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Superfandom and Its Contents

Is the experience of superfandom a positive life-altering event?
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Review of Superfandom: How Our Obsessions are Changing What We Buy and Who We Are. By Zoe Fraade-Blanar and Aaron M. Glazer. W.W. Norton & Company. 318 pp. $27.95

Each time Justin Bieber launches a new CD, his fans organize a “buyout.” They march through Kmart and Best Buys in an attempt to propel the album to the top of the charts. Since few of the teens own CD players, the CDs are often collected and donated to charity at the end of the shopping spree.

Rituals and customs like these, Zoe Fraade-Blanar and Aaron Glazer suggest, bind fans closer to the object of their adulation and to one another. Fueled, of course, by social media, the modern explosion of fandom can do wonders for the “brand.”

Source: pixabay.com
In *Superfandom*, Fraade-Blanar and Glazer, the co-founders of the crowdsourced toy company Squishable, remind us that although fandom has always been part of human cultural activity, until recently the phenomenon has been a one-way activity, stimulating consumption but not participation. In the digital age, they claim, the relationship between brands and the people who love them have become more complex.

The authors distinguish consumers (who give their money to a brand) from fans (who give their energy and time to it, him, her, or them). Armed with this rather vague definition, they do not acknowledge, let alone examine, the differences between, say, a 72 year old “fan” of Warren Buffett, who attends the annual Berkshire Hathaway shareholders’ meeting; a forty-something Brit who devoured every James Bond novel in the 1950s; and a 13 year old foot-soldier in Bieber’s Army.

Most important, Fraade-Blanar and Glazer seek to replace negative stereotypes of fans with a view that, it seems to me, is equally simplistic. Even if its origin is contrived, they write, fandom “is deeply personal and authentic,” providing opportunities for people to express themselves. Fan objects “fill a deep-seated need,” that might be “a new philosophy or perspective.” Fandom “leads to higher levels of social and personal self-esteem and well-being, and higher levels of positive emotion”; fans are less likely to feel alienated, angry, lonely, depressed, or fatigued. Fan subcultures provide “a fast way to quickly build trust, gain acceptance, pass on important information, and learn new skills in a safe environment.” Fandom “is an important part of identity building.” And “for a lot of people, finding their fandom is a life altering event. It helped them find themselves and feel like a better person.”

There is no doubt that fandom has had a positive impact on some individuals. That said, the authors cite very few empirical studies that support their sweeping generalizations. And they ignore – or shrug off – the downside of fandom. They mention in passing, for example, that fans “blur the line between real and not real,” don’t get hung up “on a product’s more potentially troubling attributes,” and tend to develop “para-social” (i.e. one way) relationships with the celebrities they idolize, only to assert that “right now the self-deception serves a happy purpose.” They maintain that infighting in fan groups is “one of the healthiest possible situations,” an indication that “people care enough about the community that they’re willing to fight for it.” They do not address the tendency of fans to spend much too much time on and/or obsess about trivial matters. They exaggerate the influence of fans on brands and minimize the degree to which brands manipulate fans.

To be sure, every one of us is a fan. We buy Chicago Cubs memorabilia, at exorbitant prices, on eBay. We never miss the Star Trek Lives convention. We are active in the Harry Potter Alliance. We travel the world to watch Lady Gaga live and in person.

Less clear – and Fraade-Blanar and Glazer aren’t much help – is what might qualify us as superfans. Or what the implications, short and long term, of superfandom are. The authors do make a compelling case, however, that the phenomenon, an aspect of a human desire to connect, is growing. And that we should try harder to understand it, in all of its dimensions.