity ambiguity were resolved only in the limited field that didn’t overlap with the larger and more generalized context of his everyday life.

Ellen also tells a story of finding herself through a fandom that she did not share with people in her “real” social context. Speaking of the music artist *Mike Patton*, Ellen describes being attracted to his “eclectic aesthetics” and his “versatility” in style and genre.

What it’s really about is that he doesn’t let anyone categorize him. And I’ve always been difficult that way, that whenever anyone asked for my opinion, I’d be like, well, I like so many things. So I feel like [*Mike Patton*] has a lot of the same, like, he does what he likes, no matter what category that belongs to ... The versatility is very important to me as a value. And [*Mike Patton*] helps me experience that as much as possible.

Through her *Mike Patton* fandom, Ellen was able to find resonance with a previously problematic aspect of her identity: an eclecticism that made it difficult for her to claim any of the particular cultural categories valued among her peers.

Similar to Michael's *Pokémon* and Sarah's *Spice Girls* experiences, all of Ellen's previous fan experiences had been focused on phenomena that were popular among her peers in her immediate social context. Through such fandoms, she had tried to "fit in" better and maintain shared interests with others. However, she referred to her previous fandoms as "fake" and "stupid", saying they were more of a result of "group pressure" and based on what "other people found". She says,

When I was younger ... well, a big part of [being a fan] was liking what your friends liked. It was about being a fan for other people. Now it's not about belonging to a crowd. And that's why it's more durable. Through the music [of *Mike Patton*] I just got the feeling that I found myself.

Ellen had previously been able to accrue field-specific capital, but it had never felt like it fit her. When she became a *Mike Patton* fan, she felt that the energy she invested in the activity returned happiness, self-acceptance, understanding of identity, and confidence. The meanings that Ellen found were more of a "personal thing" and thus, in her opinion, "more durable" and "authentic" than meanings available to her in previous fandoms. This was the fits-like-a-glove (Allen 2002) experience she had been searching for: "When I found it, I got this feeling that Yes! I don't need to categorize myself into one box! I don't have to say 'I like this and I don't like these other things', but I can say that I like everything! And it's okay." For Ellen, the aim of fandom turned from conformity in an existing peer group to finding personally relevant meanings that felt authentic to her and differentiated her as an individual. Like *Harry Potter* did for Michael, *Mike*



*Patton* seems to have unlocked expressive aspects of Ellen's style and personality that previously had lain undiscovered or undeveloped. Having felt and rejected pressure to choose popular fandoms for the purpose of fitting in (the precise strategy we discuss in the previous section), she found among *Mike Patton* fans a lifestyle that validated the distinctive and authentically experienced identity she was attempting to construct.

Through fandom that is personal and self-directed, our informants were finally able to engage in authoritative performances, supporting their authentic identity projects and linking them to others, but only in the limited context of fandom. They had progressed from trying to *find* identity within popular fandoms to *constructing* identity from resources available in fandoms that they found personally resonant. This allowed fans to also engage in authenticating acts, allowing them to legitimize their identities to themselves. This reflects Smith, Fisher, and Cole's (2007) research, in which they found that fans gained a sense of being settled in the world of their fandom and gained a "guidepost for living that confers identity and generates confidence in it" (p. 90).

We identify three reasons for our informants' breakthroughs in constructing identity and social relations. First, the narrow focus of fandom, supported by the single, correct way of understanding it (Jenkins 1992), provides clearer rules to engaging with the social context and fewer options to choose from within it. It thus becomes relatively easy to identify and accrue the necessary forms of cultural capital to gain status. Second, as serial fans, our informants had already learned the rudiments of building field-specific cultural capital in other fandom fields. Consistent with the findings of Tocci (2009) in a study of geek cultures that some subcultural capital may actually be transferrable among related fields, the competencies Michael learned as a moderator in the *Harry Potter* fan community may well have been transferable to other online

contexts. Third, in the personal, self-directed fandom, our informants carried less of the prior, negative social baggage that characterized their more general life contexts. In Bourdieuan terms, they were no longer working from positions of deficient cultural capital. Fan community members had no prior judgments or biases against them, which allowed individuals to start from scratch socially and to craft field-specific identities without the negative feedback they were accustomed to receiving from their peers. They were able to engage in fandom on their own terms, not on terms dictated by peer pressure. This supports the idea of fandom being clearly differentiated from other contexts of life, with meanings related to fandom only being available in its context (following Grossberg 1992; Thorne and Bruner 2006; Deller 2015; Johnston 2015).

All in all, self-directed fandoms allowed people that were deficient in cultural capital in their immediate social contexts to learn to express identity and communicate it to both themselves and others. However, this expression was only available to individuals in the context of the fandom. Back in “real life” they still felt as estranged as before, because they were unable to mobilize their newfound identities outside of fandom fields. This supports the findings of previous research, which established the low conversion rate or lack of direct transferability of field-specific capital (Arsel and Thompson 2011). But, as we shall see, our story doesn’t end there.

### ***Transcending fandom***

The third way in which our informants engaged in fandom allowed them to transcend its limited field in terms of capital accrual. Building on their previous fandom experiences, some of our informants learned to decontextualize and recontextualise the skill of accruing cultural capital,

thus allowing them to construct satisfying identities also outside of any fandom. The skill develops through and within fandom, but may transcend it.

Michael had been able, through his *Harry Potter* fandom, to construct an identity that was more creative and confident than his former or “real one”. He eventually began asserting that creativity and confidence in aspects of his everyday life. He took up new hobbies, such as dancing and theatre, which he finds to be “extremely cool”, but which he had previously been “too shy” to engage in. Eventually, he was able to manifest a creative identity in his more generalized life context, building friendships and asserting himself through his new identity by finding, in his everyday life, similar types of sources of creativity he had within fandom. In effect, he had decontextualized the more creative and confident identity with its self-representation and associated behaviors from *Harry Potter* and recontextualized it within the realms of dance and theatre where fandom was not a prerequisite for acceptance or status.

The above ideas can be further exemplified in Michael’s fandom of *MADtv*, a sketch-comedy TV show. The fandom emerged years after his *Harry Potter* fandom ended. Says Michael, “I was just watching something on YouTube and I noticed that, Hey! These are really really good! ... and then I noticed that there were a lot of the videos and I just started investigating what I could find.” Reflecting back on the experience, he says he had instantly found elements that fit his “style”, that is, elements that connected to his new identity. These included “imaginative performances” and “good humor”, which supported the development of the more confident and creative identity that he had begun to construct in the *Harry Potter* context. Michael did do some “information hoarding” in the context of *MADtv* as he had in his previous fandoms, but he did not collect any objects associated with the fandom. He felt they were not “necessary” so he “wasn’t bothered”. Michael was able to map out and tap into cultural

capital to support his identity directly and without accumulating any material aids. He was thus transcending fandom in terms of capital accrual and identity development.

Michael had lost the desperate yearning for acceptance in a fan community as he began to experience acceptance and validation in a more generalized social context. The *MADtv* fandom resonated with his personal values and meanings without connecting him to a particular community. He explains:

Earlier I just really wanted to fit in, and now that I've got that, now that people don't kick me in the head anymore, it's more about finding my own thing. Now it's more about setting myself apart from others than being a fan of what other people like. It's more like I've started thinking of [being a fan] in the light of "This defines me."

Michael began to understand fandom as an individual identity resource in a wider social context. Says Michael, "It's more like you try to distinguish yourself from other people, like be a fan of what your friends are not." Fandom became an exercise in authentication and differentiation for Michael, but that could not have happened if he hadn't first learned the necessary skills of capital accrual that allowed him to operate confidently in a narrower cultural framework.

Speaking of his *MADtv* fandom as a resource for authentication, Michael explains that fandom now "has a depth in which you can absorb yourself ... and which you can develop in yourself". While fandom is no longer mandatory for Michael to experience identity and acceptance, he feels that without *MADtv* his life would be "somewhat incomplete". Fandom helps him to continue developing his distinctive identity.

Michael explains that he now interacts "comfortably" outside of fandom fields, indicating that he has accrued generalized cultural capital that he once lacked. The current thinking in

consumer research would suggest that this should have been somewhere between difficult and impossible. Indeed, Michael did not directly transfer field-dependent capital from one fandom to the next. His accumulated *Pokémon* lore and artifacts had no role or status in his *Harry Potter* fan experiences, and he did not carry his *Harry Potter* status forward into other fields, such as *MADtv*. We suggest, however, that he did carry something from field to field each time. That something was an increasing, decontextualised skill of identifying and accruing cultural capital, and converting it to social and symbolic capital within a relevant cultural context.

Mark's life story as a fan shares similar themes of decontextualization and recontextualization. Mark is a 24-year-old student, musician, and long-time fan of the bands *Bon Jovi*, *AC/DC*, and *Guns N' Roses*. In those bands, he valued the "tradition" and "rock credibility" inherent in "their style and their sound". Cultural capital in these fandoms included things like knowing details about the bands and their discographies, owning and playing their music, and attending concerts. Mark felt the bands and their music to be personally relevant, and his knowledge and appreciation were valued primarily among other fans of the bands.

Everything changed when Mark became inspired to make music himself. That impulse arose from his fan experiences, but it took his life and identity into a sphere that clearly transcended his fandom. He says, "It got going when I was watching Bon Jovi videos, and the guitarist was really cool, and so maybe it started then." When the time came to purchase his own guitar, there was no doubt as to what brand of instrument he wanted. Mark had to get a *Gibson* because the brand communicated the values and credibility that Mark found appealing in his previous music-oriented fandoms. He explains: "I wanted to be able to do these cool things so that's why I wanted the guitar ... *Gibsons* are traditional and they've been used a lot, and so the people that use them have the same type of feel and sound and stuff. So then I wanted that too."

Soon Mark began playing and creating music with others, as well as performing in front of people. Mark explains that he was able to develop some of the same characteristics he had attained previously within his fandoms, namely “rock credibility” and a “values of tradition”. Instead on reaping these from a fandom, he was able to build up cultural capital in his own social milieu by finding and linking to forms of expertise, skill, and interaction in similar ways, as he had previously done within the limited contexts of *Bon Jovi*, *AC/DC* and *Guns N’ Roses* fandom.

Mark now considers himself a fan of the *Gibson* guitar, which remains an important material and symbolic instrument for his identity development. The guitar confers “status”, says Mark, and he refuses to play a guitar of any other make. “*Gibson* has become the number one brand for me ... The brand just has so much effect, so that’s why I want to buy only a *Gibson*, and not like get a guitar custom made, even if it may be as good in terms of quality, maybe even better.” From a Bourdieuan perspective, the guitar is a material manifestation of cultural and symbolic capital. Yet the meanings he cherishes and associates with the *Gibson* brand go well beyond any of his fandoms. He has learned to reproduce them and incorporate them into his everyday life, allowing him to understand better who he is and how he fits into the world outside of fandom.

For our informants that managed it, transcending their fandom in terms of capital accrual involved learning to engage in authenticating acts and authoritative performances in a manner that was not limited to the context of fandom alone. Moving from limited field to limited field, as in the case of serial fandom, seems to breed acute awareness of similar forms of capital, such as the authenticity and the link to traditions, to which Mark aspired. Informants did not exchange one form of capital for another, as Bourdieu presents it. They learned skills for accruing capital, which they then used to accrue capital in other fields. A lot of the accrued capital involved

immaterial, interactional, embodied forms, such as communication, confidence, and self-representation. Such embodied capital appeared to be best acquired in the comparative sanctuary of personal, self-directed fandom where individuals were free to explore aspects of themselves and construct meanings that resonated with them deeply and personally. In transcending their fandom, our informants were then able to situate their identity projects fruitfully outside the limited fields of fandom. Such fandom seems to take form in a manner similar to Jenkins's (1992, 2007) textual poaching: it becomes an activity of reinterpreting and reconstructing meanings of fandom for oneself within the wider cultural context. This further reflects and extends Scaraboto and Fischer's (2013) findings, in which they imply that to overcome marginalization, consumers need to learn the logics of a field. However, unlike in their context of fatshionistas, we show that this logic does not need to be an institutionalized or communal.

We end this section with discussion of a statement by Michael: "being a fan really molded what I am today. It made it possible." This attribution of personal development to serial fandom is especially meaningful. A different interpretation of our data might suggest that the processes we describe are merely manifestations of normal maturation or growing up. For Michael, however, and indeed for the other serial fans in our study, this explanation falls short. As victims of bullying and childhood marginalization, they faced identity challenges that their peers did not. We acknowledge that our informants are talking in large part about growing up, that fandom is a common part of growing up for many people, and that our informants' personal identity development cannot be attributed solely to their experiences in fandom. However, our informants' narratives are not stories of growing up as usual. They are stories of surmounting extraordinary deficits of cultural, social, and symbolic capital relative to their own peers and in

the realms of their primary socialization. Here, fandom plays an especially prevalent role from the informants' point of view.

It seems that for people feeling socially inept and ostracized, fandom provides a microcosm of social life with highly limited and structured forms of cultural capital required to navigate it. Fandom allows the possibilities for growing and learning that individuals were unable to find elsewhere. Moreover, especially when it exists outside of the face-to-face social milieu of one's primary socialization, fandom provides a relatively safe place for identity experimentation. Fans may learn skills, such as online search and interaction, for acquiring cultural capital, and those skills become transferable to other contexts. Identity constructions, such as confidence and creativity, that are internalized in the context of fandom may also transfer more broadly to general life contexts.

## **Discussion**

This research set out to understand how individuals that lack a sense of belonging and connection in the context of their primary socialization may resolve identity ambiguity through fandom. We found that young people with painful deficits of cultural capital vis-à-vis their peers were able, over time, to learn skills of identifying and accruing relevant cultural capital and eventually to resolve identity ambiguity. Learning those skills was an incremental process that involved serial fandoms, each of which provided a consumption field in which to practice capital accrual in a relatively well-defined, supportive, and sheltering milieu.

### ***Learning the skill of capital accrual***



The findings add some interesting twists to our understanding of Bourdieuan principles as they apply to contemporary consumer culture. One is that most consumer culture studies treat habitus as something that imbues all its denizens in roughly equal measure with certain forms and levels of capital. This may be generally so, but our study of fandom found a surprising number of outliers. People that, for whatever reason, fail to pick up their allotted quotas of capital find themselves at a loss with respect to their identities. Alienation or a failure to fit in becomes a self-defining characteristic as well as a source of emotional pain, and it lies at the heart of the identity ambiguity that is our subject. Learning to fit in, however, is not strictly about mainstreaming. While some informants did eventually merge comfortably with mainstream Finnish culture through transcending their fandoms, others found themselves settling into countercultural communities. In all cases our informants developed the resources to construct identities that worked for them and allowed them to operate comfortably and confidently in their social environments.

An interesting pattern emerged in the analysis of serial fandoms that helps explain the effectiveness of the fandoms as remedial courses in capital accrual. The successive fandoms were not equal in what they offered or what they required. Early fandoms were simply popular interests of immediate peer networks, and the choice to pursue them was largely other-directed. Successful accrual of fan knowledge and objects was rewarded with some positive social feedback. However, aided by a misalignment of communal meanings, this was not enough to overcome a general lack of cultural capital in one's social setting. Over time and multiple fandoms, people began to choose fandoms that resonated more personally with them, regardless of their popularity or lack thereof among their peers. Such fandoms tend to be cut off from one's immediate social context, and offered more opportunity for self-expression. They allowed

individuals to gain understanding of both their identity and their role in the community, but these were limited to the fandom. Lastly, through decontextualizing and recontextualizing capital accrual into their more general lives, individuals were able to engage in fandoms that supported their distinct identities, yet the meanings of which were not limited to the fandom context.

Previous studies have mostly supported Bourdieu's theorizing about the difficulty in attempting to rise above one's allotment of cultural capital. For instance, Üstüner and Holt (2007) found that their informants, aspiring to fit into a consumption field that was above their class, were hampered by a lack of generalized cultural and social capital, with their failures resulting in severe identity problems. Khan (2011) and Coskuner-Balli and Thompson (2013) have shown that individuals *can* overcome a lack of cultural capital if they have help from a legitimizing institution. Similarly, Scaraboto and Fischer (2013) demonstrate that individuals move beyond marginalization by drawing inspiration from, appealing to, and allying with institutional actors. Our study demonstrates that people in contemporary consumer society can learn to accrue cultural capital beyond the endowments of their primary socialization without the aid of a privileging institution. They do it by learning to accrue field-specific capital and then to apply that skill to more general forms of capital.

We suggest that learning the skill of cultural capital accrual heavily relies on fandom's insistence of 'correct' forms of interpretation (Jenkins 1992, 2006a, 2006b, 2007). This has a disciplining effect on the fan, as they learn to discern what sources of capital will confer status. In this strict learning environment, individuals engage in increasingly effective authenticating acts and authoritative performances (Arnould and Price 2000; Healy and Beverland 2013). They do so first within limited fields and then in more general contexts. Our findings exemplify that once capital is accrued and status is gained within a field, individuals feel legitimized, confident,

and free to build their individual identities. Hence, while both authoritative performances and authenticating acts are necessary, the former seems to precede the latter.

### *Adapting identity*

Smith, Fisher, and Cole (2007) propose that fandom provides individuals with a sense of who they are by anchoring identity. Our findings show that identity doesn't need an anchor per se. In fact, such an anchor may be undesirable or even impossible in a continuously changing, fragmented culture (Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Hetherington 1998; Bauman 2013; McAlexander et al. 2014). Identity emerges as malleable and multiple, with different faces for different fields (Üstüner and Thompson 2012; Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013; Saatcioglu and Ozanne 2013). And yet, despite this multiplicity, our findings suggest that a satisfactory identity needs to be comprehensible and manageable. These elements were missing in the early identities of our informants, hence the term identity ambiguity. It becomes evident that, in a rapidly changing world, individuals need to gain the ability to adapt one's identity, or to elicit appropriate identity facets, to cope with changing social challenges. It is in this protean task that the learned skills of capital accrual become especially valuable.

Ahuvia (2005) proposes that the urge for a unified identity arises from a need to connect. Previous research has further stressed the necessity of communities and a communal identity in overcoming a lack of cultural capital (Celsi, Rose and Leigh 1993; Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Cova and Cova 2002; Scaraboto and Fischer 2013). We show that while a community is initially crucial in overcoming identity ambiguity, to become fully integrated in one's social context, individuals need to go beyond communal

meanings and identification. Connecting to others does not require a coherent or unified identity; it requires the ability to identify and accrue the right kinds of cultural capital in any given context. The ideal of a coherent identity is not reached (Markus and Nurius 1986; Gergen 1991; Bahl and Milne 2010), and it is not necessarily the goal. The big identity question is not ‘Who am I?’ It is, rather, ‘How can I establish my credibility in the fields that are meaningful to me?’

### ***Engaging in fandom***

Our findings also contribute to a better understanding of fandom as a phenomenon, especially in the sense of how fans balance dual belonging in fandom and everyday life (Jenkins 2014; Johnston 2015), as well as how they pool resources and use collective intelligence (Jenkins 1992, 2007; Hills 2014). We show that individuals can engage in fandom and thus balance it with their wider social contexts in multiple ways. These findings explain the varying views on fandom as an activity, and suggest that fandom can be both distinct from (Grossberg 1992; Thorne and Bruner 2006) and intrinsically tied into wider cultural processes (Jenkins 1992). Acquired knowledge and skills can both create distinctiveness and be transferred to contexts outside of fandom. Individual and communal meaning meet within fandom (following Spigel and Jenkins 1991; Kim 2014; Yockey 2014), allowing individuals to learn how to engage with and become members of the larger society.

### ***Developing brand literacy***

Jenkins (2014) proposes that fandom could be seen as the way consumers interact with brands in general. This corresponds with Schroeder, Borgerson, and Wu’s (2014) cultural perspective on

brand literacy, as both involve active co-creation of meaning and culture around brands. Brand literacy involves consumers' ability to understand and compose signs within the meaning system of culture, which is largely based on brands (Bengtsson and Firat 2006). Bengtsson and Firat (2006) stress that brand literacy is essential in contemporary consumer culture, as it provides schemas of thought and behavior, and helps express identity and interact with others. Previous research has noted that brand literacy is acquired through consumption activities and interaction with others (Bernardo 2000; Bengtsson and Firat 2006), but does not elaborate on how exactly this happens. Our research advances the understanding of this process.

Bengtsson and Firat (2006) propose that there are three levels of brand literacy: 1) low, in which the consumer may interact with a brand, but does not understand the associated meanings, 2) medium, in which the consumer is capable of understanding meanings underlying brands, and 3) high, in which the consumer is able to not only follow meaning, but also reformulate and interpret it. Schroeder, Borgerson, and Wu (2014) propose that there are also different types of brand literacy. Functional brand literacy consists of recognizing the qualities of a brand, while creative brand literacy involves also being able to express personal and cultural associations to the brand. Co-creative brand literacy further requires individuals to perceive and engage in the creation of culture. We propose that low brand literacy is similar to the experience of our informants before they engaged in any fandom; they operated from a kind of cultural cluelessness. Medium brand literacy is analogous to what fans experienced in other-directed, popular fandoms; they built a kind of functional literacy that allowed them to connect at some level with peers. High literacy seems to be experienced both in personal, self-directed fandom and in transcending fandom, the former being creative and the latter co-creative. To develop high brand literacy, it would seem that one first needs to gain contextualized high literacy, which is

limited to a single field, after which one can develop more general literacy. Consequently, we propose that brand literacy develops through the skill of capital accrual.

### *A new way of consuming capital?*

All in all, we provide insight to how individuals deal with the simultaneously debilitating and empowering freedom of contemporary culture. While, theoretically, choice for identity construction is limitless, deep engagement with one's context and the construction of an identity may benefit from limited choice. What aids individuals in operating with more ease within a context of limitless choice is learning the skill of capital accrual. This decontextualized skill allows individuals to recognize and employ a set of choices for forming status and relations within cultural contexts, as well as for constructing identity. Following fandom and brand literacy literature, our culture may be turning toward consumption that is very similar in its form to fandom. Consequently, it is possible that gaining cultural capital in contemporary consumer culture is turning away from primary and secondary socialization, and is rather emerging as learning the skill of cultural capital accrual by moving from one limited field to the next.

The conceptualization of cultural capital accrual as a skill suggests paths for continued research, especially with respect to its possible implications in non-fandom contexts. For example, the phenomenon of cultural omnivores (Warde, Wright, and Gayo-Cal 2007) may be explained as individuals having high levels of skill at amassing field-specific capital, which allows them to operate credibly and comfortably in a wide variety of consumption fields. The ability to decontextualize and recontextualize field-specific capital may also explain the apparent transferability of consumption competencies such as video gaming to occupational contexts of military (Gopher, Well, and Bareket 1994) or surgical practice (Rosser et al. 2007).

Our study is not without its limitations. The findings are limited to the cultural context of the study as well as the age group of young adults, the latter of which accessed only through our interviewees' narratives based on their own reflections. Our method of inquiry relies on the retrospection of our interviewees, resulting in subjective narrative timelines. Future research needs to look into the applicability and nuances of our findings in other cultural contexts and life phases.

## **Conclusion**

Through examining identity construction and the resolution of identity ambiguity among serial fans of various consumption phenomena, this study finds that the accrual of cultural capital is a skill that can be learned in a field-specific context and then decontextualized to be employed more generally. The skill allows individuals to gain understanding of how cultural capital connects to status, thus allowing legitimation of their position in a cultural context. The resultant relief of anxiety and better understanding of one's choices and their outcomes allows individuals to engage in more freeform and personalized identity construction.

The study adds to our understanding of how individuals deal with fragmented identities in contemporary culture and the problematic identity construction that may be associated with it. We show how individuals can learn to deal with the simultaneously debilitating and empowering freedom of contemporary culture by learning how to maneuver within it. Individuals thus embrace a malleable identity by learning how to adapt within their ever-changing cultural context. The study also sheds new light on how individuals understand and engage with cultural capital in contemporary Western contexts. We demonstrate that people can learn to accrue cultural capital beyond the endowments of their primary socialization and without the aid of a

privileging institution or communal identity. Moreover, we show that while field-specific capital is generally not transferable to other fields, the skills involved in accruing it are transferable. These findings have allowed us to elaborate on the concept of brand literacy. We show how individuals develop brand literacy by elaborating on how the process develops in consumers, aided by the skill of capital accrual. Lastly, through this study, we provide new perspectives on the phenomenon of fandom itself, specifically showing how it can emerge as different types of relationships and engagements.

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**Table 1** Informants and their fandoms

	Sex	Age	Occupation	Popular, other-directed fandom	Personal, self-directed fandom	Transcending fandom
<b>Liz</b>	female	25	Student/Office assistant	Roswell, Lord of the Rings, Mötley Crue, Aerosmith	Aerosmith	
<b>Kate</b>	female	26	Salesperson		Antti Tuisku	
<b>Harry</b>	male	30	Musician		CMX	CMX, Ben and Jerry's
<b>Mark</b>	male	24	Student/ Musician	Coca-Cola	Bon Jovi, AC/DC, Guns N' Roses	Gibson
<b>Pauline</b>	female	23	Student		MAC, Mulberry	MAC, Mulberry
<b>Nathan</b>	male	41	Unemployed	Tampa Bay Buccaneers, BattleStar Galactica	Tampa Bay Buccaneers, BattleStar Galactica, Crest	Tampa Bay Buccaneers, Crest, Mad Men, Breaking Bad
<b>Michael</b>	male	24	Student/ Marketing intern	Pokémon, the Smurfs, Gogo's Crazy Bones	Harry Potter	MADtv, World of Warcraft
<b>Jane</b>	female	28	Marketing manager	Spice Girls, Saku Koivu	Apple	Apple
<b>Sarah</b>	female	22	Student	Spice Girls, Leonardo DiCaprio	Harry Potter, Star Wars, Discworld	
<b>Joe</b>	male	28	IT specialist	Starcraft	Starcraft	
<b>Tina</b>	female	25	Shop assistant	Lord of the Rings, Mötley Crue	Lord of the Rings, Mötley Crue	
<b>Larry</b>	male	30	Communications manager			Jersey Shore, True Blood
<b>Ellen</b>	female	23	Student	Dresden Dolls, Gogol Bordello	Dresden Dolls, Gogol Bordello	Mike Patton, Mr. Bungle, Faith No More
<b>Alex</b>	male	28	IT manager			Chicago Bulls, Aston Villa
<b>Max</b>	male	35	IT manager	The Muppets	Metallica, Nirvana, Guns N' Roses, Jokerit	Jokerit