Becoming a Fan of Social Media Marketers

Uses and Gratifications of Facebook Brand Pages

(Master Thesis)

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ABSTRACT

The advent of social media has witnessed a transformation in how audiences interact with marketers online. While previous research has shown that media consumers generally hold a negative view of advertising, today’s media consumers are engaging with brands more than ever. This study examines what it means to be an active fan of marketers in social media to the modern media consumer through an investigation of how audiences relate to brands in the social media space. Centered around audiences’ uses and gratifications of three successful brand communities within Facebook through qualitative (field observations and individual interviews) and quantitative (surveys) methods, this study intends to gain further knowledge about the role of social media and its impact on forming new cultural trends. The findings suggest that while the uses and gratifications of Facebook brand pages and what becoming a fan of a brand on Facebook signifies to social media users vary, the prevailing motivation for and function of brand community membership is the construction of one’s digital identity in association with the brands of one’s choosing. Furthermore, despite being aware that Facebook brand communities are marketing platforms, fans were largely receptive to and held a positive attitude towards the brands. This critical study of brand fans on Facebook presents the importance of studying social media’s uses and implications in order to better understand new audience cultures within the interactive media landscape.

Keywords: internet, social media, Facebook, brand community, fan community, fan culture, identity, digital identity, identity construction, digital marketing, digital advertising, uses and gratifications, audience research
# Table of Contents

1. INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................................................... 5
   1.1 Research Questions .................................................................................................................................. 6
   1.2 Materials, Limitations and Disposition ...................................................................................................... 7

2. BACKGROUND .................................................................................................................................................. 8
   2.1 Digital Evolution in Marketing .................................................................................................................. 8
       2.1.1 Measuring the Success of Social Media Marketing ......................................................................... 9

3. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK ..................................................................... 10
   3.1 Uses and Gratifications ............................................................................................................................. 10
       3.1.1 Uses and Gratifications in New Media ............................................................................................ 11
   3.2 Fans and Fandom ....................................................................................................................................... 11
       3.2.1 Fans and Fandom: Academic, Official, Colloquial Uses ................................................................. 12
   3.3 Identity ..................................................................................................................................................... 14
       3.3.1 Digital Identity ................................................................................................................................... 15
   3.4 Community ............................................................................................................................................... 16
       3.4.1 Online Community ............................................................................................................................ 16
   3.5 Authenticity ............................................................................................................................................... 17
       3.5.1 Authenticity Online .......................................................................................................................... 17

4. METHODS.......................................................................................................................................................... 18
   4.1 Netnography .............................................................................................................................................. 18
   4.2 Field Observations .................................................................................................................................... 18
       4.2.1 Field Observations Selection and Design ....................................................................................... 19
   4.3 Surveys ....................................................................................................................................................... 20
       4.3.1 Surveys Selection and Design .......................................................................................................... 20
   4.4 Interviews .................................................................................................................................................. 21
       4.4.1 Interviews Selection and Design ....................................................................................................... 21
   4.5 Treatment of Material .............................................................................................................................. 22
       4.5.1 Data Collection ................................................................................................................................. 22
       4.5.2 Analysis and Presentation of Material .............................................................................................. 23
   4.6 Methodology: A Question of Ontology and Epistemology ........................................................................ 23
   4.7 Validity and Reliability ............................................................................................................................. 24
   4.8 Research Ethics ......................................................................................................................................... 25
5. PILOT STUDY .......................................................................................................................... 25

6. FIELD OBSERVATIONS ........................................................................................................... 26
   6.1 Starbucks ............................................................................................................................ 26
      6.1.1 Starbucks General Page Overview .............................................................................. 26
      6.1.2 Self-Expression on Starbucks Page ............................................................................. 27
      6.1.3 Community-Building on Starbucks Page ..................................................................... 28
      6.1.4 Authenticity on Starbucks Page .................................................................................. 29
   6.2 Disney .................................................................................................................................. 30
      6.2.1 Disney General Page Overview ................................................................................... 30
      6.2.2 Self-Expression on Disney Page .................................................................................. 30
      6.2.3 Community-Building on Disney Page .......................................................................... 32
      6.2.4 Authenticity on Disney Page ....................................................................................... 32
   6.3 PlayStation .......................................................................................................................... 33
      6.3.1 PlayStation General Page Overview ............................................................................ 33
      6.3.2 Self-Expression on PlayStation Page ........................................................................... 34
      6.3.3 Community-Building on PlayStation Page .................................................................... 35
      6.3.4 Authenticity on PlayStation Page ................................................................................ 36
   6.4 Field Observations Summarization .................................................................................... 37

7. SURVEYS ................................................................................................................................... 38
   7.1 Starbucks ............................................................................................................................ 38
      7.1.1 Starbucks General Respondent Overview ................................................................... 38
      7.1.2 Motivations and Gratifications on Starbucks Page ....................................................... 38
   7.2 Disney .................................................................................................................................. 41
      7.2.1 Disney General Respondent Overview ......................................................................... 41
      7.2.2 Motivations and Gratifications on Disney Page ............................................................ 41
   7.3 PlayStation .......................................................................................................................... 44
      7.3.1 PlayStation General Respondent Overview ................................................................. 44
      7.3.2 Motivations and Gratifications on PlayStation Page .................................................... 44
   7.4 Surveys Summarization ....................................................................................................... 47

8. INTERVIEWS ............................................................................................................................ 48
   8.1 Starbucks ............................................................................................................................ 48
      8.1.1 Starbucks Interviewee Overview ................................................................................. 48
      8.1.2 Individual Motivation on Starbucks Page ..................................................................... 49
1. INTRODUCTION

In this era of digital media consumption there seems to be a transformation in how audiences interact with marketers, especially since the emergence of social media. Social media users appear to voluntarily join and participate in branded social media communities instead of avoiding or dismissing them. The Internet’s and social media’s unique qualities, which integrate personal and mediated communication that enhances or alleviates the effects on user involvements (Eveland 2003), are said to have altered the audience-marketer relationship, leading to a perception of engagement with marketers as active cultural participation, a shift from the passive reception of traditional marketing strategies.

Much of the previous research around advertising shows that media consumers typically hold a strong negative view or “a general mistrust” of advertising and marketing (Shavitt et al. 1998:8). Even marketing efforts on the Internet are “easily ignored by the audience or perceived to have little value” (Wang et al. 2002:1143). Despite this, since Facebook’s emergence and exponential growth, marketers’ interest in using social media as a marketing tool has sharply increased. Marketers believe that social networking sites offer vast marketing opportunities through amplifying word-of-mouth advertising; Facebook’s real-time news feed feature allows users to see their friends’ updates, including when they join advertiser-sponsored groups (Hansell 2006). Creating branded social media accounts to freely connect with consumers has thus become a prerequisite for today’s marketers. Well-known American companies like Ford and Papa John’s Pizza have used their Facebook brand presence and the “viral-ness” of social media in online marketing campaigns which enabled them to garner tens of thousands of additional fans on their social media pages (Radice 2013). One of the most controversial Facebook marketing strategies by far may have been American fast food chain Burger King’s “Sacrifice a Friend” campaign, which encouraged its Facebook fans to “sacrifice” (de-friend) ten of their friends on Facebook in order to receive a coupon for a free burger, resulting in nearly 234,000 friends to be “sacrificed” (Radice 2013). Considering the public’s attitudes toward marketing shown in prior studies (Shavitt et al. 1998; Wang et al. 2002), how can the outcome of these recent efforts be explained? To understand the public’s apparent changed stance toward marketers in the social media space, one must recognize the motivations behind these engagements.

While there are various uses and gratifications studies about the Internet and social media users, no significant studies examine the uses and gratifications of user interactions with social media marketers. The overarching aim of this study is to expand the knowledge of what it means to the modern media consumer to be an active fan of marketers in social media through an exploration of how audiences relate to brands in the social media space. Since social networking sites like Facebook introduced the concept of business pages as “an entirely new marketing venue” for brands that has “natural marketing uses within a
permission-based, user-driven social context,” companies increasingly focus on “build[ing] a fan base and creat[ing] engagement on the brands’ Facebook pages” (Evans 2012:76). According to marketers, getting corporate brands “in front of a subscriber base of 200 million” through business pages in social media has become a successful and popular marketing strategy (Evans 2012:78). Therefore, though the explicit link might not be visible, the audience’s voluntary interactions with brands in social media might imply a transformed relationship with marketers. Understanding the motivations and gratifications of fans of brands is crucial since “correlations between Fans and brand engagement vary substantially based on their motivation for (and their path to) becoming a Fan in the first place” (LaPointe 2012:287). Facebook was chosen as the research focus since it is the largest and most influential social media platform, acquiring over 855 million unique visitors worldwide (ComScore 2014). By focusing on audience uses and gratifications of popular brand communities on Facebook, I intended to gain further knowledge about social media’s expanding role and its influence on new cultural trends. The critical study of fans of brand communities will help improve the understanding of different uses of social media and their consequences in the ever-evolving interactive digital realm.

1.1 Research Questions

The overarching aim of this study is to deepen the understanding of what it means to be an active fan of marketers in social media to the modern media consumer through an investigation of how audiences relate to brands in social media. The research question that will guide this study is:

- What does being a fan of a brand page on Facebook mean to Facebook users?

Specifically, the sub-questions supporting the main inquiry are:

- What do fans of the Starbucks, Disney, and PlayStation pages talk about? What activities do the fans engage in?
- Why do they become fans? What motivations drive them and what gratifications do they get out of their membership in these brand pages?
- How do the fans identify themselves on these brand pages? How do they perceive themselves in their association with these brands?

To answer these questions, I observed and compared fan engagements in three of the top “successful” brands on Facebook: Starbucks, Disney, and PlayStation. In this case, “success” refers to the marketers’ perspective based on the advertising/marketing industry standards, typically correlated with a high number of fans or “likes” (Radice 2013; Tobin 2013; Felix 2012). Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to evaluate the activities and interactions of brand page fans, I identified fans’ usage of the
pages, examined the motivations behind becoming a fan of these brands, and looked at the gratifications obtained by community membership.

1.2 Materials, Limitations and Disposition

To construct a manageable study, I evaluated top Facebook brand pages based on the industry rankings, which were determined by the size of the profile fan base (indicated by the number of “Likes”) and their fan sustainability measured by monthly percentage increase in fans (Tobin 2013; Felix 2012). From this list, I selected three brands in different industry categories—Starbucks (food/beverage), Disney (entertainment), and PlayStation (gaming). Aside from being among the most popular brand pages with the highest traffic, these particular brands were also chosen due to the different genres of their content and the diverse set of target audiences each one caters to. Starbucks appeals to a more general and broader audience through the relatively neutral and everyday nature of its food/beverage content. Disney caters to a slightly more female-skewed audience with both recent and classic Disney-related entertainment content while PlayStation reaches a predominantly male audience through heavy video-gaming-centric material. Thus, examining these dissimilar brand pages will help uncover findings that can apply to a broader range of brand page fans and generate a more balanced outlook.

This is not to say that an analysis of fan interactivities on these profile pages represents the entire fan phenomenon in social media marketing. As mentioned, these only exemplify fan engagements within “successful” branded environments based on the specific industry criteria above. The study is skewed towards active users due to recent changes to Facebook’s interface which limit information accessibility such as contacting less active or dormant users. Active fans are those who often engage and interact within the Facebook brand pages by posting, commenting on, sharing, or “Liking” content related to those brands. As these activities make them the only visible fans on the selected brand pages, the default focus of the research is on active fans. Hence, this is an analysis of active fans and not a full representation of fans of brands on Facebook. Also, I did not look at brand pages with low fan counts since less fan activity indicates a more dormant or undeveloped brand page. This would make reaching the sample population more challenging and determining the reliability of data more problematic due to outdated or “stale” content. Concentrating on fans of only top Facebook brands helped showcase clearer patterns in social media users’ uses and gratifications of branded communities.

Furthermore, this research is US focused since the majority of social media studies have been produced by the US and two of the chosen brands (Disney and Starbucks), and Facebook itself, are American. Though PlayStation is a Japanese brand, the study of the US market is still applicable since the main PlayStation Facebook page is intended for Western audiences and only contains English-language
content, while there is a separate Japanese-language Facebook page targeted to the Japanese audience. Also, considering I am fluent only in English and that over 22% of Facebook users are within the US market (ComScore 2014), I narrowed my study to a US standpoint.

2. BACKGROUND

Before digging deeper into the study it is important to address social media’s influence on the marketing industry’s shifting trends in a historical context.

2.1 Digital Evolution in Marketing

With the digitization of the media industry, audience reception of modern marketing/advertising efforts has become more diversified. Rather than holding a purely negative perspective as older studies have shown (Shavitt et al. 1998; Wang et al. 2002), media consumers are now showing more seemingly accepting views toward marketers especially in social media, and are doing so by choice and on their own terms. One of the key contributing factors to this changed audience perception is the increasing implementation of digital marketing strategies.

A few research studies about online marketing performed in the early stages of digital evolution suggested the ineffectiveness of web advertising compared to traditional advertising (i.e., media spots and promotional events), stating that “individuals exposed to news stories and ads in the print medium tend to remember (specifically, recognize) significantly more of the ad content than comparable individuals exposed to identical stories and ads in the online medium” (Sundar et al. 1998:829); hence, digital advertising efforts seemed to have little influence on audiences’ attitudes toward marketers. This notion of web marketing’s ineffectiveness might hold in the pre-“Dot Com Bubble Burst” era of mid-2000 when the high influx of money which bolstered the hype of the online advertising empire “started to dry up,” resulting in the ultimate collapse of the stock market (Arandilla 2011). Prior to this major recession, web advertising strategies were still relatively primitive, including bothersome spam emails, invasive pop-up ads, or simple banner ads with small text and inconspicuous graphics without the ability to target relevant audiences. Also, since the Internet was a young advertising platform at this time, media consumers would have been less familiar with online advertising as a whole, seeing “no media-based differences in their processing of [editorial] content” and exhibiting a “lower level of processing of ad cues in the online context” (Sundar et al. 1998:829).

However, marketers believe that this perception of digital advertising as an unsuccessful marketing endeavor no longer reflects the media industry of today. After the crash of 2000, the marketing industry saw the search engine market sustain its continuous growth by advertising to audiences via
relevant targeting. Beginning with Google’s click-through-rate, “a ranking algorithm to measure the advertisement’s relevance,” more marketers took the tailored-ad approach in order to reach the right audience rather than merely selling or marketing, as they began to understand the importance of creating relevant content for consumers (Arandilla 2011). With social media’s entry into the field this notion became even more apparent. Social media marketing, which is said to be “more effective than traditional advertising” (Arandilla 2011), functions through word-of-mouth (WOM) communication strategies. WOM is proven to be a critical factor for marketers in acquiring new customers as well as having “larger and longer-lasting effects than traditional marketing activity” (Trusov et al. 2008:29). Many notable social marketing cases such as the aforementioned Ford and Burger King campaigns garnered successful results which marketers attribute to media consumers’ organic WOM activities and voluntary acceptance of these brands within social media communities, instead of the audience dismissal of more traditional marketing approaches. By fitting brands and media icons within their own social media space, media consumers now “appropriate, rework and reshape culture from a grassroots perspective” (Athique 2013:163), which plays a contributing role in the audience’s more open attitudes toward advertising and marketing. With the social media environment prospering, the virtual brand value becomes “a cipher of social status more significant than any particular set of goods” (Athique 2013:163) possibly leading to media consumers’ voluntary identification and association with intangible brands and services online.

With its ability to target relevant content to the appropriate audience based on users’ demographic information gathered from social media sites and the viral propagation of this content via users’ organic WOM actions, social media marketing is perceived to be a unique solution from the marketers’ standpoint to overcoming traditional consumer resistance against advertising with both the significantly lower costs and high-speed delivery of the Internet (Trusov et al. 2008:3). Therefore, having social media accounts and building brand communities on social networking sites to encourage WOM communications about a product or brand by “providing tools, content, and information to support those communities” (Trusov et al. 2008:5) becomes a necessity for modern businesses (Arandilla 2011).

2.1.1 Measuring the Success of Social Media Marketing

Exactly how the success of social media campaigns translates to actual sales is still unclear, but the current common measure of success for social media marketers is the number of “likes”, “friends” or “follows” (Arandilla 2011). In the case of Facebook, the number of “likes” (aka. fans) is what marketers use to determine the success of a brand’s social marketing efforts (Tobin 2013; Felix 2012).

If a fan is a success indicator for marketers on Facebook, then it is necessary to find out what it means to the users to be a fan of a brand on Facebook. By investigating the motivations behind becoming
a fan of brands on Facebook and the interpersonal relationship fans have with these brands and their communities, this study seeks to better understand the increasing trend of becoming a fan and the role of being a fan of these social media marketers from the social media users’ perspective.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section discusses the uses and gratifications approach as the main theoretical foundation of the research. The uses and gratifications framework is used to explain the empirical phenomena of this investigation. Other theoretical concepts that guide this study such as fans and fandom, identity, community, and authenticity are also included.

3.1 Uses and Gratifications

As the Internet and social media emerged and matured, the uses and gratifications (U&G) approach became a popular framework for studying the uses and effects of new media and its audience. Various notable media audience studies have used this structure.

U&G is a perspective which highlights “the role of audience initiative to explain channel choice and message selection, interpretation, response, and impact” (Rubin 2009:147). Contrary to the traditional notion of media’s impact on a passive audience (Katz 1959:2), U&G stresses audiences’ active control over their own media consumption which ultimately influences media’s effects: “individuals select media and content to fulfill felt needs or wants” (Papacharissi 1996:137).

While many media researchers utilize U&G, Philip Elliott claims that its individualistic nature makes it difficult to uncover broader social implications since findings are only applicable to the people being studied (Elliott 1974). Thomas E. Ruggiero criticizes U&G for being “too compartmentalized” as different researchers formulate different conceptual definitions which “hinders conceptual development because separate research findings are not synthesized” (Ruggiero 2000:12). Furthermore, Werner J. Severin and James W. Tankard question the approach’s validity since the self-reported data collected from audiences are mere “simplistic or naive” assumptions of an individual researcher (Severin & Tankard 1997:335).

However, due to its universal applicability even to digital media, U&G stands as an appropriate approach for the study of branded Facebook communities’ fans. Despite criticisms regarding over-diversity of context and interests, U&G shares “a common frame of analysis that focuses on motives, social and psychological antecedents, and cognitive, attitudinal, or behavioral outcomes” (Papacharissi 1996:138), making it a suitable framework for understanding the fandom of brands within social media.
3.1.1 Uses and Gratifications in New Media

Since the advent of digital media, numerous U&G studies have been conducted about new media audiences. Zeynep Tufekci addresses the use of social networking sites by audiences to present their own desired public image through the personal information they choose to share with others, manipulating self-representation and developing an “online persona” via presentation of users’ profiles (Tufekci 2008:546). In studying the increasing trend of narcissistic user behaviors in social media, Soraya Mehdizadeh reveals that individuals with higher narcissistic traits and lower self-esteem tend to engage in greater online activity and more self-promotions on Facebook (Mehdizadeh 2010). By evaluating assessments of individuals based on their social media profiles in relation to the attractiveness of their friends’ comments and photos, Joseph B. Walther et al. showcase how users’ social media friendships can influence the forming of their self-representations (Walther et al. 2008). According to Candice R. Hollenbeck and Andrew M. Kaikati’s study on consumer identity in relation to brands on Facebook, users “express their identities through brand linkages depending on the nature of the congruity (or lack thereof)” (Hollenbeck & Kaikati 2012:404). These studies suggest that identity affirmation often plays an important role in social media membership and activities.

Nicole B. Ellison et al. show in their study of different dimensions of social capital (the resources an individual can gain through relationships with others) that social-networking sites play an important role for young people to create and sustain three kinds of social capital: bridging, bonding, and maintained (Ellison 2007). Based on a survey of 172 college students, Pavica Sheldon also highlights “interpersonal communication needs (relationship maintenance)” as the major motive for using Facebook (Sheldon 2008:51). Paul Haridakis and Gary Hanson report that YouTube’s distinctly social aspect (commenting, sharing functions, etc.) which can fulfill users’ interpersonal social expectations is one of the key factors that attracts its users (Haridakis & Hanson 2009). Based on these examples, fulfilling social needs repeatedly appears as another key benefit that social media can provide.

Although this may help partially explain brand fandom in social media as well, these studies mainly concentrate on the individual users and fail to investigate the cultural element of communities and only focus on college students. While still observing such aspects of self-identification and social functions within social media, this study seeks to explore further patterns and meanings behind broader fans’ uses and gratifications of branded social media communities.

3.2 Fans and Fandom

Studying fans and fandom is an important endeavor since “[m]ost people are fans of something” and improving this understanding could provide deeper knowledge about the way “we relate to those around
us … [and] the way we read the mediated texts that constitute an ever larger part of our horizon of experience” (Gray et al. 2007:1,10). This is especially crucial today as new types of fan culture continuously emerge via the Internet where a clear distinction between producers and consumers of media no longer exists.

Henry Jenkins highlights the wider impact of fandom through the idea of a convergence culture, “a moment when fans are central to how culture operates,” when fans as an active audience play a significant role in the evolution of the media industry (Jenkins 2006:1). Cornel Sandvoss associates fan practices with industrial capitalism, relating them to the “society of the spectacle” which relies on spectacular displays of signs and symbols of commodities, suggesting that “fan performances are in fact performances of symbols and images representing texts and commodities tied to the economic and symbolic power of the media industry” (Sandvoss 2005:51). As capitalism is driven by profit, fan communities function based on a gift economy: “It is fans giving, receiving, and reciprocating which results in the creation of fan social networks” (Pearson 2010:87). In the case of Facebook, interactions amongst fans could be considered as a form of gift economy.

The rise of digital media has blurred the lines between producers and consumers which has also led to a change in the nature of fandom, “creating symbiotic relationships between powerful corporations and individual fans, and giving rise to new forms of cultural production” (Pearson 2010:1). The recent addition of social media to the digital landscape is transforming the traditional notion of fans since they are no longer a marginal subgroup; in this new participatory culture, everyone can be a part of the production and distribution of digital media through social media platforms which ultimately diversifies the range of fan practices (Jenkins 2007:361-362). Due to this evolving concept of fandom, it is important to address what a fan signifies in the context of this study.

### 3.2.1 Fans and Fandom: Academic, Official, Colloquial Uses

Traditionally, “fans” in academia are considered as “an undifferentiated, easily manipulated mass” who are “Othered by mainstream society” and often stereotypically portrayed as geeky “quintessential losers” with social inadequacy (Gray et al. 2007:2-4). For this reason, early fan studies focused on specialized niche activities and practices such as “convention audience[s], fan fiction writing, fanzine editing and collection, letter-writing campaigns – that had been coded as pathological, and attempted to redeem them as creative, thoughtful, and productive,” which led to the exclusion of the most obvious and common forms of fans (i.e., those who merely love a show but do not participate in specified fan practices or activities) from systematic academic study (Gray et al. 2007:3-4).
However, the notion of fans as a zealous marginalized subgroup of society is becoming less definitive as “fandom becomes part of the normal way that the creative industries operate” thanks to the convergence culture resulting from the technological advancement of media consumption on the Internet, where consumers are also active participants (Jenkins 2007:364, 361). With the presence of social media and Web 2.0, fandom in the everyday sense and the building of and communicating with communities have become ordinary phenomena in a media industry that blurs the line between media producers and consumers, leading to the ultimate erasure of the stereotypical “fan” as demonstrated by the “absence of the fan stereotype in recent media coverage” (Jenkins 2007:364) and by the broader use of the word as in Facebook “fan.” As the term “community” surfaced in digital culture as a popular choice of word referring to the plural of “user,” “categorization of innumerable consumer demographics as communities” was normalized (Athique 2013:62) while the stereotypical or traditional meanings of fandom and fan communities were diluted. As being a fan became “an ever more common mode of cultural consumption” in the era of convergence culture, the antiquated model of fans as “tightly organized participants in … subcultures did not match the self-description and experience of many audience members who describe themselves as fans” (Gray et al. 2007:7). Fans of today no longer fit into the “Othered” stereotype of the traditional academic sense; they are “fans who don’t wear rubber Spock ears, fans who didn’t live in their parents’ basement, fans who have got a life” (Jenkins 2007:359). Hence, the media industry today has adapted to the new ways of communicating with their audience as “they have been shaped by the increased visibility of participatory culture: they are generating new kinds of content and forming new kinds of relationships with their consumers” (Jenkins 2007:362).

With this evolving perspective of media convergence, Jenkins considers fans/fandom a form of participatory culture, one with “relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, … some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices,” and where members “believe their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least, members care about others’ opinions of what they have created)” (Jenkins 2009:xi). This broad definition of fans permits any fan communities in social media to be a part of the participatory culture of the digital era.

Since the fans of brands on Facebook are the focus of this study, the official meaning of a “fan” on Facebook needs to be reviewed. Techopedia defines a Facebook fan as a “user who likes a particular Facebook page,” however, it is noted that Facebook officially replaced the term “fan” with “Like” in 2010 (Janssen 2010). Though the term “fan” no longer formally exists on Facebook, it is still the predominant term used colloquially by Facebook users and the media industry.
Business Insider refers to Facebook fans when evaluating brand popularity on Facebook: “A Facebook fan is worth $174 to a brand” (Leonard 2013). Ad Week also regularly uses the term “Facebook fans” in their articles, noting that “Walmart has 31 million Facebook fans in the U.S.” (Heine 2013) and indicating “brand fans” as people who are willingly befriending brands on Facebook (Moses 2013). In this sense, being a fan of something on Facebook could also mean being a “friend” of something through the simple act of clicking a “Like” button.

Considering these elements, a fan on Facebook in this study will indicate a combination of Jenkins’ idea, the original definition of a Facebook fan, and the meaning driven by the colloquial usage: a user who likes a particular Facebook page with the intention of befriending the page/community and the willingness to be a part of the participatory culture that the selected page/community offers.

3.3 Identity

The notion of identity has always been one of the most vital and ever-evolving concepts throughout human existence and in academia. Countless scholars have tried to define what the term identity exactly entails. One of the most notable discussions of identity was brought on by Erving Goffman in The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, who describes it as a constant performance (Goffman 1959). He states that by exercising the “information game - a potentially infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation, and rediscovery” (Goffman 1959:20), individuals continuously manipulate their identity via carefully-calculated performances. According to Goffman, individuals can influence how other people react to and perceive them through ‘impression management’ which is comprised of “defensive and protective practices … to safeguard the impression fostered by an individual during his presence before others” (Goffman 1959:24). In “Phenomenology of Whoness: Identity, Privacy, Trust and Freedom,” Michael Eldred expresses a similar view of identity: “Who one is is always a matter of having adopted certain masks of identity reflected from the world as offers of who one could be in the world” (Eldred 2012:22). He adds that an individual identity does not innately come from the person’s internal self, rather it is built through a process of external identification with the world around the person (Eldred 2012:75).

Zizi Papacharissi shares a more modern perspective by introducing the concept of a “networked self” in A Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites (Papacharissi 2011). While individuals do not realize their everyday ritualistic performances when presenting themselves to others, their frequent adjustments of behaviors based on different audiences is a universal pattern (Papacharissi 2012:1989). She describes that in this contemporary era, identity is developed and sustained through social interactions performed through a network of relations via technology such as social networking sites (Papacharissi 2011). Papacharissi explains that this technology provides the stage for
various interactions between one’s private and public identities which are constantly negotiated and diversely presented depending on different networks and multiple audiences (Papacharissi 2011:304). It is apparent that identity is a concept that cannot definitively be defined due to its continuously evolving nature. As identity encompasses various forms of self-representation, examining different progressions of the term due to technological advancement is necessary for this research.

3.3.1 Digital Identity

As more and more people provide their most detailed personal data as well as forged information on the Internet via platforms like social networking sites, the notion of a person’s identity in a digitized version as “a feature of modern commerce” has become even more complex, highlighting that “the constitution, function and nature of identity depends on context” (Sullivan 2011:5-6). In a study of identity construction on Facebook, Zhao Shanyang et al. discuss the online role-playing tendency as a phenomenon resulting from the disembodied and anonymous online environment, making it “possible for people to reinvent themselves through the production of new identities” (Shanyang et al. 2008:1818).

Though Facebook does not provide an entirely anonymous environment for true online role-playing to surface, users can develop identities that are different from their real world identities, suggesting that identity is not just an individual characteristic nor something innate in a person, but a socially-constructed product depending on the environment and context as individuals are able to choose identities that will be favorable to different social situations (Shanyang et al. 2008:1831). Similarly, Adriana M. Manago et al. show in their study of MySpace users that a virtual-interaction space like MySpace creates ambiguous situations where people can experience “a period of identity exploration to cultivate ideal selves by trying them out in virtual reality” through the process of adaptation (Manago et al. 2008:454).

Papacharissi presents Goffman’s notion of identity as a constant performance in the online environment by exemplifying Twitter as a “performative platform” which enables identity performances which are projected to known and imagined audiences in the process of redaction, the editing and remixing of one’s identity that aims to form and frame a coherent storyline of the performance (Papacharissi 2012:2001,1994). Alice E. Marwick and danah boyd’s study of Twitter also showcases that in the attempt to manage their audiences, users take a variety of performative techniques that resemble “micro-celebrity” and personal branding as a self-commodification strategy (Marwick & boyd 2010). Their findings suggest that consumption reflects a self-defining and self-expressive behavior and that digital association, people’s intentional selection of products or brands that are self-relevant to communicate their identity, is a popular tool in digital self-presentation (Schau & Gilly 2003:385,399). Since my study investigates the Facebook brand pages’ active fans’ relationships and interactions with
their chosen brands, their digital association as a self-commodification strategy as well as their propensity for self-presentation will be examined. To investigate how brands affect the way fans formulate their identity, what identity signifies in this study will be determined by the interpretation of my data.

3.4 Community

The formation of communities has always been a natural and necessary part of the progression of civilization in human history. However, what is considered to be a community is also constantly evolving. As society steps into a more contemporary era, media systems have become a key player in the organization of modern communities (Athique 2013:59). Hence, the term was expanded “to encompass another broader notion of community as something constructed primarily through social interaction” allowing alternative communities that are built upon a broad rejection of the conventional world to simultaneously exist next to more mainstream ones (Athique 2013:57).

Benedict Anderson claims that “imagined communities,” which are abstracted social formations made of anonymous, comparable others with the same values, are products of the emergence of mass media (Anderson 1991). Furthermore, in The Rise of the Network Society, Manuel Castells explains that the focus of community has shifted from physical proximity towards informational connectivity in the present digitally-connected network society (Castells 1996). Since online communities tend to be a more “liberating and mutually supportive enterprise relatively free of the structural constraints that determine communities in the ‘real’ world” (Athique 2013:61), numerous virtual communities are created as virtual modes of interactions and kinships, and are becoming more normalized in society. These types of casual and flexible community environments empower media consumers through their active engagement, which caused the great shift in media studies towards the “active audience” (Athique 2013:61).

3.4.1 Online Community

As the Internet took a prominent position in today’s society, enabling more and more online communities to surface, the term community has become a default word referring to the plural of “user” in the popular lexicon of digital culture, leading many websites to create and maintain a “community” rather than just building a “user-base” or “audience” (Athique 2013:62). Though the rapid expansion of the Internet as a platform resulted in a vast diversification of community models, the key feature that remains consistent for any online community is that the membership “is not experienced collectively but rather through the interface of each individual with a multivocal interactive space” (Athique 2013:63).

The emergence of digital communities allowed members to gather more easily via electronic devices over the Internet without having to be in geographic proximity, but still in ways reminiscent of
classic communities involving the sharing of common interests, needs, and curiosities (Ohler 2010:41). Digital communities which facilitate multiple communications let users “congregate and communicate in groups that participants defined in terms of membership, ethos, and purpose” online (Ohler 2010:37).

In his study of social network sites as virtual communities, Malcolm R. Parks states that “MySpace and other SNSs such as Facebook are not communities in any singular sense, but rather function as social venues” in which many different types of communities (e.g., music, celebrities, fashion, food, politics, etc.) may form (Parks 2011:105). According to Youcheng Wang & Daniel R. Fesenmaier, online communities supply a platform for people to create a range of new social spaces where they can meet and interact with each other, which ultimately generates a new line of experience including new people, new stories, and insights from different cultures (Wang & Fesenmaier 2003). I will use Ohler’s concept of digital community—any electronically-facilitated and sustained group that shares common interests, needs, or curiosities—for this study. Considering the recent rising importance of the social networking medium as a platform for digital communities, the role and function of the selected brand pages in community-making and community membership will be observed.

3.5 Authenticity

Authenticity, like identity, can be a convoluted notion that is unclearly defined and yet used regularly in academia. Walter Benjamin stresses that in order for the concept of authenticity to exist, the presence of the original is the prerequisite (Benjamin 1982:218). He further explains that the authenticity of a thing is “the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced” (Benjamin 1982:218). However, what we consider as authentic or what symbols or signifiers mark something as authentic differs depending on contexts (Marwick & boyd 2010:11). This is because, according to Theo Van Leeuwen, authenticity is an evaluative concept which is problematic and prone to contradictions (Van Leeuwen 2001:392).

3.5.1 Authenticity Online

In their study of Twitter users, Marwick & boyd question what it means to be authentic to a user of Twitter, not in an “absolute sense of authenticity, but in what Twitter users consider ‘authentic’” (Marwick & boyd 2010:6). Their findings suggest that authenticity is socially constructed; while it might refer to someone’s “real-self” or authentic experiences, “there is no such thing as universal authenticity; rather, the authentic is a localized, temporally situated social construct that varies widely based on community” (Marwick & boyd 2010:11). Ultimately, whether something is viewed as authentic depends on the definition imposed by the person doing the judging as everyone’s understanding of authenticity
varies (Marwick & boyd 2010:11) as it is “a socially constructed phenomenon that shifts across time and space” (Vannini & Williams 2009:2-3). To understand the selected Facebook brand communities’ true function for their members in this study, the authenticity of the environments, the genuineness of their content, and the free flow of shared information will be explored.

4. METHODS

In *Researching Audiences*, Kim Schrøder et al. stress the importance of “methodological pluralism … a toolbox including a variety of methods … to grasp the multi-faceted nature of media audiences” in the current network society (Schrøder et al. 2003:4). Applying triangulation by combining different methods lets researchers “partially overcome the deficiencies that flow from … one method” (Denzin 1978:294).

4.1 Netnography

Introduced by Robert V. Kozinets, *netnography* is a research approach specifically catered to studying an online audience by incorporating various research techniques (Kozinets 2010). Modeled after ethnography, it “adapts common participant-observation ethnographic procedures to the unique contingencies of computer-mediated social interaction” to better understand the cultural and/or communal phenomenon online through ethnographic representations (Kozinets 2010:58,60). Since the online universe is loaded with data, a specialized research technique is required which enables researchers to handle the information more efficiently. Also, with the Internet’s unique communication platforms like social media that provide freedom and flexibility, audiences have more control than ever of their own constructions of meanings and opinions and can be both active consumers and creators. This distinct nature of the online audience and environment necessitates the use of netnography for my research design.

Typically, qualitative methods offer great depth of information on people’s perception of the situations they are in, while quantitative techniques deliver a higher level of measurement precision and statistical figures (Schrøder et al. 2003:29). Incorporating multiple methods raises researchers “above the personalistic biases that stem from single methodologies” and maximizes the research’s validity (Denzin 1978:294,304). To gain more balanced and complimentary knowledge about fans of Facebook brand pages, I integrated both qualitative (field observations and individual interviews) and quantitative (surveys) methods into my netnographic approach.

4.2 Field Observations

Kozinets stresses that every netnographer should be involved in activities within the communities they are studying to inscribe their “own observations of the community, its members, interactions and meanings,
and the researcher’s own participation and sense of membership” (Kozinets 2010:96,98), contributing to a deeper understanding of community culture. Though netnography in principle is similar to ethnography, the nature of the field site and level of participation changes since the observation is being done online, studying “peoples’ interactions through various technologically-mediated means” (Kozinets 2010:113).

4.2.1 Field Observations Selection and Design

For three weeks I observed audience engagements and interactions online by becoming a fan of (“Liking”) the aforementioned brands’ Facebook pages, allowing me to examine the community atmosphere firsthand and inspect for conversation themes and the communicative dynamics between the fans and marketers. Observations took place three times per day, in one-hour intervals at varying times with one week dedicated to each brand (about 21 hours were spent per brand). Based on the pilot study, one week was sufficient to acquire a general sense of the atmosphere and activities of a community.

Due to time zone differences, the observation window was between 23:00 and 5:00 CET in order to capture primarily US-based fans’ activities. All three brand pages were carefully monitored to understand the overall community experiences; however, 100 randomly-picked posts or comments were examined with particular scrutiny for each brand to more deeply inspect the engagement dynamics. Occasionally I participated in selected conversations and activities (e.g., “Liking” or casual commenting) while keeping a neutral tone to avoid conflicts, to better capture the natural power relations and social interactions contemporaneously within the community. Field notes (Appendix 1) included site descriptions, screenshots, and details about “the social and interactional processes that make up the members of online cultures and communities’ everyday lives and activities” (Kozinets 2010:114). The key observation points were guided by the following field observation themes:

- **Aesthetic Tone:** How does the brand’s Facebook page look? What kind of color schemes, graphics, and language are used? What is the general feeling when you first visit the page?
- **Content:** What kind of content is posted on the Facebook brand page? Is there a dominant pattern in what gets posted, commented on, “Liked,” and shared?
- **Engagement/Interaction:** What kind of interactions are there between the brand and fans? Do the fans interact with each other? Do they interact with other fans who they don’t know personally? What kind of tone do the fans have when they engage?
- **Motivation:** Why do fans engage (“Like,” post, comment, share) with certain content? Why do some fans interact with other fans they don’t know personally? What prevents members of a community from engaging?
4.3 Surveys

By questioning a sample population, surveys simplify, categorize, or generalize social phenomena and cultural experiences to provide an overview of a social landscape. They let us “quantify and interpret rather abstract patterns of culture, serving as a map against which the dynamic character of an individual taste, culture, or lifestyle may be brought alive” via their ability to take on huge scale and scope (Schröder et al. 2003:224-225).

4.3.1 Surveys Selection and Design

Surveys are a valuable addition to my netnography by providing an overview of the brand page users and their activities in branded communities. Using SurveyMonkey.com, I administered online surveys to recognize fans’ general motivations and usage of brand pages by asking questions concerning frequency/length/purpose of visits, engagement types, demographics, etc. Simple random sampling was used since its unbiased selection of samples most accurately represents the average active brand page fan on Facebook. Considering these brand pages have 35-45 million fans, this process was tedious but was the best available option since Facebook changed its interface to not disclose the list of all fans of a brand page. Thus, the only way to reliably distribute surveys was by submitting my research introduction and survey link as a comment or reply to fans’ posts or comments on the brand page.

I commented on a total of 150 random posts or comments (50 per brand) as this was my sample size and was sufficient and manageable considering Facebook’s accessibility limitations. Based on my experience with the pilot study, I learned the importance of contacting the brand page administrators to avoid complications and misunderstandings regarding my research from the marketers’ perspective. After negotiating with the administrators, commenting on 50 randomly-selected posts or comments for each brand was permitted in order to distribute my surveys. It is important to note some minor differences in the distribution methods of the surveys due to the nature of the different brand page layouts. Both the Disney and PlayStation pages lack a certain function that the Starbucks page has which allows fans to post their own content directly on the page in a real-time format. In the Starbucks community I linked my survey in comments that I posted on the original fan posts. The PlayStation page only permits fans to comment on posts made by the brand itself; fans are unable to post directly on the page. I was able to reply to these fan comments, where I linked my survey. In both of these cases where I was able to reply to comments made by fans, the fans would receive a notification in their Facebook account that someone commented on their post which increased the visibility of my survey requests. In the case of the Disney Facebook page however, fans are limited to simply commenting on brand posts, and cannot “Reply” to other fans’ comments. This forced me to distribute my survey in the Disney community by commenting
on brand posts only, ultimately limiting my direct access to the individual Disney fans which led to a slightly lower response rate compared to the Starbucks and PlayStation surveys.

Before commenting, I reviewed each fan’s profile to ensure they were listed as living in the US. Since the pilot surveys generated a healthy amount of data, I wanted to include these findings in my overall study, which led to the initial survey questions remaining consistent throughout. Out of 150 total potential respondents (based on the previously-mentioned 150 comments) from all three brands combined, there were 109 total responses (Starbucks - 40; Disney - 31; PlayStation - 38), about a 73% response rate, which was sufficient for a reliable data analysis. The complete survey questions and results can be found in Appendix 2.

4.4 Interviews

Qualitative interviews generate insight into informants’ interpretative processes as they make sense of a media product, thus it is “a vehicle for bringing forward the media-induced meanings of the informant’s lifeworld” (Schrøder et al. 2003:143). In an attempt to empirically identify people’s social production of meaning when they encounter media, interviews can also provide more in-depth information about how people make sense of a brand’s Facebook page.

4.4.1 Interviews Selection and Design

Due to social media usage being highly individualistic and privately-held, I carried out individual semi-structured online interviews to understand fans’ self-identification and brand association within the Facebook communities. Interviews allow netnographers to ask more delicate questions like about the informant’s relationship between online community activities and other social activities, giving “a fuller portrait of the role of online community membership in the person’s entire life” (Kozinets 2010:47). Semi-structured interviews were chosen since their flexibility allows informants to share thoughts liberally which leads to an open flow of new ideas. Like many netnographic interviews, mine was mediated via a technological apparatus, Skype, for convenience and efficiency. Though the in-person dynamic of a face-to-face interview could offer additional value, a technologically-mediated interview better suited the virtually-connective character of social media and was the only option for me to talk to informants in the US.

I conducted three half-hour interviews per brand community as this provided an appropriate yet manageable amount of information for in-depth analyses. The surveys included a question regarding the respondents’ willingness to partake in an interview, and those willing were compiled into a preliminary interview participant list. The final informants were selected from this list via stratified sampling. By
stratifying potential interview participants into different subgroups according to gender (for even gender distribution), age (18-24 through 65-74), background (occupation and location), and different degrees of community engagement (e.g., only “Liking,” “Liking” and commenting, etc.), I was able to get a more balanced and widespread perspective. The interviews were guided by questions covering the following key topics:

- **Individual Motivation**: What was the initial motivation behind becoming a fan of the brand? What kind of gratifications did they gain from being a part of the brand’s fan community?
- **Participation & Self-representation**: What is their individual community participation level? Are they active? Do participatory actions (i.e., engagement, interactions) affect how they are represented on Facebook and in their fan communities?
- **Fandom & Community**: How is the traditional notion of fandom translated into these brand communities? Is there a resemblance between these Facebook brand communities and traditional fan communities? What kind of atmosphere do these Facebook brand communities have? What is their level of authenticity?
- **Brand & Self-identification**: What is the relationship between brands and one’s identity? What kind of relationship do these fans have with their brands on Facebook? How do their voluntary associations with their brands influence their digital identity construction?

The complete interview guide and extracts from the interview transcripts can be found in Appendix 3.

A total of nine video interviews were conducted via Skype and recorded with a software application called Call Graph which enables the voice-recording of Skype conversations. While I tried to keep all transcripts as organic and literal as possible, some irrelevant parts and “small-talk” were removed since they did not add value to the research. To stay true to the ethnographic spirit, other behavioral nuances or signals such as pauses, hesitations, or laughter were also included.

The interview excerpts used in the actual results and analysis were selected based on the responses’ relevance to the topics above. Mainly, responses that were representative of majority trends were selected to show the overall consensus on specific issues. Quotes that were incongruous to the majority trends were also included to present alternative perspectives.

### 4.5 Treatment of Material

#### 4.5.1 Data Collection

The study kicked off with an initial pilot test of the Starbucks Facebook page, beginning with seven days of field observations and simultaneously administering surveys. One pilot interview was conducted to assess the efficacy of the interview questions and method. Following the preliminary testing, field observations and survey distribution were extended to the Disney and PlayStation Facebook pages. After another 14 days (seven days per brand), the survey data was collected and analyzed, and the interview
participants were selected. The interviews were conducted across three weeks and were subsequently transcribed over the following two weeks.

4.5.2 Analysis and Presentation of Material

Identifying, analyzing and reporting themes within the data organizes it in a manageable form when describing the data set in detail which helps to guide the data interpretation process (Braun & Clarke 2006:79). Hence, the analysis of the material has been executed based on a thematic approach with both deductive (themes were identified from the data itself) and inductive (themes were selected beforehand based on the researcher’s interest) models (Braun & Clarke 2006:85).

The field observations were carried out during the pilot study to answer questions regarding fan engagements and conversation topics which identified the aspects of self-expression, community-building and authenticity; these subsequently helped guide the rest of the research. The surveys were structured to address questions about motivations and gratifications in relation to U&G theory. For the interviews, designed to shed more light on users’ self-identification and relationships within the brand communities, some of the inductive themes such as U&G and notions of fandom, community, and identity were set as a foundation, but also allowed other themes to emerge.

To stay in line with the ethnographic approach, interview transcripts included hesitations or contradicting responses to indicate conflicts or negotiations of interest. Also considering the incongruities between spoken and written language, all interview quotes used in the analysis have been edited to eliminate repetitive, incoherent, or insignificant parts including pause sounds or other speech disfluency for better reading quality. In order to perform an ethical study in regards to ensuring informants’ anonymity, all names and other personal details are coded. Furthermore, both the transcripts and final study were distributed to informants for transparency and for their approval before submission.

4.6 Methodology: A Question of Ontology and Epistemology

Following the view of critical realism, its ontological belief that “there is a world independent of human beings,” and its epistemological mindset that “there are deep structures in this world that can be represented by scientific theories” (Sayer 2000:2-3), I seek to find the real and actual patterns of audiences’ interactions with social media marketers while understanding that I cannot expect to discover any absolute and definite form of scientific knowledge since the kind of knowledge that results from my research depends on the problems and questions I impose in relation to the world around me. It is crucial to carefully evaluate how my study object is conceptualized and defined as well as to confirm that the methods I use appropriately suit the object and purpose of my investigation since all these different
factors seal the fate of my research. As an explanation of the social world “requires an attentiveness to its stratification, to emergent powers arising from certain relationships, and to the ways in which the operation of causal mechanisms depend on the constraining and enabling effects of contexts” (Sayer 2000:27), object, purpose, and methods must be considered “simultaneously and in relation to each other, inform[ing] all other choices in the set-up of the investigation, including techniques of data collection and analysis” (Danermark et al., 2001:27).

Considering these elements, I defined my objective reality as the relationship between the audience and social media marketers. And to explore the audience experience of this reality I designed a research plan that reflects methodological pluralism and uses netnography, allowing me to apply “quantitative and qualitative methods side by side in order to empirically elucidate a phenomenon in as much detail and as thoroughly as possible” (Danermark et al., 2001:153). Combining width (quantitative approach) and depth (qualitative approach), through my audience studies I intend to better understand the depth of human experiences within a collective and yet individual sense of “community” and “fandom” produced by the social media marketing trend.

4.7 Validity and Reliability

The question of validity and reliability is essential to address in order to increase the probability of the best possible findings from the research. Based on the traditional criteria of scientific credibility, quantitative approaches are perceived to be strong on reliability for their precise system of measuring and generalizability due to statistical data collection while qualitative approaches are believed to be strong on validity for depth of information (Schrøder et al. 2003:30). With this in mind, I built a qualitative and quantitative design integrated into netnography to aim for the most valid and reliable outcomes.

The pilot study tested the design of my methodology and allowed me to make tweaks and improvements to ensure that it suited this study. Though each method was performed as consistently as possible for all brands, there were minor differences in the dissemination of the surveys due to the nature of the different brand page layouts mentioned earlier. Although this minor obstacle made the survey distribution process more challenging, it did not impact the reliability or validity of the results.

It should also be stressed again that this study is applicable only to understanding motivations and gratifications of those active fans since inactive or dormant fans are naturally excluded because their inactivity makes them invisible within these communities. Thus, the term fan in the context of this research is valid for those fans that are active and visible on these brand pages.

Lastly, while in-person interviews are typically perceived to be the most valid and reliable interview approach due to the personal interactions they offer, online interviews can also deliver personal
engagements with interview participants. Due to the US-market focus of my research, the only option for me to interview the US-based fans was via an online technological apparatus. Skype, the interview platform that was used for the study, provides a video-call function which allowed me to interview informants face-to-face. Although the physical distance between myself and the interviewees may have prevented the same high level of intimacy and trust that could be achieved by in-person interviews, the fact that we could still see one another’s faces helped develop a sense of comfort and sincerity. This physical distance was also beneficial since it allowed interviewees to respond in their own natural environment which is a favorable setting for more honest interactions. It is also possible that the informants’ consciousness of their own facial exposure to the interviewer might have influenced the way they answered certain questions in some cases. Despite this concern, based on the nine different online video interviews, the results were authentic and reliable overall.

4.8 Research Ethics

It is always important to consider research ethics especially when it involves people. Research ethics refers to a complex set of social and institutional values and standards that constitute and regulate the scientific research process (NESH 2006:5). In order to fulfill my ethical responsibility as an academic researcher, I properly introduced my research aims and objectives to my participants before each study and provided a research consent form which addressed anonymity, a promise to informants’ protection of identity, privacy, and other sensitive issues. The level of protection of informants varied depending on the method. If fans of a Facebook brand page were aware of my field observations, for example, it might have influenced their behavior within the community which would have negatively affected my research. Therefore, I did not disclose any information about my intention for field observations to any of the Facebook brand page community members. However, this was acceptable as these are public sites and I was merely observing public behavior. Interviews, on the other hand, required stricter protection of the informants to earn their trust in order to gain more valuable insights. Overall, the extent of required research ethics was cautiously evaluated depending on the research technique.

5. PILOT STUDY

The initial pilot study was conducted exclusively for the Starbucks’ Facebook brand page to practice field observation and test the survey distribution method. The field observation of the Starbucks’ Facebook community was performed for one week and appeared to be a useful approach to become familiar with the community and to understand overall interaction dynamics. The surveys were distributed via comments on 50 random posts which provided a good gauge for the response rate and the design of the
survey questions. The combination of results obtained from both a qualitative and quantitative approach generated well-balanced data. However, the pilot study also highlighted the definite need for interviews as an additional method in order to address the main research question comprehensively.

Since the data collected from the Starbucks pilot test was insightful and valuable, I decided to continue the study of the Starbucks’ Facebook brand page by extending the research with the qualitative interviews. I followed the same research model for the Disney and PlayStation communities to remain consistent in my data collection.

The remainder of this study is dedicated to the analysis of empirical materials centered on fan engagements and conversation content obtained from field observations of the three brand pages. Interpretations of survey results regarding fans’ uses and motivations of the page and analyses of interview responses in relation to self-identification and brand association will follow.

6. FIELD OBSERVATIONS

The field observations are structured around aspects of self-expression, community-building, and authenticity. The general descriptions of the brand pages are included to illustrate the environment and dynamics of fan engagements. Note that misspellings, bad grammar, and erroneous punctuation have purposely not been corrected to preserve the natural expressions and interactions of fans online.

6.1 Starbucks

6.1.1 Starbucks General Page Overview

Starbucks’ Facebook page is one of the most popular brand pages on Facebook, ranking 8th on the recent top 50 brands on Facebook (Tobin 2013). With over 35 million fans (“Likes”) of the page, the Starbucks Facebook community continues to grow with new interactions and engagements daily. In just seven days (23-30 November, 2013) of my observation, 50,437 fans were added, showcasing the page’s consistent popularity.

The page follows the standardized Facebook layout with a light-blue background with white and blue tones throughout, with the Starbucks “timeline” (commonly known as the “wall”) in the center, where most of the posts by Starbucks or its fans are displayed. The right side has a vertical historical timeline which archives past years’ content. The profile picture is of the iconic Starbucks green mermaid logo and the cover picture is of the recently-updated red holiday Starbucks paper cup. Below the profile picture is a small, rectangular, light-blue section providing a brief description of the company, labeling Starbucks as part of the “Food/Beverages” category and stating, “We are the world's premier roaster and
retailer of specialty coffee.” These elements set a tone of approachability and comfort, positioning Starbucks as a familiar café and coffee brand for its Facebook fans.

Most of the permanent posts on the main wall section are by the Starbucks Facebook account itself. On the top right side of the wall there is a small section labeled “Recent Posts by Others on Starbucks” which is a real-time feed that aggregates new posts by users. Based on my observations, Starbucks fans appear to be very active, with new posts appearing about every three to five minutes.

6.1.2 Self-Expression on Starbucks Page

Starbucks fans actively present themselves in the Starbucks Facebook community by expressing their thoughts, opinions, or requests by posting on the wall or by commenting on and/or “Liking” the posts of others. The most obvious form of self-representation is individual posting. The three most prominent categories of posts by individuals are brand affirmations, brand dissatisfaction, and customary requests.

Brand affirmation entails fans’ voluntary posting of positive comments about the Starbucks brand/products/service such as “just stopping by to tell you that I LOVE the Duffins!!!!!” (30 Nov. Starbucks FB), photos of Starbucks products or of individuals, their children, or their pets together with Starbucks products, or real-time location updates of fans at Starbucks cafés. Overall, 49% of the 100 posts under observation expressed brand affirmation. Since the American holiday of Thanksgiving fell within the observation period, many fans expressed gratitude toward Starbucks for being open during the holiday: “Thanks for being open this Thanksgiving Morning” (28 Nov. Starbucks FB). Random location updates and general positive comments were expressed in 25% of the posts. Interestingly, 19% were photos of fans’ own children with Starbucks products while about 5% were photos of fans’ pets with Starbucks products, showing the strong sense of trust and security that fans feel within this Facebook community, allowing them to share such personal information in public.

Brand dissatisfaction posts include those that convey complaints or negative attitudes about Starbucks products, its customer service, an individual store, the brand as a whole, or Starbucks’ corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts. 35% of posts exhibited brand dissatisfaction, most of which were complaints regarding specific products: “The snowman cookies changed - NOT good” (30 Nov. Starbucks FB), or customer service at an individual café: “VERY DISAPPOINTED with the quality I received tonight” (25 Nov. Starbucks FB). 5% of fans criticized Starbucks for its CSR promotion to help the Philippines following Typhoon Haiyan by expressing doubts about its genuine intentions and Starbucks’ irresponsibility to its home country in comments like “Starbucks have you donated ???” and “So you guys will donate to the Philippines but not your own American Troops?” (23 Nov. Starbucks FB). Many posts and comments of dissatisfaction also surfaced after the airing of an episode of The Voice
in the US, where a Starbucks-sponsored chorus dropped the word “Lord” from the song “Will the Circle Be Unbroken?” Numerous active Starbucks fans were offended and complained by posting sentiments like “In the garbage where you belong… now the circle is broken” accompanied by a photo of Starbucks travel mugs in a trash can (27 Nov. Starbucks FB). Fans actively utilize the Starbucks brand page as a place to vocalize ordinary complaints as well as zealous political and religious opinions.

Customary requests comprised of neutral posts/comments expressing specific wishes or requests for information from Starbucks. 16% fell into this category with posts like “Is this starbucks butter beer a real thing?”, “Are you guys open on Thanksgiving?” or “I wish that SB would start a delivery service #lazy” (25, 27, 28 Nov. Starbucks FB). With fans using the Starbucks Facebook page as a direct communication line to Starbucks corporate, the community has in effect replaced the traditional customer service center for these fans.

6.1.3 Community-Building on Starbucks Page

The Starbucks Facebook page also functions to build and maintain an interactive fan community. Fans of Starbucks can utilize this virtual community to engage with other fans or with Starbucks corporate itself. To achieve this, the main types of interactions that fans perform are “Liking” and commenting on others’ or Starbucks’ posts, each with their own implication. Based on close observations of comments and “Likes” associated with 100 posts, a range of three to five “Likes” and an average of three comments were recorded per post. The most common motivations for interacting with others were to show genuine interest or agreement, strong objection or disagreement, and entertainment value (where the content or context is entertaining to other members, such as pictures of their pets with Starbucks mugs).

The act of “Liking” posts or comments can be seen as an indication of genuine interest or agreement, or that the content is considered entertaining. Fans are more likely to “Like” posts/comments that resonate with their own thoughts, opinions, and interests. Also, posts/comments that provide entertainment value tend to generate more “Likes”. Strong objection or disagreement cannot be expressed in the same way through any one-click function as there in no “Dislike” button on Facebook.

Commenting on posts or on other comments signifies still deeper fan engagement and spawns a sense of a real virtual community. By commenting on others’ forms of self-expression, fans can directly interact with each other and share different ideas and opinions, which is essential to community-building. Fans tended to comment more on posts/comments dealing with brand dissatisfaction and customary requests. Posts about controversial topics like politics or religion received the most comments (five to seven on average) exhibiting both strong agreement and disagreement. For example, when a fan posted a complaint about the aforementioned controversy on The Voice, others commented either sympathetically,
“You're right about that … and it is so disappointing,” or by avidly objecting, “ITS CHRISTIANS LIKE YOU, WHO MAKE AGNOSTICS LIKE ME- ATHEISTS!” (27 Nov. Starbucks FB).

6.1.4 Authenticity on Starbucks Page

One of the appealing qualities of brand communities in social media is that they can provide an authentic environment for real consumers to voice their opinions freely. Active fans tend to encourage other fans to interact more and keep the community interesting by generating new content in the branded social media space. Starbucks fans on Facebook keep the Starbucks page busy and dynamic with frequent interactions and engagements, making it a seemingly ideal brand community, which could be contributing to its continuous increase in fans (“Likes”).

However, a question about the authenticity of some Starbucks fans was raised when observing comments under posts dealing with brand dissatisfaction and customary requests. Especially when posts expressed negative attitudes toward the Starbucks brand, a few fan names consistently came to Starbucks’ defense. After a thorough investigation of comments made by seven reoccurring fans, I found their profiles to be inauthentic. Even considering Facebook’s privacy options, all seven profiles displayed minimal information about themselves with ostensibly fabricated names (e.g., “Scully,” a character from The X-Files) and generic images of pop culture or cartoon characters as profile pictures, which greatly undermined the authenticity of these fans. These “fake fans” tended to reply with harsh attitudes toward criticisms of Starbucks. In response to fan protests against The Voice debate, these “fake fans” defended Starbucks by mocking regular fans’ comments in cynical or condescending tones: “That’s just dumb” and “Another ‘Shame on you’ post … Silly people” (27 Nov. Starbucks FB). When a fan complained about her long wait at one Starbucks café, the same “fake fans” replied with sarcasm: “Ashamed? Coming from the person who is complaining about waiting 15 minutes” (25 Nov. Starbucks FB).

As if it was the task of these users to monitor every Starbucks wall post and conversation, they consistently interacted with regular fans whenever any “controversial” posts emerged throughout my observation period, meaning these “fans” devoted at least five hours per day to engage with the Starbucks community. While these “fake fan” interactions with other fans are highly unprofessional, their persistent dedication to defend and protect the Starbucks brand alludes to their possible connection to Starbucks corporate. This is highly problematic since these users disguised as genuine and enthusiastic Starbucks fans create an inauthentic environment for the true and unaware Starbucks fans who believe the Starbucks Facebook community to be a place to freely express themselves and legitimately interact with others.
6.2 Disney

6.2.1 Disney General Page Overview

Disney’s Facebook page, ranking 5th on the recent top 50 brands on Facebook (Tobin 2013), is the most popular Facebook brand page selected for this research. Garnering over 46 million fans (“Likes”), the fan base of the Disney Facebook page is consistently growing with various daily interactions and engagements. During the seven days of observations (3-9 March, 2014), a total of 27,034 new fans were added. Although a lower growth rate than Starbucks’, this still shows consistent growth.

The Disney brand page follows the typical Facebook layout with the blue and white color schemes and the wall in the middle where the Disney posts and fan comments appear. Unlike Starbucks, Disney’s Facebook page does not allow original posts by fans; users can only engage with or comment on the official posts by Disney. Despite the standard format of the page, Disney managed to include their quintessential flair with the iconic Mickey Mouse character as their profile photo and an image of their recent animated film, Frozen, as their cover picture. Over time, the cover picture changed to show other Disney-related images, but the Mickey Mouse profile photo remained constant during the observation period. The page description section does not specify a brand category, but it exudes the classic Disney ideology with Walt Disney’s personal quote: “It’s kind of fun to do the impossible” (3 Mar. Disney FB). The traces of famous Disney elements and the lack of details or descriptions about the brand highlight Disney’s status as a renowned global brand that requires no explanation for its Facebook fans.

It is interesting to note Disney’s additional effort to protect their brand image by including a disclaimer-like note on their “About” sub-page, a section which provides information about a brand or the community: “This Page is a place for our Fans. However, we do need to have certain rules. Please be aware that we do not accept or consider unsolicited idea submissions and, also, we must reserve the right to remove any posting or other material that we find off-topic, inappropriate or objectionable” (3 Mar. Disney FB). Despite this seeming strictness of the community, Disney Facebook fans still appear to be very active considering that every official Disney post receives multiple user comments and other interactions (an estimated average of 35,000 “Likes” and 600 shares per post).

6.2.2 Self-Expression on Disney Page

Though the Disney Facebook page places some limitation on fans to express themselves by prohibiting personal posts by individuals, fans still actively present themselves and voice their opinions to other community members through commenting on, “Liking” and/or sharing the official Disney posts. The most prominent means of self-representation here are fan comments on Disney posts. Comments are
limited to be expressed in the form of text and emoticons only, without photos or videos. The three guiding categories of self-expression mentioned in the Starbucks section – brand affirmations, brand dissatisfactions, and customary requests – were also used to evaluate the Disney fans’ comments.

Brand affirmation refers to fans’ posting of positive comments on official Disney posts, such as “Dreams come true!!!!! I believe!!!!!” “I <3 Disney (emoticon),” or “Loved this movie!” (3, 5, 6 Mar. Disney FB). Strikingly, 95% of the 100 comments under observation displayed brand affirmation, which showcases Disney’s reputation as a positive brand to its fans. The majority of brand affirmation comments (57%) contained nostalgic sentiment usually referencing childhood memories about Disney products or other positive moments related to Disney, for example, “Love it miss my childhood years” and “This was literally me when I went to Disney Land” (8 Mar. Disney FB), in response to Disney’s post of a highly stylized photo of a young girl looking towards Disneyland’s quintessential landmark, Sleeping Beauty’s castle. 20% of the comments were about friends’ associations with certain Disney posts, where users mentioned or tagged friends’ names in their comments to recall specific shared memories of Disney with their friends. 11% were directed at Disney characters, with users expressing their adoration of these fictional Disney figures: “love you Kermit,” “I LOVE YOU!” to the young Arthur character from *The Sword in the Stone*, and “Mulan <3,” (6, 9 Mar. Disney FB). 7% of the comments highlighted more passionate fans who boasted about their Disney knowledge or fandom to other community members, such as “Watched this so many times, even had the book to it” and “Fauna, Flora & Merriweather. Fauna is in green, Flora in red & Merriweather in blue” (8, 9 Mar. Disney FB), demonstrating their pride as Disney fans on Facebook. Brand affirmation can also be measured through the number of “Likes” on each post. Based on the observed posts, each Disney post acquired an average of 35,000 Likes, which is about 40% above the average “Likes” benchmark on Facebook (Ribeiro 2011).

Comments that displayed brand dissatisfaction were rare within the Disney Facebook community. Only 5% of the observed comments showed subtle signs, if any, of dissatisfaction with specific details about Disney products such as character designs (e.g., “That frog is definitely different”) or the cost of entrance fees to the theme park (e.g., “I would have to save $ for a year to afford to take my kids”) (6, 9 Mar. Disney FB). This indicates that either the Disney community consists mainly of loyal and committed Disney fans who hold biased positive attitudes toward the brand or perhaps that Disney’s effort to protect its image has purposely excluded negative opinions of Disney on the page.

There were no evident comments that showed customary requests (neutral comments conveying specific wishes or requests from Disney) within the 100 comments under observation. This might be an indication of fans’ perception of the community as more of a member-driven community that is independent from Disney corporate, which would explain the lack of attempted direct communication.
with Disney as a brand or corporation. However, as mentioned, it is also possible that the protective tendency of Disney in regards to their brand image might have led to the deliberate elimination of any potentially controversial conversation topics that might arise from customer wishes or requests.

6.2.3 Community-Building on Disney Page

Despite the fact that fans can “Like” other community members’ comments, not being able to deploy individual posts firsthand or directly comment on other fans’ comments are obstacles for communication and for the easy flow of information between community members. Therefore, the amount of “Likes” on most fans’ comments, the only numerical measurement of fan-to-fan engagement available, is low, mostly ranging from zero to two “Likes,” most of which are likely from friends of the fans’ who are also fans of Disney. However, this alone cannot dismiss the Disney brand page’s community-building effect entirely.

While it is difficult to gauge how much community-building is actually facilitated through the Disney Facebook page (due to its more limited user functionality) the general positive and supportive atmosphere can be a potential contributing factor in creating and sustaining a strong like-minded fan community. Most of the fans’ comments on official Disney posts carried more of a conversational tone even though fans know that others cannot directly reply to their individual comments. Comments such as “The Sword in the Stone was my dad’s favorite disney film” or “I’m going there in 2 weeks!!!” (6, 9 Mar. Disney FB) show that fans feel comfortable and safe enough to share specific and personal matters to the whole community, not necessarily directed at anyone in particular, indicating a hint of a community-building aspect within the Disney Facebook community. Furthermore, some fans’ comments were clear attempts at direct conversation with other community members. Below is an example of fans’ attempts at direct communication via comments about the same topic, Kermit the frog, showing up consecutively as a chain of conversation amidst the thousands of other unrelated comments (6 Mar. Disney FB):

Fan 1: That frog is definitely different
Fan 2: Besides his voice?, since Jim Henson passed away
Fan 3: Apart from his dodgy accent he has developed a frog mole above his right lip. He never had that before. X

The context of these comments shows that these fans are experiencing and exchanging a community moment through a common conversation topic, interacting with one another in a benign discussion about their common interest. In this sense, the Disney Facebook page displays the potential to provide a community-forming platform for the passionate fans of Disney on Facebook through these interactions.

6.2.4 Authenticity on Disney Page

Traditional fan communities thrive in authenticity which enables them to fuel the organic flow of thought-provoking conversations and interactions between fans. Since the Disney Facebook page can be
considered an official fan community of its own, not just a marketing platform for the Disney corporation, it is important to address its authenticity as well. Based on close observations of 100 random comments, the content of these comments appeared to be genuine, originating from real fans. Many comments seemed to express honest feelings and opinions about Disney, especially when involving personal stories such as “This is my son’s bedtime song I sing to him every night!” or “That’s one of my all-time favorite scenes!” (9, 5 Mar. Disney FB). Also, keeping the possible “fake” users from the Starbucks experience in mind, I performed a deeper investigation of fans with such personal comments. However, no similar evidence indicating in-authenticity by these users was found. In general, the context of the Disney-centric fan comments displayed on the Facebook page seems to enhance an authentic fan environment.

Nevertheless, it is also important to address the previously-mentioned concerns regarding Disney’s strict control over the page content. As mentioned before, topics expressing negative opinions about Disney or controversial consumer questions or requests were rare. It is difficult to confirm if members of the Disney community do post comments that might be potentially harmful to the brand’s image, and are deleted or immediately blocked by Disney in order to shelter themselves. This could plausibly be standard procedure for the community facilitator. Currently, the general tone of Disney’s Facebook community is extremely positive and sanitary which might not be reflecting authenticity within this community. Nevertheless, claiming that the entire Disney Facebook community is inauthentic would be a naive assumption and would be demeaning to the integrity of the true and authentic Disney fans that are undoubtedly present on Facebook.

6.3 PlayStation

6.3.1 PlayStation General Page Overview

PlayStation’s Facebook page is also one of the most popular brand communities on Facebook, ranking 9th on the recent top 50 brands on Facebook as well as being the most popular in the gaming category (Tobin 2013). Acquiring and maintaining over 36 million fans (“Likes”) of the page, the fan base of the PlayStation page continued its stable growth with 17,760 new fans added over the seven days of observations (3-9 March, 2014).

Like the other two brands, PlayStation is no exception in following the archetypal Facebook format with the typical blue and white color scheme and the wall in the center where all the PlayStation posts and fan comments are collected. PlayStation’s Facebook page resembles that of Disney’s since it also does not have a section for individual fan posts; only community members’ comments on the official PlayStation posts appear on the wall. The difference from Disney’s page is that PlayStation allows community members to directly comment on other fans’ comments via the “Reply” function directly
beneath each user comment, which helps enable more direct fan-to-fan interactions. The overall look of the PlayStation page is catered to their more masculine brand image with a simple PlayStation logo as the profile picture and an action image of a scene from one of the PS4-exclusive games as their cover photo, promoting the share functionality (#PS4 share) of their newest console. Unlike Disney, the cover photo remained the same during the week of observation. On their “About” sub-page, PlayStation includes a similar disclaimer like Disney’s regarding PlayStation’s right to delete any comments that are considered to be inappropriate. Interestingly, the PlayStation Facebook page is the only brand to promote their other official PlayStation communities off of Facebook, possibly to keep their gaming audience excited and interested by providing them with more information outlets.

6.3.2 Self-Expression on PlayStation Page

Despite the fact that PlayStation’s Facebook page, like Disney’s, does not allow individual personal posts, PlayStation fans can still engage in active self-presentation via commenting on, “Liking” and/or sharing the official PlayStation posts as well as replying to other fans’ comments. The most visible ways of expressing oneself in this case is by commenting, either on PlayStation’s posts or on other community members’ comments, which are also limited to text and emoticons, without videos or photos. The same categories of self-expression used for the other brands were applied to the fans’ comments on the PlayStation Facebook page as well: brand affirmations, brand dissatisfactions, and customary requests.

Brand affirmations included fans’ comments on official PlayStation posts or on other fans’ comments that emanated a generally positive perception of the brand or of products associated with the brand such as “YES! PS4!!!” or “PS4 Are The Best … (emoticon)” (3, 7 Mar. PlayStation FB). Only 37% of the 100 observed comments exhibited clear brand affirmation which is low compared to the other brands in this study, possibly indicating the PlayStation fans to be more of an opinionated and independent-minded crowd compared to the Disney fans who displayed a high level of like-minded loyalty and commitment to the brand. 15% of the comments expressed positive attitudes and excitement regarding PlayStation and PlayStation-related products: “Best graphics yet on a console,” “GTAMMO rules” and “I can’t wait for watch dogs on PS4” (3, 4, 9 Mar. PlayStation FB). 12% of the comments defended the PlayStation brand or other PlayStation-associated aspects usually within fan-to-fan conversations, for example, “Haaters – haters everywhere,” “Then don’t play it. If you think it’s boring,” and “So many haters on here. Go back to your xbox fan site” (4, 7 Mar. PlayStation FB). 10% of the comments showcased some form of showing-off of PlayStation-related or gaming knowledge: “A game doesn’t have to run at 60fps for it to be good, it just enhances the experience,” “Sony are supporting the ps3 for 5 years from the launch of ps4,” and “FFS, PCs are the most power, yes, but they have nothing
which the PS4 offers” (3, 6, 7 Mar. PlayStation FB). These different types of brand affirmation conveyed through fans’ comments reveal the vocal and passionate dynamics of PlayStation’s Facebook fans.

The outspoken and straightforward communication style of the PlayStation fans was further emphasized when looking at brand dissatisfaction comments, which appeared in 34% of the comments. Brand dissatisfactory comments included those expressing negative attitudes toward the PlayStation brand or PlayStation-related products and generally included more aggressive debate amongst fans. 22% exhibited general frustrations or negative attitudes toward the PlayStation and PlayStation-associated matters shown in comments like “This game is kinda terrible… I want my money back…”, “f-ing sony. all late to the party,” and “you have bad service!!!” (4, 8 Mar. PlayStation FB). The remaining 12% of comments demonstrated confrontations or debates in relation to PlayStation or PlayStation-associated items: “are you an idiot or just a fan of shooters?”, “Fk you” (4 Mar. PlayStation FB). These types of fan behaviors suggest that the PlayStation fans on Facebook are not afraid to share their intense emotions and possibly controversial opinions with other community members.

Customary-request-oriented comments (neutral comments addressing concerns or questions seeking specific information from PlayStation) covered 29% of the 100 selected comments. Comments like “Also can we get vita tv?”, “Announce the PS4 version already (emoticon),” or “So when is the phasing out of the ps3 going to start?” (3, 4, 6 Mar. PlayStation FB) are some examples of the customary request sentiment displayed on the page. Though it is uncertain if PlayStation will respond to these requests, the fans persistently posted a substantial amount of similar comments as in most cases other community members provide answers or respond with their own knowledge.

6.3.3 Community-Building on PlayStation Page

Based on the analysis of 100 random posts/comments, the PlayStation Facebook page appears to have a sort of community-building function, especially for passionate active fans. Fans of PlayStation appear to utilize this digital community to interact with other fans or with the brand itself. The main modes of engagement were “Liking” and commenting on official PlayStation posts or on other fans’ comments. In evaluating the comments and “Likes” linked to the selected posts/comments, typically about five to seven user comments were recorded on other user comments. Like Starbucks, the common drivers for interacting were genuine interest or agreement, strong objection or disagreement, and entertainment value.

Genuine interest or agreement can be indicated by the act of “Liking” posts or comments, which can also signify entertainment value. Naturally, fans tend to “Like” posts or comments they relate to in terms of their ideas and interests. Since gaming is a sub-category of the entertainment industry, all official PlayStation posts encompass “entertaining” elements in general. Therefore, it is difficult to distinguish
which topic of fan conversation is considered to have innately more entertainment value. However, it is safe to conclude that posts/comments that received the highest numbers of “Likes” generally are the “hot topics” at the time and have high entertainment value. Strong objection or disagreement with content cannot be displayed this way since, as mentioned before, a “Dislike” button does not exist on Facebook.

Although PlayStation’s layout does not allow for fans to make original posts on the page to be commented on, limiting communication routes for these members, commenting on others’ comments implies deeper fan-to-fan interactions and thus a stronger sense of online community. Other fans’ comments on the PlayStation posts also signify a form of self-expression, which indicates that the act of commenting on other fans’ comments connotes an attempt for direct and personal interaction with other fans of the community through the sharing of new ideas or different perspectives, ultimately strengthening the community-building characteristic. Unlike the Starbucks study, PlayStation fans were more inclined to comment on other fans’ comments addressing relevant updates or content in the gaming industry, such as brand affirming comments, instead of the expected controversial subjects typically shown in brand dissatisfaction or customary request comments. For example, comments about an upcoming PlayStation video game or PlayStation console update garnered the most comments (usually between eight to ten) expressing strong personal opinions, agreement or objection to the other fans’ comments, which helps to create a true community and social atmosphere. The following are some examples of the fan comments displaying agreement or disagreement to comments of other community members in regards to various new game updates: “Sir you made my day with the true statement,” “lol same here,” and “@[User A] master race when it actually doesn’t crash” (4,6,7 Mar. PlayStation FB).

6.3.4 Authenticity on PlayStation Page

The question of authenticity cannot be overlooked when discussing online communities. As mentioned earlier, PlayStation Facebook fans exhibited straightforward and outspoken ways of engaging within the community despite the disclaimer in the “About” section. Examining 100 random fan comments on the page revealed enough signs of authenticity through both its content and context. Unaffected and unfazed by the reality of the Facebook page as a new marketing medium, PlayStation fans engaged in liberal and seemingly honest and organic flows of knowledge and information sharing.

Nonetheless, the authenticity of a community is something that cannot be confirmed definitively since what is considered authentic can be socially constructed. Therefore, it is still important to discuss the extent of control that PlayStation exercises over their Facebook community. Compared to the Disney page, the PlayStation page presented more strong opinions and aggressive expressions produced by their fans, which can serve to increase the level of authenticity. However, the inclusion of the clear disclaimer
regarding their rights to delete or block inappropriate content draws attention to the degree of control PlayStation could deploy in their community management. And yet it is important to note that some level of content control exists even within individually-run, non-commercial online communities to serve the purpose of protecting users from abuse or harassment, for example. All in all, genuine content and relevant context embedded in the PlayStation Facebook community by its fans seem to assist in creating a more authentic environment for members.

6.4 Field Observations Summarization

Although these three brands’ Facebook pages differ in their content, audience, and fan dynamics, the field observations reveal some common patterns that could help explain the fans’ general uses and gratifications of these brand communities and the real meaning of being a fan in these environments. In summary, the three brands’ Facebook pages can be seen as a digital platform for self-expression and community-building. At the same time, the authenticity of the environment and interactions is constantly challenged.

The close investigation of diverse user engagements and various conversational topics presented on these pages exemplified different levels of self-expression depending on the site’s atmosphere and functional limitations. In modern societies, expression of the self can be carried out “as fluid abstraction, reified through the individual’s association with a reality that may be equally flexible” (Papacharissi 2011:304), which leads individuals such as fans of brand pages on Facebook to easily adjust their way of expressing themselves in relation to different realities available to them. Diverse conversation themes surfaced within these environments also reflect the multiplicity of self-presentations dealing with the “complex facets of our identities” (Schau & Gilly 2003:387). Fans of the three brand pages expressed themselves according to their own personal motivations such as to present themselves as loyal fans of the brands, to express anger or frustrations towards the brands, or simply to ask for information, ultimately influencing the self-presentations of these fans to their communities.

The notion of community-building exhibited within these online environments brought attention to different degrees of a sense of community as “[c]onceptualizations of community are further complicated by tensions between descriptive and prescriptive approaches, and by tensions between what might be called ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ requirements” (Parks 2011:107). Based on my field observations, both the Starbucks and PlayStation Facebook pages can be categorized as stronger communities while the Disney Facebook page can be considered a weaker community. According to Parks, a group might qualify as a virtual community “if its members engaged in collective action, shared in rituals, had a variety of relational linkages, and were emotionally bonded to others in a way that conferred a sense of belonging
and group identification” (Parks 2011:118-119). Looking at different fan interactions and behavioral patterns within these environments, all three brands’ Facebook pages qualify as a virtual community.

Authenticity is an ambiguous concept which makes it challenging to determine whether or not these brand pages provide authentic environments to their users since the understanding of authenticity varies depending on the individual (Marwick & boyd 2010:11). A close evaluation of the content generated by fans and their reactions to each other indicated a degree of authenticity embedded in all three Facebook communities. Despite speculations regarding “fake” users on the Starbucks page and concerns about brands’ monitoring and close control over their environments in all three communities, the actual communications between the fans and their opinions displayed in public are as authentic as they can be since, in the end, “authenticity is constituted by the audience” (Marwick & boyd 2010:11).

7. SURVEYS

The survey analysis is centered on fans’ motivations behind becoming a fan of the brands on Facebook and their general uses and gratifications of the brand pages. Select graphs are included to help illustrate the findings. Since the survey participants per brand are relatively low to be expressed as percentages, results are expressed in fractions (e.g., 17 out of 40 = 17/40) to not exaggerate the survey scope.

7.1 Starbucks

7.1.1 Starbucks General Respondent Overview

The survey data revealed the general motivations behind becoming a Starbucks fan and participating in the community as well as different gratifications gained from using the Starbucks page. The survey was distributed to 50 Starbucks fans via comments on wall posts and 40 users participated and completed the whole survey. The survey comprised of 18 questions about Facebook and Starbucks page usage habits and motivations. Participant ages ranged from 18 to 74, but the 25-34 bracket had the most respondents (15/40). Women appeared to be more active Starbucks fans as 25/40 respondents were female. Most participants were quite active Facebook users with 32/40 frequenting the site daily.

7.1.2 Motivations and Gratifications on Starbucks Page

In contrast to many previous studies revealing negative public attitudes toward marketers (Shavitt et al. 1998; Wang et al. 2002), 35/40 admitted that they were a fan of (have “Liked”) brand profile pages on Facebook, showing users’ voluntary acceptance of marketers within their social media consumption. 28/40 respondents also said they were aware of being a fan of (having “Liked”) the Starbucks’ brand page
before being approached for the survey, implying a memorable value of being part of the community since users could easily “un-Like” the page if they were no longer a fan.

When asked about the initial motivation behind becoming a fan (Image 1), special promotions/deals/discounts was the top reason (10/29) while voluntary search was second (9/29). This was surprising considering the usual notion that media consumers hold a critical view of marketing. Searching voluntarily to become a fan of a brand on a public platform indicates users’ intentional decisions to associate their online identity with the Starbucks brand within their social media network.

Image 1 – Motivations for “Liking” Starbucks’ Facebook brand page

![Image showing motivations for liking Starbucks' Facebook page]


Although 17/40 fans said they visited the Starbucks page only once when they first became a fan, Facebook’s functionality which allows users to engage with posts directly from one’s own news feed means that fans do not have to visit the actual community page to “Like,” comment on, or share posts. Still 19/40 re-visited the page with 4 frequenting three to five times per week and 3 at two to three times per month, showing fans’ recurrent use of the community. Special promotions/deals/discounts were also
the most popular motivations for revisiting the page (22/33), followed by Starbucks updates in the news feed (14/33) and voluntary visits (7/33). Obtaining material benefits, acquiring information, and personal interest seem to be the top gratifications that fans gain from being a part of the brand community.

In terms of fan engagement within the community, 15/40 claimed not to participate at all while 25 admitted participation in different forms—posting (text, pictures, video, and other: 14/40) and “Liking” (13/40) Starbucks branded content were the most common. Receiving special promotions/deals/discounts was again the top incentive for community participation (16/29). Other key motivations for fan activities were to give general feedback to Starbucks (15/29), to show a genuine like or dislike of content (14/29), to connect with other fans (8/29), and to file complaints (6/29). This variety of motives indicates the role the Starbucks Facebook page plays to gratify fans’ different needs: tangible rewards, displays of interest, expressions of opinion, and interaction with others (Image 2).

Image 2 – Motivations for engagement on Starbucks’ Facebook brand page

While 16/40 fans felt no difference in their personal connection to the Starbucks brand after becoming a fan, 10/40 said they felt more personally connected to Starbucks through their Facebook community. Also, 15/40 expressed that the brand page instilled a more positive image of Starbucks in them and 26/40 viewed the Starbucks page as a successful example of marketers’ presence on Facebook. This data suggests a high level of satisfaction that fans experience from their uses of the Starbucks Facebook page.

7.2 Disney

7.2.1 Disney General Respondent Overview

Disney’s survey data provided an overview of general motivations and gratifications that the users obtain by being a part of this Facebook brand community. The survey was deployed via comments to 50 randomly-selected official Disney posts and 31 complete responses were received. Staying consistent with the Starbucks survey, there were 18 questions regarding Facebook and Disney page usage habits and motivations. A majority of respondents were active Facebook users with 26/31 using the site daily. Compared to the Starbucks fans, the Disney participant age groups skewed slightly younger, ranging from 18 to 54, but the majority of respondents belonged in the 25-34 age bracket (17/31). Female users were the more active Disney fans at 22/31.

7.2.2 Motivations and Gratifications on Disney Page

Similar to the Starbucks fans, most Disney respondents (24/31) reported they were a fan of (have “Liked”) brand profile pages on Facebook, again highlighting a general acceptance towards marketers’ presence in the social media environment. 25/31 admitted they were aware of being a fan of (having “Liked”) the Disney brand page before being approached for the survey, indicating their conscious acknowledgement of Disney’s Facebook community in their social media usage.

In terms of motivations for becoming a fan of the Disney page (Image 3), while 8/24 claimed that they did not remember the initial reason for joining the page, friend’s news feed/comments and voluntary search were shown as the top motivations (5/24 each) followed by seeing a “Suggested Post” ad that appears in users’ news feed (4/24), which suggests that membership in the Disney Facebook community is steered by users’ personal interest in the brand and their deliberate effort to associate themselves with it.

Despite users being seemingly self-imposed and more passionate fans, 10/31 visited the page less frequently than once a month and 9/31 never even visited the page. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the Disney community is a highly-controlled environment as discussed in the field observations, with limited user activity options. Also, as mentioned earlier, being able to engage with posts directly from one’s news
feed means Disney fans do not have to visit the actual community page. Still, another 9/31 reported visiting the page at least once a month, and the most popular reasons were seeing Disney updates in their news feed (17/25) and special promotions/deals/discounts (9/25) while 6/25 were voluntary visits. Information and material benefits appear to be the top gratifications that Disney fans experience from their brand community. However, it is quite surprising that a majority of fans do voluntarily revisit the Disney Facebook page at some point, indicating that exercising genuine interest and passion for the brand is also a gratification these fans get out of their community membership.

As for fan engagement within the Disney Facebook community, though 18/31 reported they do not participate at all, still a significant amount of respondents (13/31) claimed they do engage in different forms, mainly through “Liking” Disney’s official content (7/31) and sharing branded content with their friends (4/31). While 6/19 could not name the reason for their community participation, the leading motivation was their genuine like or dislike of content on the Disney Facebook page (8/19), showing that these fans’ activities are primarily driven by their interests. Some of the other popular reasons for fan engagement include seeing friends’ news feed comments (20.83%) and sharing content with friends (28.57%).

participation were to get special promotions/deals/discounts (5/19) and to give general feedback to Disney (3/19). These motivations exemplify various ways that the Disney Facebook page fulfills fans’ different gratifications such as expressing interest/passion, receiving material rewards, and sharing opinions within their fan community (Image 4).

**Image 4 – Motivations for engagement on Disney’s Facebook brand page**

![Chart showing motivations for engagement on Disney’s Facebook brand page](image)


Though 5/31 said they felt a more personal connection to the Disney brand after becoming a fan of the Facebook page, 16/31 did not feel any difference. Since Disney fans in general appeared to be genuinely passionate about the brand even before becoming a fan of the Disney page (as indicated by the high percentage of voluntary search as the motivator for “Liking” the page), it is not surprising that membership in the Disney Facebook community did not make a significant incremental difference in their
personal connection to the brand. However, it is also possible that the controlled nature of the community was a hindrance to strengthening this connection. Consistent with the nature of Disney fans’ avid interest in the brand, 10/31 expressed that the Disney Facebook community has helped instill a more positive image of Disney in them and 18/31 perceived the page as a successful example of marketers’ presence on Facebook. These results display a strong sense of satisfaction obtained by fans from their uses and gratifications of the Disney Facebook page.

7.3 PlayStation

7.3.1 PlayStation General Respondent Overview

Like the other surveys, the PlayStation survey data illustrated the general motivations and gratifications the fans gain from their membership in the PlayStation community via the Facebook brand page. The survey was distributed to 50 PlayStation fans through replies to their comments on official PlayStation posts and 38 complete responses were collected. The survey was kept consistent with those for the previous brands. Ages ranged from 18 to 44, making them the youngest fan group in this study. However, the 25-34 bracket was again the age group with the highest respondent number at 25/38. As expected, the active fans of the PlayStation Facebook page appeared to be predominantly men as 36/38 were male. Most participants were active Facebook users with 30/38 visiting the site daily.

7.3.2 Motivations and Gratifications on PlayStation Page

In line with the previous brands, the PlayStation fans also demonstrated their receptiveness to marketers in social media with 36/38 admitting they were a fan of (have “Liked”) brand profile pages on Facebook. 33/38 reported they were aware of being a fan of (having “Liked”) the PlayStation brand page before being approached for the survey, the highest out of all three brands, indicating the fixed recollection of community membership and the respondents’ clear intention and awareness of becoming a fan of this particular page.

As for the initial motivation of becoming a fan (Image 5), a resounding 14/28 credited voluntary search while 6/28 could not recall. Seeing a friend’s news feed or comment was the third most common response (5/28). This suggests that membership in the PlayStation Facebook community is mainly driven by users’ self-identification as a fan of the brand even before becoming a fan on Facebook as well as their association with and pre-existing interest in the brand.

While 8/38 said they visited the PlayStation page only once (when they first became a fan) and another 8/38 claimed they never visited the page, 22/38 reported they do revisit, of which 4/38 frequent the page two to three times a month and 2/38 at least once a week, demonstrating PlayStation fans’
Image 5 – Motivations for “Liking” PlayStation’s Facebook brand page

**Note.** From “PlayStation Facebook Brand Page - Audience Uses and Gratifications Study,” Surveymonkey.com, 2014.

regular usage of the community. The top ranking motivations for revisiting were PlayStation updates in their news feed (21/31), voluntary visits (10/31), and friend’s news feed/comments (6/31). Interestingly, special promotions/deals/discounts which was one of the most popular motivations for the previous brands was ranked low with only 3/31, suggesting that the gratifications of PlayStation fans on Facebook are more focused on information gathering and interest than material incentives.

When examining fan engagement, it is interesting to note that although one might expect PlayStation fans to be the most actively engaged group due to their strong voluntary motivations for becoming a fan initially, 23/38 claimed that they do not participate at all. This may be partially due to the slightly more restricted environment of the PlayStation page which does not allow organic user posts like the Starbucks page. Also, since the motivations for both initially becoming a fan and for revisiting the page centered around informational gratification aspects, fans do not necessarily have to engage to receive
the information and updates they seek. Still, 15/38 do engage within the community in various ways; “Liking” PlayStation-branded content (14/38) and “Liking” other community members’ content (5/38) were the most popular forms of community participation. Although 5/23 reported they did not know their reason for participation, the most popular motivation was a genuine like or dislike of content on the PlayStation Facebook page (12/23), similar to the Disney results, staying consistent with the notion of genuine brand interest as their initial motivation behind community membership. Unexpectedly, the second top reason for community engagement was to get special promotions/deals/discounts (6/23). This is contrary to the motivations behind revisiting the page and to the previously-observed nature of PlayStation fans as more information- and interest-driven. This might be an indication that there is a distinction between an active PlayStation fan who only revisits the page and an active PlayStation fan who engages within the community. Some of the other motivations tap into more traditional communal aspects of a digital community such as to connect with other fans, to recommend to friends, and to give general feedback to PlayStation (all at 2/23 each).

**Note.** From “PlayStation Facebook Brand Page - Audience Uses and Gratifications Study,” Surveymonkey.com, 2014.
These different motives showcase various gratifications that the PlayStation page provides to its fans: expression of interest/passion, tangible incentives, contribution of opinions, and communal interactions (Image 6).

Although 7/38 felt a more personal connection to the PlayStation brand after becoming a fan on Facebook, 21/38 felt no difference. As there was an unforeseen flaw in the answer options for this question since there was no option to indicate a decreased personal connection, it is unclear if respondents who answered “No” to whether they felt a more personal connection meant they actually felt less of a connection, or if they also simply meant there was no change. 10/38 fell into this uncertain category.

However, 12/38 reported that the PlayStation Facebook community has helped instill a more positive image of PlayStation for them and 23/38 said the PlayStation page was a successful example of marketers’ presence on Facebook. Considering this data that suggests a high level of gratification that fans gain from their use of the PlayStation page, the high percentage of users who felt that their personal connection to the brand did not increase is somewhat surprising but may partially be explained by the aforementioned error in the survey’s answer options.

7.4 Surveys Summarization

The potential effects of media are influenced by individual media consumers’ “differences and motivation, social structure, and individual attitudes, initiative and involvement” (Rubin 2009:147). The survey data of all three brands helped to shed light on the effect of brand pages by presenting a general overview of active fans’ uses and gratifications attained from membership in these branded communities. As motivation is a key component that influences “the selective and active manner that [media consumers] participate in communication and the possible outcomes of the encounters” (Rubin 2009:150), finding motivational patterns in the survey data can explain different uses and gratifications that active fans on Facebook achieve from the brand communities. Despite the fact that the three brands catered to different types of audiences with different content, the survey results revealed key patterns of usage and motivations for becoming a fan of these brand pages that are applicable to more general active Facebook brand fans as well.

The majority of respondents reported they were still aware of their membership in the brand communities before being approached by the surveys, which makes sense considering that voluntary research was one of the most common initial motivations for becoming a fan of a Facebook page for all three brands. As most of these active fans intentionally become fans of these brands based on their own interest, it is more likely that the organic awareness of their membership in these brand pages will subsist.
Though many fans claimed that they never revisit the brand communities, still a significant amount of them admitted to their re-visitation in varying degrees. The most common motivations for revisiting these communities were brands’ updates in fans’ news feeds and voluntary will. Receiving special promotions/deals/discounts was among the top ranking reasons for revisiting, but it was not the most popular motivation shared by all three brands. Based on these key motivations for revisiting or reusing the brands’ Facebook pages, acquiring new information and fulfilling personal interest appear to be the main gratifications obtained by active fans.

Many respondents also said they do not engage in the communities, however various forms of engagement were still performed by a substantial number of fans. Among those, the most commonly-shared type of engagement for all brands was “Liking” branded content, which could be due to the fact that this is the simplest and least intrusive way to engage within Facebook communities. The key motivations behind engagement shared by all three brands were receiving special promotions/deals/discounts and giving feedback to the brands, which work to gratify these fans’ needs for gaining tangible rewards and expressing their opinions.

These examples of uses and gratifications drawn from the surveys suggest the importance of understanding the types of needs that active brand page fans have through their various motivations of being a fan, since social media has “the capacity to fulfill both interpersonal needs of expression, inclusion, and social interaction and mediated needs of surveillance and information seeking, entertainment, and pass time or habit” (Papacharissi 1996:145).

8. INTERVIEWS

To acquire a more in-depth understanding of the meaning behind being a fan of a Facebook brand page at an individual level, the analyses of interview responses are guided by four themes: individual motivations, participation & self-representation, fandom & community, and brand & self-identification. An overview of each interviewee is included as a general reference point and to provide context.

8.1 Starbucks

8.1.1 Starbucks Interviewee Overview

The informants were a well-balanced group encompassing different genders, ages, and backgrounds, all of which worked to help bring interesting perspectives. They comprised of Sally (age 22), an editorial intern from Illinois, George (age 34), a programmer from California, and Jane (age 46), an insurance broker from Massachusetts. More female interviewees were selected for Starbucks since the survey showed a
more female fan base, and all three have been fans of the Starbucks community for at least three months to ensure they had enough time to properly experience their membership.

8.1.2 Individual Motivation on Starbucks Page

Even though questions about motivations for becoming a fan were covered in the survey, this topic was also included in the interview to better understand the significance on a personal level. While each individual had their own reasons or motivational triggers for becoming a fan of Starbucks on Facebook, it was clear they had all been loyal fans of Starbucks prior to becoming a fan on Facebook, which became the main motivation for clicking the “Like” button. Some informants raised the significant connection between their digital Starbucks community membership and their real life Starbucks experience.

George: I go to the local Starbucks every morning to get coffee before work. I enjoy going there, so it seemed reasonable to become their Facebook fan.

Jane: I’m a big fan of Starbucks. I have to have my Starbucks every day. So it was just natural to become a fan of their Facebook page as well.

Individual connection with the brand also appeared to be one of the key motivations. For example, Sally expressed a strong association to the Starbucks brand through personal memories.

Sally: … I can relate to the brand with nostalgia. I used to have some friends who worked at Starbucks near my high school. So I used to go to Starbucks every day after school and hang out with my friends and would get free Frappuccino, which was the best!

George discussed the personal appeal that the Starbucks brand has for him, which ultimately makes him feel more connected to the brand and more of a fan.

George: I identify with the style and the design aesthetic of the shops and products, branded mugs, coffee, things like that. I can relate to this type to atmosphere. It resonates with my personal design taste. And it represents constancy for me. I know it will be in every city I visit and will serve the same drinks. So I can rely on it and feel at home at whichever Starbucks I go to.

Jane also displayed a similar notion of constancy and reliability of the Starbucks brand in her offline life.

Jane: [Starbucks is] also home away from home… It’s a place where I feel comfortable and relaxed. I remember my first trip abroad, I felt so overwhelmed and nervous with these unfamiliar places […] And then I saw the Starbucks logo from far away. I got so excited. I walked in there confidently and I felt safe at home.

Interestingly, the relationship these fans expressed having with the Starbucks brand is not the stereotypical relationship between consumers and marketers. What these particular fans have in common is a personal and emotional relationship with Starbucks, which indicates a true passion for the brand that existed even before they joined the Starbucks Facebook community. Therefore, it appears natural as a pre-existing fan to “Like” the page on Facebook to display their genuine receptiveness to the brand.

As for the different gratifications these active fans gained, the interviewees mainly felt satisfied by receiving the most up-to-date Starbucks information like promotional news within their own news feed.
Sally: … I do like the fact that I sometimes get news about their promotional stuff and random nostalgic updates, especially during Christmas time. They have their special Christmas drinks and it always makes me feel warm and cozy inside. And when I get updates about it, I feel good.

George on the other hand brought up an interesting perspective on the function of membership in a brand community on Facebook. For him, being a fan of Starbucks contributed to his identity-building process as it is part of his publicly-displayed personal information, which helps to paint a clearer picture of himself to others on Facebook.

George: I feel like becoming a fan of things just to give people a better picture of who I am, so it kind of gives more information about me for other people to look at on my profile.

Although most of the informants admitted that knowing that their friends can see when they “Like” a brand did influence their decision to become a fan of certain brands, when they do “Like” a brand it is still a genuine expression of fondness towards the brand.

Jane: … I am definitely choosy when it comes to brands I “Like” because I know that other people get that news. But the ones I “Like” are the ones I really like and they tend to generally have good reputations overall.

In this way, all three interviewees considered themselves authentic Starbucks fans, which was further exhibited through their membership in its Facebook community.

8.1.3 Participation & Self-Representation on Starbucks Page

Most of the informants said they do not actively engage in the Starbucks community and none of them viewed themselves as active fans. As mentioned before, active fans are those who often engage and interact within the Facebook brand pages by posting, commenting on, sharing, or “Liking” content. Since these interviewees were selected based on their visibility in the Starbucks community due to their activities, it was interesting to find this discrepancy in their own perception of what kind of fan they are. Most informants felt that simply reading Starbucks updates and “Liking” something on the page is not considered active engagement and therefore did not see themselves as active fans.

Sally: I’m not really an active fan. I mean, I read all the news feed updates and “Like” certain posts, but I wouldn’t say I’m active.

Only Jane considered herself a moderate fan and somewhat more active than the others due to the greater variance in her activities. Still, she did not call herself an active fan because of the rarity of her actions.

Jane: I think I’m moderate. I do check the page regularly, I “Like” things, or post or comment or share things. But I don’t do this every day of course. Once in a while when I feel like it. So I’m in the middle.

These Starbucks fans had their own idea of what an active fan is, but the only difference between their level of participation in the community compared to “active” fans were that the active fans frequently performed more actions than just “Liking” something, such as commenting and posting.

Sally: An active fan would visit the page all the time; like post on their own, comment, and share things all the time.
As for the reason for their lack of engagement, the interviewees simply did not feel the general need to participate in the community. This indicates that this is a different form of community environment compared to the more traditional type that facilitates member interactions.

**George:** I just don’t feel it’s necessary for me to participate in deeper engagement other than what I’m doing now. [...] I didn’t become a fan to make friends on the Starbucks page after all. I became a fan to support Starbucks.

**Sally:** I don’t post or comment because I do not want to engage in any drama with other people. Some people are kind of crazy and I don’t want to associate myself with them. Also I don’t want my friends to think that I have too much time on my hands to be commenting or posting on a brand community page. That’s kind of lame in my opinion.

Sally’s response addresses an interesting point about self-representation. Rather than worrying about how she was presented within the community, she was more concerned about how her social media actions were being perceived by people she knows. Jane was the only informant to express her appreciation for Starbucks community interactions.

**Jane:** … I think the Starbucks fan page is a pretty safe and pleasant place. So I don’t feel worried or concerned about posting or commenting there […] I can relate to some other people’s posts. And it’s nice to share some information with other fans on this page. Like last Thanksgiving for example, I didn’t know whether Starbucks will be open on Thanksgiving day or not. So I just simply posted my question and some friendly people replied to let me know which Starbucks were open near me. I mean these were just regular people like me, but somehow, they knew more than me. So it was very helpful!

Despite the other informants’ lack of desire to partake in any community aspect of the Starbucks Facebook page, Jane’s experience exhibits signs of a typical online community. Whether this is an authentic example of community interaction is still unclear considering the possibility of “fake” fans discussed in the field observation section.

Other explanations for the other fans’ minimal participation in the community are the issues of privacy and self-representation.

**George:** … It’s my personality that’s being represented here. So I do put some thought into how I present myself. I am more conservative with what I share publicly since this information is discoverable and lasting.

**Sally:** … Nowadays, employers search you on Facebook. So I don’t want any inappropriate representations of me on it. Also I want people, my friends, to see only the cool side of me. If they can see how much time I actually spend on Facebook, it would be embarrassing since I would look like a loser.

Since Facebook is a public space where strangers or future employers can access people’s personal information, most Starbucks fans were cautious about what kind of information they included in their profiles and how their social media actions might reflect their character.

### 8.1.4 Fandom & Community on Starbucks Page

In this section, whether or not the traditional sense of fandom translates to branded communities on Facebook was discussed. To most informants, becoming a fan of the Starbucks page signified the simple digital confirmation and extension of their pre-existing fandom or preference for the brand.
Jane: … You have to be a fan first in order for you to “Like” something on Facebook, which was how it was for me. I have always been a Starbucks fan and then when Facebook came about, I became a fan on their page.

George: It means associating myself with a company. I am willingly letting this company have a relationship with me […] But that whole idea of being a fan of this brand is always there from the beginning. Otherwise, why else would you click that button when you’re not really a fan of this brand?

When talking about the traditional notion of a “fan,” the informants stressed that they are a different, ordinary type of fan without the negative “fan” stereotype. Based on how they described the stereotypical sense of fandom, the Starbucks fans clearly viewed participants of this type of fan culture as an atypical phenomenon that is far removed from their own Starbucks fan activities.

George: Obsession? I think it requires more effort to become a traditional fan. Those guys in costumes who preorder everything, spend all the money in the world to just see a show or something like that […] A casual fan like myself can’t really understand that culture.

Jane: … Like Star Wars people? I think they are an interesting group of people […] Their lives revolve around Star Wars or whatever they are fans of. […] I sometimes think they might need more help, maybe some therapy. But then again, who am I to judge... I’m sure they are great people.

In terms of their own membership in the Starbucks Facebook community, most of the interviewees portrayed themselves as passive members or observers who participate from a distance, which was perceived to be the norm in this type of fan community environment.

Jane: I think I’m a normal or an ordinary member of this community. I don’t stand out too much. I just comment or post from time to time, but not too much […] I’m mostly a quiet member. So I’m just an ordinary fan.

Sally: I guess that the community aspect is more loose on Facebook. I think community just means the masses, people, the consumers. I don’t really communicate with those so-called “passionate,” “dramatic” people on any of these pages […] I’m just an observer or a distant participant of a corporate-facilitated group.

Despite this overall passiveness George did address a sense of belonging that arises from his community membership, even as an “ordinary” Starbucks fan.

George: Sometimes, I feel like I am a part of this community, because people write some things I agree with or I know about. So it makes you feel like you’re connected to them, like thinking alike. Maybe other people in your life who know you really well might not be able to provide this type of information or this type of feeling.

Since authenticity in a community environment plays a central role in a community-building process, informants were asked about the authenticity of the Starbucks community.

Jane: … I think it’s a pretty authentic environment. I guess the main posts are by Starbucks itself, but the conversations that go on below those official posts are authentic. People talk about their real feelings and real problems. And people post their personal photos. I do that sometimes, like when I had my first gingerbread latte last year, I posted a picture of my latte.

Sally: … authenticity… I guess it depends on what you mean by authentic. Yes and no… I mean it’s organized by the company itself. Starbucks people control this page. So in that sense, it’s not that authentic since it’s a corporate-run group. But since it’s on social media, people can say whatever they want… and I have seen many comments that were quite personal, so in that sense, it can be authentic as well.

These responses reveal mixed feelings, which is not surprising given the intricate nature of the term.
8.1.5 Brand & Self-Identification on Starbucks Page

Understanding the relationship between brands and one’s self-identification process is necessary to comprehend the recent trend of media consumers becoming Facebook fans of brands. All informants agreed there is a strong correlation between the brands they like and how they identify themselves.

**Jane:** … I buy things that will represent me the way I am. So in that sense, it is more about what kind of message certain brands stand by and what kind of reputations the brands have in public. So I carefully only choose brands that will reflect me as a person […] because people will get an impression of you based on what you wear, what you eat, etc. […] And there are these specific brands that can create that image for me.

**Sally:** I would not like certain brands if they are not my style, if they don’t reflect upon my personality. I also notice sometimes, I like brands that are not attainable for me at this time, but that I aspire to. Like some high-fashion designer brands that I cannot afford, but I want to one day and I want people to see that I do have classy taste, which partly makes up my identity as well.

When this notion of brand influence on the self-identification process is transferred to an online environment like social media, the interviewees also highlighted the brand selection process as part of building the specific identity they want to portray on Facebook, which furthers supports the link between an individual’s choice of brands and their self-identification process.

**George:** … I think my identity drives that whole brand selection process on Facebook […] Other people on Facebook can develop an idea about me when they see these brands on my profile. These brands can sort of represent who I am as a person.

In discussing the presence of brands in social media as a marketing approach, the Starbucks fans shared a surprisingly positive perspective of Starbucks’ effort.

**Jane:** I think their presence is great on Facebook. Since I only select what I like, I mainly only get relevant or useful information unlike the other traditional advertising […] It’s no longer a one-way communication, which makes people be more open-minded about these brands […] It’s funny because I “Liked” the page knowing that it is a marketing or a PR tool. But it honestly felt like these official posts were by other community members.

Most of them had willingly become a fan of the Starbucks page knowing that it was a way for marketers to communicate with them, and generally gained positive experiences from it.

8.2 Disney

8.2.1 Disney Interviewee Overview

The interviewees for the Disney brand page were also a well-balanced group covering a broad age range with diverse backgrounds. They were Samantha (age 24), a graduate student from California, Michelle (age 37), a stay-at-home mom from Washington, and Harry (age 54), a businessman from Georgia. This group had the oldest participant out of all the interviews which could potentially offer a different perspective since the older generation typically uses social media less frequently. According to the survey data there are more female fans on the Disney page, which again influenced the selection of more female
informants. Like the Starbucks fans, the Disney fans had been part of the Disney Facebook community for at least three months to help ensure sufficient familiarity with and exposure to the page.

8.2.2 Individual Motivation on Disney Page

As was the case for Starbucks, all informants were already purported Disney fans before becoming fans on Facebook. However, some life-changing moments, influence from friends, and other personal interests also worked to trigger the final act of “Liking” the Disney Facebook page.

Michelle: I just had a daughter 7 months ago. So I added it after she was born because I wanted to get more news about kid-oriented things. I mean I’m sure my daughter will grow up with Disney like I did. 
Samantha: … I really like the brand and […] my friends played a big role in this too. Most of them like Disney a lot. 
Harry: I liked Disney since I was a child and now I own Disney stock. So I’m naturally interested in what’s going on with Disney and how well they are doing.

It was interesting to see that all informants expressed the same idea of nostalgia and Disney’s representation of their childhood as being their primary motivation for being a fan in the first place, which implies that Disney had instilled a ubiquitous and positive brand image that is uniquely personal and emotional for these fans. This personal and memory-invoking aspect resembles what Sally experienced with Starbucks, however these interviewees’ connections to the Disney brand showcased an even stronger representation of a most commonly-shared and nostalgic phase of a person’s life: childhood. This makes Disney as a brand even more special for these fans such that they extend that reflection to their online community membership.

Harry: I lived overseas when I was a child and I would see articles and pictures about Disneyland Park in magazines. So it became one of my dreams to visit there and Disney represents my childhood […] I finally made my dream come true when I took my daughter to Disneyland when she was a child. 
Samantha: … When I think of Disney, it actually reminds me of my childhood. Like the cartoons I saw when I was a little girl, kind of nostalgic. 

Getting updates and news about Disney was the most common gratification informants gained from being fans. For Michelle, being a Facebook fan of Disney also provided her with a sense of security over other brands since Disney has a reputation of being a trustworthy brand.

Michelle: I chose Disney because it is the brand that I know the most and I trust. Especially, since I selected it because of my daughter, it was important for me to pick a brand that I’m familiar with.

Resembling the Starbucks responses, most of the informants said they tend to be more selective when choosing to become a fan of brands on Facebook since their friends can see these activities. Since Disney is perceived to be a brand that is universally acceptable, some interviewees felt free to display their affection for the brand by becoming fans of the Facebook page, while others were not.

Samantha: … When you “Like” a page, you think about what other people would think of you if you “Like” this page. But in the case of Disney, I think it’s a generally-accepted brand. So I didn’t really have to think about what other people would think.
Harry was the only informant for whom the visibility of personal information to friends did not affect his decision to become a fan of brands on Facebook.

**Harry:** It doesn’t affect me whatsoever. I don’t care about what other people think. I am who I am and I like what I like. Other people’s opinions of me don’t really matter to me. Maybe they did when I was young, but not anymore.

His response shows that he attributes his deviation from the others’ attitudes to self-confidence and self-assurance gained from his age.

### 8.2.3 Participation & Self-Representation on Disney Page

Just as the Starbucks informants underestimated their community participation, all Disney fans also felt they do not engage within the community that much and did not consider themselves active fans. All said they rarely visit the actual page and the only actions they take are reading Disney updates or “Liking” some Disney content, both of which they perceived as passive forms of community interaction. To be considered an active fan, the informants required the same criteria as the Starbucks fans; active fans invest more time and perform various kinds of engagements involving other members of the community aside from merely reading and “Liking” content.

To explain their limited community participation, both Harry and Michelle blamed their busy lifestyle; they do not have enough time to participate or engage more deeply on the brand page.

**Harry:** … I do “Like” some news at times. I just never thought of that as doing something engaging. I do that because I genuinely like something and it doesn’t take any extra time to do it. I don’t do other types of activities because I am very busy.

**Michelle:** When I see updates from Disney on my news feed, I might want to investigate further, but since I have a newborn, I just don’t have enough time. I think I might go on it more once my daughter is a bit older and she starts to get interested in this stuff.

The awareness of transparency, concern for privacy, and self-representation were other common justifications for nominal participation. Both Samantha and Michelle care about what kind of personal information they deploy in public environments and how they are presented to others via their actions on Facebook, and thus tend to be cautious and hesitant when engaging or participating more actively.

**Samantha:** … Because other people can see what you do […] even though I might “Like” the article, I will think twice before I actually “Like” it and share it with my friends […] I do care about the content that I’m associated with.

**Michelle:** … I think I’m more concerned now that I have a daughter. I just recently changed my Facebook name because of it. More about the security, privacy issue. So I guess that’s also why I don’t participate in this engagement thing, because I don’t want people to know that I am there in a way. I would like to be hidden? Sort of.

Michelle’s changing of her profile name to protect her privacy is an interesting tactic in terms of her online identity and also raises the issue of authenticity of other Disney community members. She is likely not the only Disney fan purposely using an inauthentic account to present herself, which plays a role in the authenticity of community dynamics. Harry, consistent with his previous attitude, was the only
interviewee who did not care about others’ perception of himself. However, he admitted to filtering his personal information due to concerns about privacy, which influences how he is represented on Facebook.

8.2.4 Fandom & Community on Disney Page

Similar to the Starbucks interviews, the Disney respondents generally saw becoming a fan of a brand on Facebook as a digital affirmation and extension of their existing affection for the brand since one must first be a fan in real life in order to reach the decision to become a fan on Facebook. Michelle took this notion even further by considering it a direct relationship with the brand; because she is a fan of Disney, becoming a fan on Facebook implies her giving permission to Disney to directly communicate with her, even if this entails promotional messages.

Michelle: … “Liking” the page means you are signing up to possibly get marketing materials from Disney, but you are ok with it […] I have always been a Disney fan. But becoming the fan of Disney [on Facebook] means I’m willing to let Disney send me their promotional messages.

When discussing the traditional type of a “fan” in relation to their own identity as fans of Disney on Facebook, the informants again differentiated themselves from the stereotypical fan culture while reestablishing the meaning of a “fan.” The consensus was that nowadays the term encompasses a broader group of people with a looser set of criteria. The Disney fans’ perception of traditional fandom also differed slightly from the Starbucks group in that they included groups of people with a wider range of interests such as teenagers.

Samantha: When I think about traditional fans, I think of very excited people screaming and yelling to see their idols. They are very obsessed about, for example, a book or a movie. So to me, “Liking” a page or being an active fan of Disney on Facebook is not the same as being these people […] Being a fan now has a broader meaning.

Harry: … I think these people are mainly teenagers. They are overly attached and emotional about some popular culture stuff. I remember my daughter was a huge Backstreet Boys fan when she was a teenager. She was very obsessed […] When she got older, she grew out of it.

In regards to their own membership in the Disney Facebook community, each informant expressed slightly different opinions, but both Harry and Michelle effectively viewed themselves as observers or passive participants like some of the Starbucks interviewees.

Michelle: I am a quiet observer. I’m not actively participating in the dialogue, but I’m observing it. I just read everything that interests me. It could be Disney posts or what other people post.

Harry: I’m not really a part of this community. I’m just a news reader of Disney. I just get myself updated on Disney news. I don’t know anyone else from that Disney group.

Though statements like Harry’s give the sense that the Disney Facebook page lacks a strong community aspect, the fact that Michelle still reads other members’ posts demonstrates the information flow of shared interests and passion amongst fans. Furthermore, despite Samantha’s passive participation, the Disney community provides a sense of belonging and camaraderie for fans like her, which hints at qualities of more typical online communities that the Disney Facebook community also possesses.
Samantha: I do feel like I am a part of this community sometimes, because these random people could be talking about something I like or I agree with. So in a sense, we have this collective mind I guess. So I feel somewhat connected to them from time to time.

The authenticity of the Disney community was unclear due to the informants’ different outlooks. This was mostly caused by interviewees’ varied ideas about what is considered authentic.

Harry: … Well, I guess it is authentic in the sense that it provides reliable and accurate information about Disney.

Michelle: … I think it is a comfortable authentic environment for the fans. Well, maybe not since it’s created by a company. But then, I still think it’s authentic. I think people who leave comments are genuine enough and the page has provided me with only valid information so far.

Samantha: … I would say it might not be that authentic. It’s a very well-known brand […] So I think lots of people might be a fan of Disney, but they might not be able to contribute to the community to make it more authentic with useful information. I think it might be less authentic compared to the pages of smaller brands.

Interestingly, the fact that this community is tightly controlled by Disney as seen in the field observations seemed to have little effect on the interviewees’ view of the environment’s authenticity.

8.2.5 Brand & Self-Identification on Disney Page

Most Disney informants also agreed that there is a link between the brands they like and their self-identification process, which can influence their decision to become fans of certain brands on Facebook. Harry on the other hand illustrated the brand-agnostic life that he leads due to his experience. He claimed that brands no longer have much meaning in his life to the point where he doesn’t even think about them. This is contradictory since he voluntarily became a fan of the Disney Facebook page and included this information in his profile as part of his public online identity. Perhaps he means that he already knows what brands he likes because he knows himself so well that he does not need to seek any new brands.

Harry: It doesn’t mean much to me anymore. When I was in my 20s or 30s I might have cared about expensive cars and well-known brand clothing, to brag about them or so that other people will respect me more. But I’m in my 50s and these things don’t mean much when you are at that age in your life […] I know who I am and I know what I like at this point.

Both Samantha and Michelle believed that the inclusion of brands they like on Facebook helps them develop a clearer picture of who they are to others, enhancing the presentation of their online identity, which is both a motivation for and a gratification from being a fan of a brand on Facebook.

Samantha: … It kind of contributes to building an identity for yourself on Facebook, because you are selecting what kind of information you are putting out there. If people see that I like certain brands, they can make a judgment of me depending on what kind of image this brand has.

Michelle: … I’m fine with other people deciding what kind of person I am based on my “Likes” of these brands. I mean I do that to other people. I would look at their “Likes” and stereotype them.

When addressing the increasing marketer presence in social media in the form of brand communities on Facebook, all interviewees were receptive to this approach. Though Harry displayed a more neutral tone while the others expressed positive attitudes towards the brands on Facebook, all three
informants became fans of the Disney page knowing it was a marketing platform. Samantha even said that this Facebook marketing approach made her feel more closely connected to Disney, effectively personifying the brand.

**Harry:** … While there is some informative news, in the end, it’s all about marketing […] But that doesn’t really bother me because that is the reality and it only makes sense that they do that. I mean Disney is a multi-million dollar corporation, not your friend. It’s only natural that they are on popular media to promote themselves and stay relevant. Also since I have their stock, it’s only better for me if they market themselves well.

**Michelle:** … I know that they are on Facebook to market themselves and I know they can track what I do. But I just don’t care. I mean if I “Like” something and they want to market it to me, then market it to me. At least it is something that I like or I’m interested in.

Based on these responses, the Disney Facebook community seems to provide gratifying experiences for its fans.

### 8.3 PlayStation

#### 8.3.1 PlayStation Interviewee Overview

The informants for the PlayStation page skewed younger and were male-only, reflecting the PlayStation fan demographics seen in the survey. Their different backgrounds were considered in the selection process to improve the applicability of the data. The group consisted of Andy (age 25), a graphic designer from New York, William (age 29), a chemical engineer from Texas, and Dan (age 35), a financial analyst from Florida. All had been fans of the PlayStation page for at least three months.

#### 8.3.2 Individual Motivation on PlayStation Page

Like the previous groups, the most natural motivation for becoming a fan of PlayStation’s Facebook page was that they were already PlayStation consumers and fans of the brand prior to their Facebook association. To most of the interviewees, the PlayStation brand has been a constant entity for most of their gaming lives. Only Andy was a new PlayStation fan recently converted from Xbox, but nevertheless he was already an avid fan of PlayStation before “Liking” their Facebook page.

**William:** … I have been a fan of PlayStation since I was a kid, so yeah… I simply like it […] PlayStation is something that has always been in my life, so I didn’t have to think much about it when I chose to like it.

**Andy:** … I just wanted to because I like PlayStation, or I did after got it for Christmas […] before that I had always only had an Xbox360, and before that I was mainly a PC gamer, so finally I had my own PS3 and I liked it better than my Xbox, and it had a Blu-ray player, so it was much cooler and I was a big fan all of a sudden. So that made me want to “Like” it on Facebook.

The aspect of a more personal connection to the brand surfaced as another motivation for becoming a fan of the PlayStation community. This was expressed through conversations about PlayStation as a quintessential idea of entertainment, through its association with a video game series, or a memory of their first experience with PlayStation. It is interesting to point out that on some occasions the informants
used the name Sony, the parent company of PlayStation, when referring to the brand. Perhaps this is due to the fact that PlayStation is more often viewed as specifically a gaming console, not a brand, by its fans.

Dan: I think Sony provides more interesting stuff, more interesting content than some of the other game brands like Microsoft or Nintendo. Like news about Uncharted, one of my favorite games of all time.

William: … [PlayStation to me is] recreation, fun, what I do in my spare time. I mean it’s something I always liked as a kid and what I still like now.

The PlayStation brand’s reputation in the gaming industry as a more technologically-advanced platform compared to their competitors was also a reason for this group of passionate gamers who aspire to be tech-savvy to associate themselves with the brand.

Andy: [PlayStation is] … a cooler, more adult way to game, a more complete entertainment system. Pushing the envelope of technology, not just for gaming but in video, audio, anything “entertainment.”

Dan: … I mean the exclusive content they provide is great and more relevant to the games I like […] The actual content they build for the console is more my style than any other gaming brands.

Aligning with the survey data, the main gratification the interviewees obtain from becoming a PlayStation fan was highly information-driven; receiving the latest news or content about the console and the gaming industry or learning about discounts and special promotions were appealing incentives they gained from being active PlayStation fans on Facebook.

Out of all the interview groups, the PlayStation informants appeared to be most protective of their personal information online. They all reported they were more selective and cautious when they choose to become a fan of certain brands on Facebook due to the fact that their friends can track all their actions.

Dan: … [I’m] more discriminating definitely […] Because other people can see what you “Like,” I don’t want to “Like” some weird brands people are going to ask about. PlayStation is not a weird brand. It actually is a great brand. You can tell that they really care about their consumers from their posts and comments […] I remember when PSN was down for a month, […] they gave me bunch of free games and when PS4 came out, they still gave me free experiences. So I felt rewarded.

Andy: … I’m definitely conscious of all my choices on Facebook and thinking about how people are going to get updates about any changes I make whether I’m posting new pictures or changing my profile […] If I feel strongly about something like a brand or book or movie or person, then I’ll “Like” them. So if I’m NOT “Liking” something or someone it’s because I don’t care about it enough.

When they do choose to become a fan of a brand on Facebook, it thus implies each fan’s intentional decision to associate themselves with the brand for what it represents and how it is publicly perceived, which could result in a stronger commitment to the brand as a fan.

8.3.3 Participation & Self-Representation on PlayStation Page

In terms of the level of participation by the PlayStation fans within their Facebook community, the interviewees addressed usage habits that were again consistent with the findings from the previous brands’ interviews. Though these informants read the PlayStation news updates regularly and occasionally “Like” PlayStation content, they did not perceive themselves as active fans.
Andy: I wouldn’t call myself an active fan really. I mainly just check the page like I said less than once a month on average, mainly if something caught my eye in a news feed update about a new game […] I sometimes “Like” things but that’s as active as I get.

William: … I don’t really post or share. I just read what’s on there. Ok, I might “Like” something but is that active? Well, I don’t know, I guess other people can see it. But it’s not too intrusive like other stuff. So I don’t think I am an active fan.

According to the PlayStation informants, in order for someone to be qualified as active there must be frequent actions of engagement as well as numerous recurrent visits to the page.

Dan: I would consider someone who comments and posts things regularly and visits the page all the time as an active fan. I mean “Liking” is so easy that I wouldn’t consider someone who “Likes” things as being active. Someone who’s participating in conversations on the page itself more than just “Liking.”

All informants attributed their minimal interactions within the PlayStation community to simple lack of interest in engaging with others. Andy and William expressed their dislike for some of the other community members’ disruptive behaviors which created a hostile environment for them. Dan on the other hand admitted his extremely private usage habit of Facebook in general, which naturally influenced his community participation patterns. All in all, while the PlayStation community was expected to be the most community-like Facebook brand page due to the legacy of gaming fandom and based on fan conversations mentioned in the field observations, it is surprising that these fans purposely avoided the community aspects of their PlayStation community on Facebook. Furthermore, William’s concern about being used as a marketing tool was a dilemma that had not been brought up by anyone else in the study as most of the others were receptive towards their brands’ use of Facebook as a marketing platform.

William: I don’t really want to engage with other people that I don’t know. I mean some of these gamers can be really stupid, getting really dramatic over stupid little things. So I don’t want to get involved. Also I don’t want to end up being like an advertising tool for PlayStation.

Dan: … I don’t really care. And it’s just the way I use Facebook. I just generally don’t participate, not even in my own friends’ posts or comments.

Other causes for the low level of community participation have already been mentioned in the previous brands’ analyses, namely concerns about privacy and self-representation. Although Dan said he wasn’t worried since he does not display much information about himself on Facebook, both Andy and William discussed their apprehension about Facebook’s vast transparency which threatens their privacy.

William: … I am concerned about what other people can see of me […] Everyone can see it, like your family members, your co-workers. So I do find myself filtering information because I don’t want everyone to know everything about me. So I don’t comment or post things that much anymore nowadays.

Andy: … I am pretty concerned […] I’m more aware or conscious of what I choose to “Like” or say […] Of course I often try to present it in the best way possible, like everyone does I’m sure, like choosing only the best pictures to post, and making sure my status post has no typos and is maybe cleverly written. I mean I’m not more concerned about how I’m presented on Facebook than I would be in person with these same people.

Andy’s response also highlights how the issue of transparency ultimately affects the way he represents himself on Facebook as well as his desire to present the best version of himself.
8.3.4 Fandom & Community on PlayStation Page

The PlayStation fans felt that becoming a fan of a brand on Facebook simply means extending one’s pre-existing fandom online as well as publicly admitting that fandom. In other words, being a fan of a brand offline is a prerequisite to becoming a fan of that brand’s Facebook community.

Dan: … I guess you become a fan on Facebook because you were already a fan to begin with. Definitely, I’m not an active fan on Facebook, but I have been a loyal fan of PlayStation since I was a kid.

On the topic of the traditional concept of “fans” and fan culture, all three interviewees again indicated a clear distinction between their membership in the PlayStation community as Facebook fans and the stereotypical notion of fandom. They felt that aside from being fanatically immersed in their field of interest, these traditional fans’ real offline lives are heavily influenced by their commitment to fandom.

William: Traditional fans are those people who would organize events and really advocate the thing that they are fan of to their friends and talk about it a lot. Be more involved and organize the fan community, make it have a bigger role in their lives, not really like a Facebook fan page
Dan: … [They are] probably very passionate and nerdy, and they really care about the brand and participate in everything put out by the brand. Engaging in conversations and going to events, special conventions and stuff.

Andy shared an interesting view about what being a fan means to him. Similar to the idea of the word “fan” being a broader universal term that was mentioned during the Disney fan interviews, Andy believed that being a fan of something is a part of everyone’s daily life. This challenges the traditional concept of fandom and suggests a more casual fan phenomenon in social media.

Andy: … It’s just part of today’s pop culture, everyone’s a fan of something […] their favorite shows and books and movies and technology brands. I don’t know that there’s a stereotype or anything negative about it. Except for maybe what you’d call a super-geek or something, like Trekkies or Star Wars […] That’s just an extreme form of fandom I guess, but in general being a fan of something is just part of everyday life.

Regarding their own membership in the PlayStation Facebook community, all informants described themselves as passive observers or casual members who participate mostly by observing the community from a distance, consistent with the previous groups. William suggested that this type of member comprises the community’s majority and that he therefore represents the norm.

William: … I’m more of a casual fan. I just simply “Like” the brand I like and get information out of it […] I think I’m probably like the majority of the people. Like thousands and millions of people who add a fan page, but they don’t really interact with it that much. So I’m just one of them, a silent majority. I just watch what other people do I guess, just observe.

The PlayStation informants’ overall passiveness with regards to community interactions undermines the features that qualify the PlayStation Facebook page as a proper community. Some of their doubts about the authenticity of this environment further weaken the idea of the PlayStation fan page as a true online community. Due to the fact that this community is a corporate-run platform and the lack of
anonymity that is enjoyed by more traditional forum-type fan communities, the authenticity of the PlayStation community on Facebook is questioned by its fans.

**William:** … It’s a little bit corporate […] It comes from Sony or whoever it is that owns the company […] So I don’t think the community is authentic because it doesn’t come from the users […] To make it authentic, it has to have people who are real fans running the page, not a corporation.

**Dan:** I don’t think it feels like an actual community because it’s very form-based. Not like the traditional forums, where people can share their unique opinions […] In those traditional forum type of communities you can put your opinions out there and be anonymous. But on Facebook, when you make comments, people can see who you are. So people might be less honest or less expressive, which makes it less authentic.

Andy still felt that this community was authentic enough for him, which again shows that the level of authenticity varies depending on one’s perspective. He was the only one who appears to have a community experience from his membership.

**Andy:** Well, the comments of the people are all authentic. You can usually tell when someone is trying to be a troll or being particularly cynical or whatever, but on the internet, people tend to be pretty honest and authentic with their feelings […] And the posts by the PlayStation account obviously are authentic in that they’re from the brand […] So all in all I’d say it feels like a pretty authentic environment for a brand and its fans.

This suggests that what is considered to be a community differs based on individuals’ expectations and standpoints.

### 8.3.5 Brand & Self-Identification on PlayStation Page

Consistent with the previous interview findings, all informants implied the connection between the brands one favors and the development of an individual’s identity. According to William, it is more of a circular process where one’s identity determines which brands best represent them and the choice of brands they pick can influence the building of one’s identity by exuding certain images that these brands represent.

**Dan:** … I know who I am and I know what brands I like. I would only use PlayStation for my gaming and I would only wear Nikes. I mean I have already been in long-term relationships with brands I like […] I already know sort of what brands are more… me.

**Andy:** I mean people dress a certain way and buy certain products and listen to certain music and go to see certain bands and eat at certain types of restaurants in certain neighborhoods, so as far as brands are involved in all of those things then they affect how I identify myself pretty heavily.

When the link between brands and self-identification is displayed via Facebook, most informants felt this is another way to represent their identity online where others can get an idea of how to perceive them. For some it also meant building an alternate digital identity while they can have other identities in real life. In whichever case, the important role the brands can play in depicting one’s identity is evident.

**Dan:** When I “Like” a brand on Facebook, I really mean it. I don’t just “Like” something to like it. Since I don’t put much information about myself anyway, if I choose a brand, it means it’s important to me or it represents who I am as a person.

**William:** … I mean I am more reserved online. I can have different identities in real life. […] I guess it affects more how other people see me. But regardless, if I do select certain brands to include in my Facebook profile, then it’s
supposed to represent who I am. That’s why they are there, so that people who don’t know me that well can get a better idea of me.

As for brands’ presence in social media as a marketing effort, like the other brands’ fans, the PlayStation interviewees were tolerant and accepting towards this approach.

**Dan:** I think it made me be more biased towards PlayStation a little bit more than before. I already liked PlayStation as a brand anyway, but now I get all these news feeds […] I don’t even look at content from other gaming companies anymore […] I know that this is a marketing thing for the company, but it’s more subtle and maybe it reaches you in a more personal way. And I have no problem with it.

**Andy:** I think it’s much better. I mean it’s hard to think of it as advertising because you chose to “Like” the page and see what the brand has to say. And with people interacting and commenting and debating it’s like the best forum possible for a brand. They are not only able to communicate information to their fans, but they can also host an environment where their fans can share that fandom, so it’s about that and not being sold to.

As shown in these responses, some held a very positive attitude towards PlayStation’s practice as it provided them with exclusive content and a more personal connection to the brand through the fan community atmosphere, which even contributed to increasing brand loyalty.

### 8.4 Interviews Summarization

The analyses of interviews with nine fans of three brand pages provided a clearer understanding of what it means to be a fan of a brand on Facebook to media consumers. The guiding themes (individual motivations, participation & self-representation, fandom & community, and brand & self-identification) helped clarify the actual relationship between the brands and Facebook fans on a more personal level.

Since “[c]ommunication behavior is purposive and motivated” (Rubin 2009:148), investigating individual motivations revealed that the media consumers’ key motivation for becoming a fan of a brand on Facebook is their genuine pre-existing offline affection towards the brand which gets extended to the digital space as a confirmation of their association to the brand. Through this association to the brands, fans were able to gratify their needs for information-gathering as well as identity-building. Some informants expressed more personal and emotional connections to the brands including childhood nostalgia, which worked to fulfill other types of gratifications including a sense of security and constancy, which could be a result of *parasocial interactions* between these fans and the brands on Facebook. By perceiving these brands as “friends” or entities with which one can have interpersonal relationships, brand fans are engaging in parasocial interactions with these brands, linking personal and mediated communication as “an important affective and emotional involvement construct” (Rubin 2009:152).

The interviews also shed light on the levels of participation in relation to the self-representation process within the brands’ Facebook communities. None of the informants viewed themselves as active fans despite their actions and engagement within their communities. This revealed an interesting discrepancy considering the fact that they were selected based on their different levels of engagements on
the various brand pages. They considered certain activities to be more passive while others were more “aggressive;” the interviewee consensus was that more frequent aggressive actions needed to be taken in order to qualify as a true active fan. The prevailing explanation for the low level of participation involved the issues of transparency and self-representation. Due to the visibility of personal information on Facebook, “the information that is directly created or posted by a Facebook user (e.g., brands “liked” by the user) can also be used to mold others’ impressions of him or herself … allow[ing] for a transcendence of physical and material constraints, thus facilitating consumers’ extensions of self” (Hollenbeck & Kaikati 2012:403). Most of the interviewed fans showed a great concern for how they were being represented and perceived based on the information they display on Facebook. Since people in general behave in “ways that maintain and enhance their sense of self” according to self-concept theory (Hollenbeck & Kaikati 2012:396), the majority of the informants expressed their hesitance and caution in deciding what information they share with the public, including different acts of community participation.

Discussions about whether or not the traditional concept of fandom can be translated into these branded communities on Facebook highlighted the distinction between stereotypical fans and casual everyday fans as well as different perspectives on what is considered an authentic digital community. As fans no longer signify a niche fanatic group after the technological evolution of the media landscape, fandom has become an “elastic category” that questions “who isn’t a fan? What doesn’t constitute fan culture?” (Jenkins 2007:364). Per the informants’ responses, the term “fan” now encompasses a broader sense of devotion including passive fans of brands on Facebook. In addition, the communities made for this type of fan trend can involve both “strong” and “weak” requirements (Parks 2011:107) depending on different perspectives. In general, the interview participants displayed mixed feelings about the actual community aspects of the brand pages. Some felt that these brands’ Facebook communities offered them authentic community experiences while others expressed their complete detachment from the community as a passive member. Since the notion of authenticity in itself is a socially-constructed and inconsistent concept (Vannini & Williams 2009:3), what qualifies as an “authentic” community experience is still unclear. On a similar note, with so many expectations of digital communities, whether the actual interactions that cover functions of “sociability, meaningful connection to others, conviviality, perhaps even empathy and support” on social media platforms such as Facebook reach “the level of a ‘virtual community’ depends on one’s perspective and definition” (Parks 2011:106).

Some findings from the interviews exhibited a strong link between the brands one likes and how one identifies or represents oneself. Many informants admitted that brands they like do influence their identity-building process online since “[c]onsumers self-present daily as they select clothes, hairstyles, automobiles, logos, and so forth, to impress others in any given context (a shopping mall, an opera)”
By associating themselves with material objects or brands, informants were able to make their identities “tangible, or self-present” (Schau & Gilly 2003:385). The flexible nature of the social media space allows its users to express “an online persona” through various forms of personal information they choose to share from photos to data fields (Tufekci 2008:546). Social media environments like Facebook enable “individuals to engage in a controlled setting where an ideal identity can be conveyed” (Mehdizadeh 2010:358). Since it is possible to create an optimal identity for oneself or to conceal information depending on how one wishes to present oneself in public, per the notion of identity as a performance (Goffman 1959), one’s association with brands can construct a desired identity based on what these brands represent socially. Most interviewees’ responses showed some signs of using brands “to express both the actual and ideal selves” (Hollenbeck & Kaikati 2012:403). Since Facebook users can express their identities through “brand linkages depending on the nature of the congruity (or lack thereof)” (Hollenbeck & Kaikati 2012:404), all informants made a conscious decision to “Like” the chosen brand to represent themselves. Some also confessed “their avoidance of some brands and the embrace of others” in relation to the self-concepts they want to identify with (Hollenbeck & Kaikati 2012:404). Since digital association in itself cannot offer any tangible value that fans can showcase as part of their real-life identity, “the brands’ symbolic values are explicitly and consciously considered before consumers communicate with the online world” (Schau & Gilly 2003:399).

Although all fans were aware that their brands’ presence on Facebook was part of a marketing strategy, they still voluntarily became fans. They also generally showed a tolerance and receptiveness to this type of marketing approach. Examining the relationships the Facebook fans have with their brands provided a better understanding of what it means to the fans themselves to be a brand’s fan on Facebook. Ultimately, the findings from these interviews came to one conclusion. While the uses and gratifications of a Facebook brand page and the significance of becoming a fan of a brand vary depending on the user, one common motivation and clear function of brand community membership on Facebook is the construction of one’s digital identity in association with the brands of one’s choosing.

9. DISCUSSION

Throughout this study, fans of Starbucks, Disney, and PlayStation exhibited signs of different uses and gratifications that these brands’ Facebook communities provide for them. As new media like social networking sites “enhanced people’s choices and selectivity of channels and content when they seek to gratify needs and desires,” a special emphasis on studying the role of individual users’ initiative, motivation, and involvement is crucial to understanding the true impact of media (Rubin 2009:148).
To address the research questions, field observations provided an overview of the general conversation topics and activities that are performed within these brands’ communities. Surveys helped reveal patterns of motivations behind becoming a fan of these brands and what was ultimately gained from membership, while the individual interviews were designed to uncover the fans’ awareness and sense of their own identity in relation to these brands. Although each method had its own specific purpose, they were not restricted to respond only to those goals, and in fact much overlapping and supporting data was found across all methods. The findings and insights were used to answer the main research question – *what does being a fan of a brand page on Facebook mean to Facebook users?*

Through field observations, various uses and gratification aspects were identified in three categories: self-expression, community-building, and authenticity. As a form of self-expression, brand affirmations revealed fans’ trust and confidence in the brands’ Facebook community. They were generally regarded as safe platforms to share their thoughts and opinions, including personal information such as photos of their children in some cases. Observations of user interactions showcased varying levels of community-building engagement which suggests that individual differences “play an important role in media uses and effects because lifestyle and life position, including social and psychological dispositions, affect communication alternatives, and media reliance or dependency” (Rubin 2009:153). The question of authenticity remained unresolved mainly due to the term’s ambiguous nature. However, aside from concerns regarding potential “fake fans” and strict monitoring and control over certain brand environments, the actual communications displayed in public between fans appeared authentic.

In the survey data, respondents highlighted different motivations and gratifications of being fans of these brands on Facebook. Though all three brands catered to different audiences and featured diverse content, the survey results showed clear key patterns of usage and motivations of becoming a fan of these brand pages, which can also be applied to more general active brand fans on Facebook. Voluntary search was shown to be one of the most popular initial drivers for becoming a fan of brand pages for all three brands which helps explain these fans’ enduring awareness of their membership in these communities. Brands’ updates in the news feeds and voluntary visits were among the most common motivations for revisiting the communities, implying that obtaining new information and fulfilling personal interests are the main gratifications sought by the active fans. Receiving special promotions/deals/discounts and giving general feedback to the brands were the main motivations for engaging in the communities, which fulfills the fans’ need for acquiring tangible rewards and expressing their opinions. These uses and gratifications examples drawn from the surveys suggest the importance of understanding the needs that active brand page fans have through their various motivations for being a fan, since exploring basic constructs of the perspective, “especially motivation; audience initiative and involvement; and functional alternatives to the
media, including links to interpersonal communication” (Rubin 2009:148) are crucial to studying the significance of an individual’s media use.

The analysis of the interviews was guided by four different themes (individual motivations, participation & self-representation, fandom & community, and brand & self-identification) which helped clarify the actual relationship between these brands and the Facebook fans on a more personal level. It was revealed that the key motivation for becoming a fan of these brands on Facebook is their genuine pre-existing offline affection towards the brands. By becoming an online fan of a brand they already like, they were able to extend their relationship with the brand into the digital space as well as confirm their brand loyalty. None of the interviewees viewed themselves as active fans and reported to only engage within the community at a nominal level. The most common reasons given for this were issues regarding transparency and self-representation. Due to the high visibility of personal information on Facebook and the fans’ individual desire to present the best possible versions of themselves, many informants expressed hesitation and wariness in deciding what kind of information they shared in public, including the various actions that comprise community participation like commenting on or sharing a post.

The notion of fandom in relation to these brands’ fan communities was redefined as the term “fan” has evolved to encompass a broader range of people now including passive supporters of brands on Facebook. And the community aspect of these Facebook brand pages was constantly challenged due to the fans’ low levels of participation and inconclusive perceptions of authenticity which is a mutable concept of its own. Still, this study did reveal some qualities of a gift economy which drive community-building (Pearson 2010:87) on these Facebook pages. With the advent of the internet, the free exchange of gifts “builds a closed social network” which greatly facilitates “both the production of gifts and the exchange mechanisms among fan communities” (Pearson 2010:87). Answering questions for fellow community members demonstrated altruistic information sharing and attempts to communicate directly by exchanging comments on the brand page as well as the abundant trading of “Likes” of each other’s content shown in some interviews as well as the field observations suggest that elements of a gift economy do exist. Most importantly, the interviews presented a strong connection between brands and one’s self-identification process. One can choose to represent “both the actual and ideal selves” by using a mix of brands (Hollenbeck & Kaikati 2012:404). Informants admitted that the brands they like do influence their identity-building process especially online since there one can create the best possible identity and even withhold or change certain information depending on how one wishes to present themselves; one’s association to certain brands can construct a desired identity based on what these brands represent socially. Since brands are part of “the popular imagination and the reality of people’s lives” they also convey meaning since fans associate themselves with these brands online, which links
“the symbolic meanings and the public interpretations derived from these symbols” (Schau & Gilly 2003:400). Possibly due to this, most fans of the three brands held a positive attitude and a degree of acceptance towards the brands’ social media presence as a marketing tactic.

Before concluding, it is important to address the difference between how these fans perceive themselves and how they are defined in this study. Although fans did not perceive themselves as *active* fans, they were found for this research precisely because their activities made them visible. This discrepancy may partially be explained by their stricter perceptions of what it means to be an active fan, yet perhaps it is due to an aversion to the stereotypical “fan,” or subconscious embarrassment. While the study suggests that fandom has indeed become more loosely-defined and mainstream, there may still exist a stigma that fans wants to separate themselves from, as if the real “active” fans with higher levels of community participation are still “Othered by mainstream society” after all (Gray et al. 2007:2-4).

Studying the relationships the Facebook fans have with these three brands provided a clearer understanding of what it means to be a fan of a brand on Facebook in the mind of the user. It can be concluded that while the uses and gratifications of a Facebook brand page and what becoming a fan of a brand on Facebook means to the social media user vary depending on the person, the most common motivation and function of membership in a brand community is the construction of one’s digital identity through the association with the brands of one’s choice. As these technologies are “continually altering how people, organizations, and societies function, individually and collectively” (Rubin 2009:155), the ways that people can represent themselves have multiplied especially in the digital space and within social media, allowing for the co-existence of multiple identities for a person. Based on my findings, the significance of becoming a fan of a brand is most heavily related to the conscious process of developing the user’s online persona more than anything else. And despite fans’ cognizance of Facebook brand communities as being marketing platforms, they were generally receptive to and held positive attitudes towards the brands, which marks a changed perspective from the anti-advertising/marketing attitude found in previous research (Shavitt et al. 1998; Wang et al. 2002). This critical analysis of brand fans on Facebook presents the importance of studying social media’s different uses and implications in order to better understand new audience cultures within the interactive world of new media. Further research could investigate whether a similar fan phenomenon also exists for marketers on the various other social media platforms that make up the ever-changing and expanding media landscape.
10. SOURCES AND LITERATURE


Field Observations

Starbucks Field Observation Notes

23 November, 2013

First Impression:

- Standardized Facebook layout format with light blue background and darker blue bar on top with the Facebook logo (left), search bar (middle), and buttons to the personal account (right). The right side has a vertical timeline which lets users to click on each year to see contents from that specific year.
- The profile picture is the iconic Starbucks green mermaid logo
- The cover picture is of the recently updated Starbucks holiday red paper cup
- Underneath the profile picture is a small rectangular blue box which gives a brief description of the company: Starbucks is under “Food/Beverages” category and says “We are the world's premier roaster and retailer of specialty coffee.”
- Feeling of familiarity and approachability
- Most of the permanent posts on the main wall section are by Starbucks itself
- On the right side, a small rectangular section labeled as “Recent Posts by Others on Starbucks,” aggregating real time feed of new posts by Starbucks fans
- New posts appearing on average every 3-5 minutes
General Information: (23 November – 30 November, 2013)

23 Nov

![Facebook Insights screenshot for November 23, 2013]

- Likes and People Talking About This:
  - Likes: 458,877
  - Total Likes: 35,501,694

25 Nov

![Facebook Insights screenshot for November 25, 2013]

- Likes and People Talking About This:
  - Likes: 377,127
  - Total Likes: 35,519,914

28 Nov

![Facebook Insights screenshot for November 28, 2013]

- Likes and People Talking About This:
  - Likes: 350,915
  - Total Likes: 35,545,995

30 Nov

![Facebook Insights screenshot for November 30, 2013]

- Likes and People Talking About This:
  - Likes: 347,778
  - Total Likes: 35,552,131

0.14% increase in number of “Likes” in 7 days

Main Wall Posts:

- Mostly posts by Starbucks and Starbucks-approved posts
- No direct fan posts
Self-Expressions

**Brand Affirmations:** Baby pictures, dog pictures, self pictures w/ Starbucks, random Starbucks product pictures, positive comments about Starbucks (49% overall, 19% kids, 25% location updates/positive comments, 5% pets)
Hello @Starbucks! I needed to tell you a funny story:

I'm a mom of two and we're all fans of yours in our house. Part of our weekend is definitely family runs to Starbucks and "treats" for the kids via your Strawberries and Cream...AKA "Strawberry Clouds" in our house. I have a 4-year-old son, Baden, and a 3-year-old daughter. Her name is Holland and she is obviously at the age where she is figuring out "ownership". She loves her Strawberry Clouds and is very possessive of them. I gave you the background to what happened at 3:30 am in our house last night...I didn't hear Holland but my husband, Chris, sure did. She was really sending screams from her bedroom. Chris thought something was wrong so he went into her room to find her sleeping soundly but screaming. He tapped her and told her everything was fine and she mumbled..."No it's not Daddy...Baden is stealing my Strawberry Clouds!" He was able to calm her down and tell her it was just a little "nightmare". So funny! Such an age-appropriate nightmare but I know I wouldn't want anyone stealing my PSL!

Happy Thanksgiving to all of you! Katie
Brand Dissatisfaction: Complaints/ negative posts about Starbucks products, customer service, individual Starbucks chain, Starbucks brand as a whole, Starbucks’ corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts – Philippines (35% overall, 5% against CSR)
Customary Requests: Neutral posts about wishes and questions (16% overall)
Community Building

- ~ 3-5 “Likes” average on regular posts
- ~ 3 comments average on regular posts
- ~5-7 comments average for controversial (political/religious) posts

Authenticity

- 7 reoccurring “fans” defending Starbucks brand against complaints and negative posts/comments
- 7 seemingly fake profiles – cartoon/TV show character names and profile photos, no information other than Starbucks page “Like”
- 7 “fake fans” bulling normal fans – sarcastic, mocking tones, rude attitudes
- Possibly work for Starbucks and not genuine fans
- Normal fans are totally unaware of them potentially being hired by Starbucks
- Complaints about my “STUPID SPAMS” (aka. my survey-requesting comments)
- Affecting authenticity of Starbucks Facebook community interactions…
“Fake” Profile Examples: Names look made-up, No real profile pictures, Job info looks fake, only info is association with Starbucks...

“Bullying” Regular Fans Examples:
First Impression:

- Standardized Facebook layout format with light blue background and darker blue bar on top with the Facebook logo (left), search bar (middle), and buttons to the personal account (right). The right side has a vertical timeline which lets users to click on each year to see contents from that specific year.
- The profile picture is the iconic Mickey Mouse face
- The cover picture regularly changed with quintessential Disney related illustrations, starting from the picture of Frozen, the movie
- Underneath the profile picture is a small rectangular blue box which gives a brief description of the company: “It’s kind of fun to do the impossible” – Walt Disney
- Feeling of familiarity, approachability, nostalgia
- All permanent posts on the main wall section are by Disney
- Highly controlled environment – fans cannot post their own contents unlike Starbucks, only can comment/like/share Disney content on the main wall
- About tab – “This Page is a place for our Fans. However, we do need to have certain rules. Please be aware that we do not accept or consider unsolicited idea submissions and, also, we must reserve the right to remove any posting or other material that we find off-topic, inappropriate or objectionable”
- Still very active, new comments or “Likes” appearing on average every 5-7 minutes (an estimated average of 35,000 “Likes” and 600 shares per post)

General Information: (3 March – 9 March, 2014)
0.06% increase in number of “Likes” in 7 days

Main Wall Posts:
- All official posts by Disney
- No direct fan posts
Self-Expressions

**Brand Affirmations:** Comments displaying nostalgia, friend association, love for specific characters, Disney knowledge (95% overall, 57% nostalgia, 20% tagging friends, 11% characters, 7% knowledge)
Brand Dissatisfaction: Rare or very subtle, complaint about character designs or expensive theme park fee (Only 5 % if any)
**Customary Requests:** None

**Community Building**
- Too controlled by Disney for real fan interactions
- Still generally positive and like-minded community
- Conversational tone of commenting
- Kermit the Frog “conversation” attempt example

**Authenticity**
- Overall, genuine topics and authentic tone show, more personal stories
• No signs of “fake” fans
PlayStation Field Observation Notes

3 March, 2014

First Impression:

- Standardized Facebook layout format with light blue background and darker blue bar on top with the Facebook logo (left), search bar (middle), and buttons to the personal account (right). The right side has a vertical timeline which lets users to click on each year to see contents from that specific year.
- The profile picture is the neutral PlayStation logo
- The cover picture is a scene from one of the PS4-exclusive games, promoting #PS4 share of PS4
- Underneath the profile picture is a small rectangular blue box which gives a brief description of the company: “This is the Official PlayStation Fan Page. Please click About for fan comment policy. More info: https://us.playstation.com/” – promoting their official site as well
- Very masculine gaming atmosphere
- All permanent posts on the main wall section are by PlayStation
- Semi-controlled environment – fans cannot post their own contents unlike Starbucks, but they can reply to each other’s comments on the wall unlike Disney
- About tab – “We want to hear from you and encourage comments, critiques, questions, and suggestions. We ask that you simply stay on topic, respect other people’s opinions, avoid profanity, offensive statements, illegal content, and anything else that might otherwise violate our standard terms and conditions. Be aware that anything sent in, posted, or in any way disclosed to SCEA can be reproduced, disclosed, transmitted, published, broadcast and/or posted somewhere else … And more”
- Still fairly active, new comments/replies appearing on average every 10-15 minutes

General Information: (3 March – 9 March, 2014)

3 Mar

5 Mar

7 Mar
0.05% increase in number of “Likes” in 7 days

**Main Wall Posts:**
- All official posts by PlayStation
- No direct fan posts
**Brand Affirmations:** Comments or replies to other fans’ comments showing excitement/positive attitude about brand/product, loyalty, PlayStation game knowledge (37% overall, 15% excitement/positive attitude, 12% defending PlayStation, 10% knowledge)
Brand Dissatisfaction: Outspoken and straightforward communication style displaying general frustration/negative attitude or debates and confrontations with other fans (34% overall, 22% frustration/negative attitude, 12% debates/confrontations)
**Customary Requests:** 29% neutral comments about concerns or questions, seeking specific PlayStation information

Community Building

- Semi-controlled environment, yet still very interactive fan-to-fan engagements
- More interactions shown than Disney’s page
- ~5-7 comments average on other user comments
- Community revolves around entertainment content - More likely to engage with posts about relevant updates or content in the gaming industry rather than other socio-political controversial issues shown in Starbucks’
- ~8-10 comments average for informational (upcoming PlayStation games or PS4 updates) posts – more fan-to-fan information seeking
Authenticity

- Overall, liberal and organic flows of information sharing and engagements
- Some very strong-minded opinions – adds to the level of authenticity
- No signs of “fake” fans
APPENDIX 2

Survey Questions

1. How frequently do you use Facebook? (Please check one of the options below)
   - Daily
   - A few times a week (3-5 times/week)
   - Once a week
   - A few times a month (2-3 times/month)
   - Once a month
   - Less frequently than once a month
   - Never

2. In a typical day, about how much time do you spend using Facebook? (Please fill in the blanks)
   _____ Hours_____ Minutes

3. What do you mainly use Facebook for? (Please check all that apply)
   - To post status updates (text, picture, video, and other posts)
   - To share content with friends
   - To chat with/message friends
   - To comment on posts
   - To “Like” other’s posts/content
   - To read news
   - To check up on friends’ updates
   - To make new friends
   - To find deals and discounts
   - Other (please specify) __________________________

4. Are you a fan of (have “Like”d) any brand profile pages? (Please check one of the options below)
   - Yes (please specify how many) _____
   - No
   - I don’t know

5. Before being approached for this survey, were you aware that you were a fan of (have “Like”d) the Brand X’s Facebook brand page? (Please check one of the options below)
   - Yes
   - No
   - I don’t know

6. If yes, what made you “Like” Brand X’s Facebook brand page? (Please check one of the options below)
   - Special promotions/Deals/Discounts
   - Friend’s news feed/comments
   - Saw a “Suggested Post” ad (appears in your news feed)
   - Saw a “Sponsored” ad (under the “Sponsored” section, to the right of your news feed)
Saw it on other social media sites (e.g. Twitter, Pinterest, etc.)
Voluntary search
Other (please specify) __________________________

7. How often do you visit Brand X’s Facebook brand page? (Please check one of the options below)

□ Daily
□ A few times a week (3-5 times/week)
□ Once a week
□ A few times a month (2-3 times/month)
□ Once a month
□ Less frequently than once a month
□ Only once when I first became a fan (“Like”d the page)
□ Never

8. If you revisit Brand X’s Facebook brand page, what makes you do it? (Please check all that apply)

□ Brand X’s updates in my news feed
□ Special promotions/Deals/Discounts
□ Friend’s news feed/comments
□ “Sponsored” ad (under the “Sponsored” section, to the right of your news feed)
□ Mentions on other social media sites (e.g. Twitter, Pinterest, etc.)
□ Voluntary visit
□ Other (please specify) __________________________

9. When you visit Brand X’s Facebook brand page, about how much time do you typically spend there? (Please fill in the blanks)

____ Hours _____ Minutes

10. How do you engage on Brand X’s Facebook brand page? (Please check all that apply)

□ Post (text, picture, video, and others)
□ Share branded content with friends
□ Chat with/message other fans/community members
□ Chat with/message Brand X
□ “Like” Brand X’s branded content
□ “Like” other fans/community members content
□ I do not participate
□ Other (please specify) __________________________

11. If you DO engage on Brand X’s Facebook brand page, why do you do it? (Please check all that apply)

□ To get Special promotions/Deals/Discounts
□ To give general feedback to Brand X
□ To file complaints to Brand X
□ To connect with other fans
□ To connect with friends who are also fans
□ To recommend to friends
□ For job opportunities
□ I genuinely “Like” or “Dislike” content
12. Do you feel more personally connected to the Brand X’s brand on their Facebook brand page? (Please check one of the options below)

- Yes
- No
- No difference
- I don’t know

13. Has the Brand X’s brand page on Facebook helped instill a more positive image of Brand X’s for you? (Please check one of the options below)

- Yes
- No
- No difference
- I don’t know

14. Do you think Brand X’s Facebook brand page is an example of successful brand presence on Facebook? (Please check one of the options below)

- Yes
- No
- I don’t know

15. What is your age? (Please check one of the options below)

- 18 – 24
- 25 – 34
- 35 – 44
- 45 – 54
- 55 – 64
- 65 – 74
- 75 or older
- Other (Please specify)

16. What is your gender? (Please check one of the options below)

- Female
- Male
- Other

17. Do you have a Skype account?

- Yes
- No
18. Would you be willing to participate in a 30-minute follow-up Skype interview? (Your responses in the interview will also remain anonymous).

If yes, please leave your name and email address, and I will get in touch with you with additional details.

**Survey Results**

**Starbucks**
Q17 What is your age?

Answer Choices | Responses
---|---
18 to 24 | 11.60%
25 to 34 | 37.88%
35 to 44 | 22.96%
45 to 54 | 11.96%
55 to 64 | 5.00%
65 to 74 | 2.56%
75 or older | 0.00%

Q18 What is your gender?

Answer Choices | Responses
---|---
Female | 62.50%
Male | 37.50%
Other | 0.00%

Q1 How frequently do you use Facebook?
(Please check one of the options below)

Answer Choices | Responses
---|---
Daily | 83.87%
A few times a week (1-5 times/week) | 12.90%
Once a week | 0%
A few times a month (2-3 times/month) | 0%
Once a month | 0%
Less frequently than once a month | 3.23%
Never | 0%
Q14 Do you think Disney's Facebook brand page is an example of successful brand presence on Facebook? (Please check one of the options below)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>18.99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>6.45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don't know</td>
<td>19.48%</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Q15 What is your age?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18 to 24</td>
<td>12.95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 to 34</td>
<td>54.64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 to 44</td>
<td>20.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45 to 54</td>
<td>3.12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 to 64</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 to 74</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75 or older</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q16 What is your gender?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>79.37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>20.63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Q13 Has the PlayStation brand page on Facebook helped instill a more positive image of PlayStation for you? (Please check one of the options below)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>31.52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>15.79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No difference</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don't know</td>
<td>2.63%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q14 Do you think PlayStation's Facebook brand page is an example of successful brand presence on Facebook? (Please check one of the options below)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>66.63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>10.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don't know</td>
<td>28.85%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q15 What is your age?

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18 to 24</td>
<td>2.63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 to 34</td>
<td>65.79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 to 44</td>
<td>31.58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45 to 54</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 to 64</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 to 74</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75 or older</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q16 What is your gender?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>94.74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
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</table>
APPENDIX 3

Interview Guideline - Questions

Individual Motivation

- Why did you become a fan of this brand? What prompted you to become a fan?
  - What did you gain from the act of becoming a fan of this brand?

- Why did you choose to become a fan of this brand over other brands?

- What does this brand represent to you in general?
  - How do you identify with this brand in particular?
  - What does this brand represent to you personally?

- How does the fact that your Facebook friends can see when you become a fan of a brand affect your decision to become a fan of certain brands?
  - (Do you ever choose not to be a fan of certain brands because you are aware that your friends on Facebook will see it? Alternatively, do you ever choose to be a fan of certain brand because you want your friends on Facebook to see it? Why or why not?)

Participation & Representation

- Approximately how often do you visit the brand page? Why?

- How active of a fan are you?
  - What does being an active fan mean to you?
  - What kind of benefits do you get out of being an active fan?

- How do you engage (e.g. post, comment, like, etc.) on the brand page/community?
  - If/when you do engage, how do you present yourself to the members of this community?
    - Do you present yourself this way on purpose?
    - What do you think the other community members actually think of you when you engage?

- How concerned are you about the way you are being represented on Facebook in general?
  - How does this affect the information you present about yourself? (Do you purposely filter information about yourself? Why or why not?)

Fandom & Community

- In general, what does becoming/being a fan of a brand’s page on Facebook mean to you?
  - How do you differentiate between becoming a fan and being a fan on Facebook?

- What comes to mind when you think of the traditional “fan” stereotype? (e.g. fans of certain books, TV shows, movies, or other brands)
  - What kind of fan do you consider yourself when you become a fan of a brand on Facebook?

- How do you think you fit in this community on Facebook?
How would you describe this Facebook brand community? What qualities does it have or lack?
  ○ What would you say about the authenticity of the environment of this Facebook community?

How does your membership in this brand’s Facebook community influence other aspects of your life? Please explain.

Brand & Self-Identification

How do the brands you like (in your life in general) affect how you identify yourself?

How do the brands you “Like” on Facebook affect how you identify yourself?

After becoming a fan of a brand on Facebook, how does this affect your personal connection to the brand or how you identify with the brand?

How do you feel that brands’ presence on Facebook compares to more traditional types of advertising/marketing?

How do the brand representatives who are speaking for/as the brand on the Facebook page present themselves?
  ○ How do you view them? (Do you think of them as marketers/corporate representatives or as peers, community members, moderators, etc.?)
  ○ Who do you feel you are mostly interacting with on the brand page?

Conclusion

What additional thoughts or opinions can you share about being a fan of or Liking brand pages in general?

What else would you like to share about this brand or its presence on Facebook?

Would you be willing to be contacted if I have any final follow-up questions?

Interview Transcript Excerpts (Full transcript available upon request)

Starbucks Informant: Jane 46 years old (Insurance Broker)

Interviewer: Why did you become a fan of Starbucks on Facebook? What sort of prompted you to become a fan in the first place?

Jane: Um, because I’m a big fan of Starbucks. I have to have my Starbucks every day. So it was just natural to become a fan of their Facebook page as well.

Interviewer: What did you gain from the act of becoming a fan of Starbucks?

Jane: Um… Usually regular updates and news about Starbucks. Occasionally, discounts or coupons. And also more information from other fans as well. Also a certain sense of belonging?

Interviewer: Why did you choose to become a fan of Starbucks over other brands?
Jane: Because I love Starbucks and I wanted to support them. I think Starbucks is a great brand. But when I first became a fan, they were doing something like sending your friends a Starbucks card on their birthdays on Facebook. So I saw that first and I thought it was a nice idea, so I joined the page after I sent that gift card thing to my friend.

Interviewer: What does the Starbucks brand represent to you in general? How do you identify with this brand in particular?

Jane: It represents the start of my day. I go to Starbucks every morning on my way to work. I have to have their coffee and scone to be awake. Also home away from home... It’s a place where I feel comfortable and relaxed. I remember my first trip abroad, I felt so overwhelmed and nervous with these unfamiliar places. I didn’t know where to eat. And then I saw Starbucks logo from far away. I got so excited. I walked in there confidently and I felt safe at home.

Disney Informant: Samantha 24 years old (Grad Student)

Interviewer: After becoming a fan of Disney on Facebook, how does this affect your personal connection to the brand or how you identify with the brand?

Samantha: Um... Before I would only look at Disney as my childhood, but now, I can see their updates and their latest news. So I feel more closer to the brand I guess.

Interviewer: How do you feel that brands’ presence on Facebook compares to more traditional types of advertising or marketing?

Samantha: I think it’s more important for the companies to be on Facebook than TV or magazine. I mean they can reach more people every day. Like, people check their Facebook every day. I mean I know that Disney is on Facebook to market themselves, but I have no problem with it. I think it’s smart of them and I like it better since I feel like I get more useful things out of it than from a TV ad for example.

Interviewer: How do the brand representatives who are speaking for/as the brand on the Facebook page present themselves? How do you view them, for example, marketers, corporate representatives, peers, or anything else?

Samantha: To be honest... I view them as a community member. I never really thought of them as a corporate representative until this interview. [Laughs] So I guess they are doing a great job. I mean it’s the environment too that makes them appear as your peers I think.

Interviewer: Who do you feel you are mostly interacting with on the brand page or your personal newsfeed?

Samantha: I feel like I’m interacting with other community members. I mean when I liked Disney page on Facebook, I knew what I was getting into. I mean they are there to advertise. But I never felt like I was reading posts from Disney, the company. I always felt like they were community members like me.

PlayStation Informant: William 29 years old (Chemical Engineer)

Interview: Approximately how often do you visit the brand page?

William: Once a month.

Interview: And what makes you visit the page once a month?

William: To see what stuff’s on there. To check what new things are coming out, like what new games or updates on the console, stuff like that
Interviewer: How active of a fan are you?

William: Uh... I don't really post or share. I just read what's on there. Ok, I might “Like” something but is that active? Well, I don't know, I guess other people can see it. But it's not too intrusive like other stuff. So I don't think I am an active fan.

Interviewer: Then how do you feel about those active fans who do engage in these other types of activities on Facebook brand pages?

William: Well, I think they can look more knowledgeable to their friends. Like, I have a friend who is more active, like he posts and shares stuff. So it seems like he is more in the loop and up-to-date when new things come out, like he’s... cooler, or he thinks he’s cooler cuz he has that kind of stuff on his wall.

Interviewer: How does your membership in this brand’s Facebook community influence other aspects of your life?

William: It doesn’t really influence my life. I mean I might buy a new game after reading about it from the page. But that's about it. Nothing more.