

# The kids are alright? Generational distinction vs. 'we-sense' in an ageing music fandom

**Fathallah, J. M.**

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## **The Kids are Alright? Generational Distinction vs ‘We-sense’ in an Ageing Music Fandom.**

With the maturation of fan studies as a field, longitudinal approaches to fandom across time have been gaining more attention. Both the ageing of participants within fandoms and the ageing of fandoms as collectives have been topics for study, as evidenced by the recent edited volume on the subject, *Fandom: The Next Generation* (Kies and Connor 2022). Popular music fandoms are particularly relevant for such studies, due to the strong connections between music and memory than often endure over years (Istvandy 2019; 2022). This article investigates the negotiation of subcultural capital in one ageing music fandom, grounded in enduring and long-term experience of older participants, as it is held in tension with the construction of a cross-generational ‘we-sense’ (Peterson 2018) which includes younger and less experienced participants. The accumulation of subcultural capital is also influenced and compromised by broader social age norms, regarding the appropriateness of fandom at different life stages. The fan forum under study is the subreddit r/falloutboy, which was selected as a stable archive dating back over a decade; as well as the applicability of a band fandom that has enjoyed varying degrees of popularity of over twenty years.

First, I will recap some of the scholarship on long term and enduring fandom, particularly as it pertains to music, subcultures, and the concept of generations. Then, I will outline the data collection method and present the findings, which were thematically coded. I discuss what this reveals about an enduring fandom which on one hand remains invested in a sense of distinction based in age and enduring fandom, and on the other recognise the need for change and adaptability for any fandom to survive, including an influx of new and young members.

Harrington and Bielby first called for explicit attention to long-term and enduring fandom in a series of articles published in the early 2010s (Harrington and Bielby 2010a; 2010b; Harrington, Bielby and Bordo 2011). Introducing the concept of the ‘life course’ to fan studies, they argued that ‘long term fans’ *existence* is gradually transformed into *texistence* – the self unfolds over time in ongoing dialogue with the media object that helps define and sustain it’ (Harrington and Bielby 2010b: 444). As traditional markers of life transitions such as university, marriage, childrearing and stable work become increasingly destabilized, in conjunction with the important role of media fandom in fans’ lives, the authors argue that ‘the emotional anchoring provided through fandom [is] supplanting the anchoring of the institutionalized life course’ (Harrington, Bielby and Bordo 2011: 571). Popular media is ‘thoroughly implicated in life course processes and transitions, offering representations of normatively appropriate age-based identities and activities (and tantalizingly non-normative ones)’ (Harrington and Bielby 2010b: 141). Fandom provides us with role models, guides, salient warnings, points of stability, and emotional resources in the course of increasingly ‘liquid’ lives (Bauman 2005), where traditional institutions from college to marriage to retirement seem undependable.

Though cautioning against reducing a life course to a rigid schema, Harrington and Bielby draw attention to the relevance for fan studies of Erikson’s three phases of adulthood:

Erikson posited that the challenge of young adulthood is to forge intimate bonds or risk isolation (intimacy vs. isolation); the challenge of mid-adulthood is to contribute to the betterment of the world through transmission of core values or culture, or to risk stagnation (generativity vs. stagnation); and the challenge of late life is to come to terms with life's accomplishments and thus achieve wisdom, or die with bitterness and regret (integrity vs. despair). (Harrington and Bielby 2010b: 439)

Whilst the middle phase can be observed in the mentoring practices older fans often take on towards younger fan newcomers, the last phase, sometimes called 'gerotranscendence', is observed by subculture scholars looking at ageing participants of the punk scene, wherein spectacular displays of visual style give way to a 'a more studied and reflexive understanding of punk as an identity', as an attitude to life and ideology (Bennett 2006: 226). Further, Harrington and Bielby argue for attention to influence of broader age norms on fandom. They cite Vroonen's observation on ageing music fans as feeling 'a certain ambivalence about their popular music investments and questioned what is 'right and proper' to listen to at a particular age' (Vroonen, 2004: 242; see also Hodkinson 2011). Many older fans feel that emotive expression and investment in music and media is appropriate to youth, so conceal these investments or take care to express them more moderately once they feel themselves out of this category (Anderson 2012). Gender norms, particularly the policing of femininity, are bound up with this discursive negotiation (c.f. Peterson 2017) a point that will be returned to in the data analysis below.

Older fans may use favoured celebrities as guides to contemporary age norms, as 'role modeling for later life [may be] provided by aging actors, singers, musicians and fictional characters' (Harrington and Bielby 2010b: 441; c.f. Stevenson 2009). When fans use role models to construct stories about ageing for themselves and to themselves, we see an example of 'self-narrativization' or 'autobiographical reasoning' (Harrington and Bielby 2010a). Autobiographical reasoning is the process by which we make sense of our past as having led up to our present self-conception. Fandom is a resource for autobiographical reasoning. Music especially seems to serve an indexical function with regard to autobiographical memory which Istvandy (2019; 2022) terms the 'lifetime soundtrack'. Most people have the experience of particular songs and albums triggering specific memories. For long-terms fans of particular bands and artists, it would be reasonable to assume the effect is particularly intense, where one's fandom is connected to one's identity. The increasing mobility of music (from CDs to mp3 players to Bluetooth earbuds, for example) has 'allowed for the permeation of music into and around the places and spaces of routine travel, work and leisure' (Istvandy 2022: 170), thus creating ever more opportunities for indexical linking to experience. For Van Dijck, this function of music is intimately connected to the technological medium of the moment, arguing that 'people who use recorded music as a vehicle for memories [...] want these apparatuses to re-enact their cherished experience of listening' (2006: 364). Van Dijck also argues for the importance of 'public spaces to share narratives and to create a common musical heritage' (357): he contends that 'autobiographical and social memory should not be considered separate domains; there is an intricate and recursive connection between personal and collective cultural memory' (357-8). Whilst individuals have personal connections to songs, we also 'share musical preferences with others before songs become part of a collective repertoire that, in turn, provides new resources for personal engagement with recorded music' (358). The Reddit forum under study is one such resource.

But how should we understand such a collective, when a fandom spans decades and incorporates multiple generations? Bolin argued for a definition of a 'generation' as a group of 'individuals who occupy the same historical location, share the same experiences and become realized as a generation [...] for themselves' (2014: 110). A generation must have a self-reflexive sense of itself as a generation, which is constructed in dialogue with media and media technologies, as 'a certain 'we-sense' among the members of the group'. When it comes to fandoms, particularly of multimedia properties which have been through several iterations, fans often identify with particular entry points into the text (Hills 2017). Sometimes these are held up as the original and authentic experience of a text, with later additions to the franchise being devalued as inauthentic, as favouring political correctness over narrative fidelity; or conversely as 'selling out' and/or betraying the values of the original text in a bid for renewed popularity (see e.g. Scahill 2022). Older fans bid for distinction within fandoms, in the Bourdieusian sense, by claims and evidence to have 'been there' at the beginning – subcultural capital accrues to the physical body of the fan, by virtue of his/her presence at exclusive events such as small intimate gigs and early film screenings (c.f. Hills 2015).

On the other hand, Line Nybro Peterson has suggested that 'being a long-term fan with an intense relationship to a media text (e.g. constantly re-watching old episodes) disrupts fans' experience of generational belonging'. She contends that fandom 'creates a 'we-sense' that can be cross-generational' (2018: 220). There are several ways in which this can happen. Nybro Peterson's case study is the long-running programme *Gilmore Girls*, which itself is concerned with three generations of women in the Gilmore family. Nine years after the end of the original television series, a four-episode miniseries was released on Netflix, revisiting the characters at later life stages. However, fans did not necessarily experience this revival as either a nostalgic return or a new text addressed at new fans, but 'simply a continuation of their viewing routine', as they had continued to watch repeats of episodes at various times throughout their life. The shift from time-based broadcast models of television to on-demand viewing has potential to disrupt any chronological model of media generations: a person in her thirties discovering a series for the first time that initially aired twenty years ago may identify more with younger or newer fans than those sharing her chronological age. Elsewhere, Peterson argues that 'Since fandoms are built on a shared passion and devotion toward an object, other demographic signifiers seem to matter less' (2017: 8.2) She finds that

Aging fans use younger subjective age to legitimize their participation on the one hand and use older subjective (and perhaps chronological) age to position themselves within the fan community [...] on the other hand (Peterson 2017: 3.1).

Subjective age is a shifting identity, the age or phase one feels oneself at a particular time and in particular contexts, as opposed to chronological age. We establish subjective age 'through a myriad of markers and factors within a fan context' ranging from fannish norms, to broader age norms, to 'internal markers such as experienced passion or desire' (8.6) This accords with Anderson's (2012) finding that ageing fans of the band Duran Duran were able to reconnect with a sense of youthful possibility through their fandom. Again I believe gender norms play a large role in influencing a subjective age: the association of femininity with youth (and indeed, immaturity) informs the pathologized category of the fangirl, who responds to (particularly music) with excessive emotion and sexual interest (Zubernis and Larsen 2012; Fathallah 2020).

## **Context; Collection**

Fall Out Boy (sometimes abbreviated as FOB) is an American alternative rock band from Chicago, formed in 2001. Their first album, *Take This to Your Grave* (2003) enjoyed underground success; following which they signed to the major label Island. Their second, third and fourth albums (2005-08) were formative to the construction of emotional hardcore (emo) in the 2000s, though the genre classification is somewhat retrospective (Fathallah 2020). After a hiatus between 2008 and 2013, which many fans assumed to be a permanent breakup, they returned with more stadium rock and pop sounds for *Save Rock and Roll* (2013) and *American Beauty/American Psycho* (2015). Their seventh album, *Mania* (2018), is perhaps their most divisive; many fans dislike the experimentations with electronica and trap beats, in line with a broader cultural discourse of authenticity which privileges traditional instruments over synthesisers and studio effects in music. Their most recent album, *So Much (For) Stardust* (2023), is a return to more traditional instrumentation and has received almost universal acclaim. Many fans feel it is a strong 'return to form' for the band, combining the instrumental skill of earlier releases with a more mature approach to songwriting and lyrical content. It is thus an appropriate time for a longitudinal study of this fandom, as longtime fans reflect on their journeys of 'texistence', their life courses unfolding in a mutually informing process with the band's.

Reddit was selected as the data collection site due to the stability of its archives, its reliable search function, its support of extended threaded discussion, and its pseudonymous/public facing nature. Reddit is not considered a personal or intimate space, precluding the need to seek permission or identify individual participants. Nonetheless, it should be remembered that this is just one space and one perspective on a relatively large fandom, and moreover, the discursive norms and affordances of Reddit influence the content and findings. Reddit is quite a traditional platform. Bergstrom and Poor call it 'a present-day embodiment of a message board system, evolved from earlier forms like Usenet and modem-based bulletin board systems' (2021, n. pag.). The site is divided into subforums by interest, known as subreddits. Identities can be as stable and enduring as a user chooses: one could theoretically make a new identity as often as one likes, but in reality users value the accumulation of upvotes and reputations via a posting history. Written text is the primary medium; images are generally limited to the posts that open threads, though emojis are sometimes used. Norms of discussion which are culturally coded masculine, such as rationality and civil debate, are favoured in practice on most subreddits.

The data from the subreddit r/FallOutBoy was collected in September and October 2023. I searched the forum for the terms 'age' and 'ageing/aging' and sorted by relevance, which after discarding irrelevancies, produced a total of 56 threads for Age and 5 more unique results for Ageing/Aging (most of the matches were the same). I coded the data inductively for thematic patterns, whilst bearing in mind the established fan theory on ageing in and of fandoms, and discovered that whilst many of the trends identified by previous academics were evident, Fall Out Boy fans on Reddit practice a delicate negotiation between cross-generational 'we-sense' and fannish bids for distinction based on age and experience. I will therefore argue that an ageing, enduring fandom must hold in tension the fannish desire to bid for acquired subcultural capital based on longtime participation with an accepted necessity for change and influxes of new fans. Both sides of this negotiation hook into broader cultural discourses around gender and music that privilege behaviours coded masculine (such as rationality and technical instrumentation) over those gendered feminine (such as the unbridled expression of emotion). Admittedly, the Reddit context might strengthen this tendency, and future scholars should exercise caution in applying this finding to other fan contexts. Fans across generations felt the normative strength of this gendered discourse as a structuring factor in their actions and expressions of fandom, yet also protested against it,

asserting their right to enjoy and experience feminine-coded forms of fandom, which are simultaneously coded as immature and/or young. Further, fans were self-reflexive on the concept of age and generations within fandom, setting up a tension between those who argue for a strong generational division (commonly ‘pre-hiatus’ and ‘post-hiatus’ fans) and those who assert the unity of fandom that transcends generational divides. As coding progressed, I refined the findings under the following themes:

- 1) Objective (chronological) and subjective age
- 2) Gerotranscendence (positive and negative)
- 3) Familial fandom
- 4) Autobiographical reasoning (self-narrative)
- 5) Critique of nostalgia
- 6) The concept of fannish generations

The findings are discussed in turn.

## Findings and discussion

### *1) Objective (chronological) and subjective age*

Firstly, it should be noted that fans on this subreddit held regular reflexive discussions on a) the age demographic within the subreddit and b) the age demographics of Fall Out Boy fans more generally. Polls were a regular feature, and whilst the data is self-reported, it was also fairly consistent. The data cannot be usefully collated into one set, because the polls used different age categories, but by comparing three polls (StonksNewGroove 2023a; clouds4sale 2023; Shady\_Imitator 2018), it seems fair to say the most common age bracket for fans on this subreddit is late twenties to early thirties, older than the stereotypical image of the ‘fan’ (girl/boy), with minorities of users in their late thirties and forties and above. The traditional architectures of Reddit as a platform probably influence this, being more likely to attract a slightly older userbase than TikTok, for example. On the other hand, a poll on birthdates taken in 2023 suggested a younger userbase, with the most common category being the late 1990s and early 2000s, giving an age of approximately 20-26 (Sweet-Ad-2477 2023).

If the polls concern objective chronological age, the comments below the post reveal fans’ negotiations with subjective ageing. As Peterson noted (2017), subjective age is negotiated with reference to both fannish and broader cultural norms, and in keeping with this, fans frequently express discomfort with getting older:

I turned 40 a week ago and man was it tough hitting that 40-46 button for the first time (-MCKvR- 2023).

‘47. Felt like a crone when I had to click that button (1-cupcake-at-a-time 2023).<sup>1</sup>

Ageing is perceived as negative, especially for women, as the gendered term ‘crone’ indicates. On the other hand, the sentiment that ageing does not mean one has to give up fandom or fan practices was common, and other fans were used as reference points. ‘It will

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<sup>1</sup> Minor edits to spelling and grammar have been made to some fan comments for readability.

be fun when we are all in our 40's and 50's', muses StonksNewGroove (2023b), 'Hopefully [Fall Out Boy will] still tour and all that by then'. Fans express a subjective age that incorporates both the anxiety of ageing and relief that one's participation in fandom is still legitimate and acceptable with reference to other fans:

I'm not even that old but I feel like the crypt keeper on here r[ight] n[ow] b[e]c[ause] someone just asked if this makes FOB dad music [...] thank you to the fans in their 30s+ for making me not totally lose it (cayden416 2023)

Other fans provide markers according to which one's subjective age is established.

Comparisons with younger fans, and acknowledgement of necessarily different experiences of the band, made some commenters 'feel as ancient and eroded as the Sphinx of Egypt' (tenhinas 2023). Whilst longtime experience is often used to gather subcultural capital, it is held in tension with notions of age 'appropriateness' (c.f. Vroomen 2004) drawn from broader culture. Several threads expressed anxiety over whether the poster was too old to go to a concert. The answers were consistently, resoundingly, that one is never too old to go to a concert, asserting a unified fandom 'we-sense' in which 'age doesn't matter' (showgirlsteve 2023). Some fans expressed anxieties that were clearly rooted in the social regulation of gender:

Am I too old to go to a show?

Just that really, my husband said to go ahead and book tickets if I want for UK tour in October. The only thing stopping me is my lack of confidence. I'm an overweight, frumpy mum of two, almost 40 years of age but my god I've always wanted to go and sing along with a crowd and even more so now after hearing the new album. Do you think there would be other people like me there? (BrokenArrows9 2023).

Being a mother, being nearly 40, and being overweight seem to mitigate against this fan perceiving herself as the sort of person who *should* go to show, as though enjoying live music *ought* to be the province of the young slim and childfree. This aligns with Vroomen's (2004) observation that for adult female fans of Kate Bush, their fannish pleasures were subordinated to and separated from the needs of their husbands and children. In response to the subtextual implication that mothers are less deserving of fannish pleasures, queenadanorf replies that the poster should '1000% go. Especially since you're a mom, it's so important to pursue your own dreams and passions' (2023). One older fan asked about the appropriateness of singing along at a concert. Singing is an activity culturally gendered feminine and associated with the body, thus subordinated in popular discourse to the technical mastery of an instrument (see Fathallah 2020). One fan advises her:

I'm a 42 year old FOB fan and have been since TTTYG. I have a big girl job, with a big girl job title, a mortgage, and an advanced degree [...] You are NEVER to[s] old to experience joy and you should NEVER let anyone [...] tell you that your feelings or expressions of that joy aren't valid (Bruve 2023).

This fan revalues the feminine-coded properties of emotional connection, of 'complete joy and letting go' over masculine-coded restraint and reasoned appreciation. But it is interesting that she it feels necessary to *first* establish her traditional markers of cultural capital, as though having met the traditional markers of successful adulthood, she is (self-)*licensed* to indulge in youth/feminine coded pleasures and experience a younger subjective age.

Conversely, age can be incorporated into a bid for distinction based on experience, specifically on having 'paid one's dues' (Bennett 2006, 225) as a member of music-based subcultures:

I'm sorry, but what's the average age of this fan base now? A lot of you haven't been in a pit and worried for BMTH. I'm just curious (awesomesauceds 2023).

. Was just about to post the same thing. I feel like an elder FOB fan at 30 now, and some of you have just never been to a concert or bought tickets before. I'm so confused (crazydudex 2023).

BMTH is an abbreviation of 'Bring Me the Horizon', the band that opened for Fall Out Boy on several U.S. dates of their 2023 tour. The 'pit' refers to the moshpit – Bring Me the Horizon is considered relatively 'hard' rock by comparison with many of the other openers, and thus their set more likely to result in a moshpit breaking out. The faux-apology implies a criticism of younger, less experienced fans, pulling against the establishment of a cross-generational 'we-sense', though interestingly most respondents were discussing whether or not they were too *old* for a pit. Bennett (2006) found that older punks were generally content to stand back from moshpits, feeling they were no longer physically able, and fans in their forties and fifties expressed similar sentiments. It seems that early thirties is about the upper limit of when fans felt able to join the pit, whether this was due to internal changes in their physical bodies, or the external pressures of social discourse that relegates physical expression of emotion to youth.

## 2) *Gerotranscendence (positive and negative)*

The second category came under the broad heading of 'Gerotranscendence' as defined by Harrington and Bielby above. This does not necessarily refer to fans in any specific age group, but rather to a discursive position of learned reflection based on time and experience in the fandom. The category was further split into two sub-streams: first, the establishment of fannish credentials as explicit bids for subcultural distinction based in experience and longevity, and secondly, reflections on younger members of the fandom as defined against the self. As Hills (2015) has observed, and I have previously documented with regard to emo fandom more broadly, subcultural capital attaches to the longtime fan who has physically experienced particular events which are inaccessible to younger members, particularly when said events can be claimed as more exclusive (pre-devalued mainstreaming) than fandoms in their current forms. One user asserts that they have 'been a fan since the days of [FOB] playing VFW halls an[d] them being the "local" band' (Sweetnarnar 2013). Some near-mystical transference of subcultural capital is reserved for those fans who have physically attended 'venues with a few hundred people and being pretty much close enough to touch the guys' (chesterT3 2015). This is a form of gerotranscendence, albeit a bittersweet one, as the longtime fan reflects on their observed development of the fandom, and utilizes their memories of earlier phases as a form of claim-staking. In keeping with Van Djick's insights, fans used their familiarity with old media forms to anchor these memories and bolster this nostalgic subcultural capital: 'I actually own the "Growing Up" demo CD-R with Fall Out Boy written on it in blue sharpie' posts user anonymossitee (2021), whilst user glumicorn uploads an image of 'old ticket stubs from when [they] saw FOB way back when (look at those prices 🤔)' (2023a). The age of digital reproduction notwithstanding, some auratic quality remains attached to the physical object for these fans, to the point that several express regret at the demise of the physical ticket in favour of mobile QR codes: 'now everything is digital and no keepsakes' (glumicorn 2023b).

Sometimes these reflections accompany comparison of the self and one's experience with those of younger fans. Bids for subcultural capital position the self within a field, which is always in relation to the position of the others. These comparisons can be negative, positive, or some mixture of the two:



Holy crap I'm old. I'm 40. I knew the age was younger here because of the use of 'deep cuts' for some songs. Back in our day we just listened to the record from front to back. Didn't skip songs. Didn't listen to the radio so didn't know which ones were popular (punkopops 2023).

'Deep cuts' refers to the relative lack of popularity of certain songs – typically non-singles. Comments like this tap into a discourse that denigrates the 'popular' (coded feminine) as inauthentic, as shallower. In 'our day', punkopops implies, we held an appreciation of music not dictated by the whims of radio, and had the attention spans to absorb entire records. Others criticize younger fans for their lack of knowledge of the band's extensive back catalogue. User Avendora reports that the child of a friend attempted to introduce them to Fall Out Boy, to which they responded:

Me: Yeah I was listening to them before you were even born.

Kid: what, no way they're new and you're old

was one of those moments that I was glad I'm not a parent and could just walk away (Ayendora 2015).

In this instance, far from taking on any sort of mentoring role as older fan, younger fans are not considered worth engaging. But when users actually castigate younger fans, they tend to meet backlash. User puddingemoji condemns 'All the 13yr old Dan & Phil-obsessed new-age emo's with 'TwentyØneFallOutBoysatTheDisco' (or something else as equally ridiculous) as their YouTube names [...] Not even knowing the raw awesomeness of Evening Out'.<sup>2</sup> This poster is taken to task for gatekeeping, thus violating the construction of a cross-generational 'we-sense', and their bids for distinction mocked via paraphrase to 'I was the biggest fan to ever fan, here is a list of all the ways I fanned that nobody else has ever done because I am the Ultimate Fan TM' (smantie 2017). Indeed, most older posters expressed that they found interactions with younger fans 'heart-warming' (millennialmonster755 2023). User millennialmonster755 (presumably aged at least 30) 'assume(s) this is how parents of kids who are discovering and fully bought in to Santa Claus feel' (ibid.) – this is something of a double-edged sentiment, as the figurative parent clearly holds superior knowledge, yet vicariously enjoys the child's wonder. This is more in line with the mentoring sentiments attributed to older fans by Harrington and Bielby (2010b: 439).<sup>3</sup> We can say, then, that the experience of gerotranscendence can incorporate both positive and negative feeling towards younger fans, even to the point that fans will self-police it:

Maybe the only con I can think of [being an older fan] is against myself because sometimes I get into that annoying oldie mindset where you're like 'I've loved FOB longer than you I'm a better fan!!' and I have to keep telling myself how stupid I must sound because we all love the same band. Also I wish we could go back to the smaller venue days (data\_dawg 2015).

'We all love the same band' is an assertion of cross-generational 'we-sense': older fans self-monitor, to an extent, to ensure that their bids for capital do not violate this. If they do, they are disciplined by the community.

### 3) *Familial fandom*

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<sup>2</sup> *Fall Out Boy's Evening Out with Your Girlfriend*, a mini-LP recorded in 2002, prior to their debut album.

<sup>3</sup> Though Harrington and Bielby associate mentoring more with Erikson's middle stage of the life course, I think it can equally apply to the concept of 'gerotranscendence', especially given that we observe statements of gerotranscendence from fans who are still relatively young.

Sometimes, fandom is literally inherited within families (Smith 2012). Vermaak-Griessel describes this phenomenon as ‘heirloom fandom’ (2022, 114). Several fans describe that their first exposure to Fall Out Boy was through the tastes of an older relative: fans reference parents and older siblings as having formed their music taste. This creates a cross-generational ‘we-sense’ because younger fans report being fans of older material, including that which came out before they were born. User piximelon writes that ‘FOB has a unique appeal that spans generations (I’ve seen firsthand because I’m a ‘94 baby, my mom was born in 1960 and my kids are post 2013 and we all love them)’ (2023a) Elsewhere the same user writes:

This will be my 10yr old daughter’s first big show. She’s been hearing Fall Out Boy since she was in utero and really got into them about 3 years ago. Truly a full circle moment. I started listening at 11/12 and didn’t get to see them until I was 15 and my mom went with me to many [...] shows. She’s in her 60s now and still loves Fall Out Boy (piximelon 2023b)

This is heirloom fandom in a classical sense, where fandom of the band is passed from grandmother to mother to granddaughter. When concerned with younger relatives, most of these comments assumed the mentorship role as part of the creation of a cross-generational ‘we-sense’. User haisenseihaiyujikun writes that ‘one of the coolest/mind blowing things about being a parent is raising the next generation of fans’ (2023). Of course, children are far from guaranteed to inherit parental fandom, but when they do, fandom can provide an experience of familial bonding and shared understanding: user pnzwebs reports, ‘I took my daughter to her first FOB concert when she was 11 and it’s one of my top 5 parenting experiences of my life’ (2023). Here, we observe a smaller ‘we-sense’ within the ‘we-sense’ of fandom is created inside the family unit, drawing together parent and child. Through the shared activity of singing a shared favourite song together at a live show, this poster claims to have experienced the ‘best moment of [her] life’ with her child – possibly a hyperbolic claim, but given the indexical function of music to bond to key memories from across our lifespans, certainly a moment of intense cross-generational joy. In one variation of familial fandom, a poster reports that they ‘got [their] kids into FOB over the past year, took them to their first concert 2 weeks ago and they loved it, been listening non-stop since,’ but ‘That’s old news’ (JeffTheAndroid 2023). What truly impressed them was that whilst driving a group of children from their extended family,

My son’s favorite FOB song came on - Chicago Is So Two Years Ago.

All the kids sang. They all knew songs from across FOBs catalog.

I was just like ‘whoa, you kids are alright’ (ibid).

Age and long experience is not as necessary for the acquisition of fannish capital as it once was, given the ‘liquid times’ of instantaneous access to artists’ catalogue from any point of their career. As Hills noted, this is probably one reason why the nostalgic capital of having physically been at certain events has taken on increased importance (2015).

#### *4) Autobiographical reasoning (self-narrative)*

The next category of posts fell under the category of autobiographical reasoning, including the construction of the ‘lifetime soundtrack’, or indexical connection of songs, albums and

old technologies to particular memories and experiences. Some of these were relatively everyday experiences:

Cork Tree because that album encapsulates my middle school experience. I listened to it every day on the bus, to and from! Whenever I listen to it, I always have memories of riding the Q17 (parodyofsincerity 2022).

This evidences Istvandy's (2022) observations on how the increasing mobility of music on a range of devices connects songs to our experiences of moving through urban environments. Other commenters remember old technologies of piracy, recalling how they would 'download the albums from websites like Limewire and import them to iTunes and put them on our iPods' (ArmorOfMar 2023). Sometimes songs and albums were linked to one, highly specific memory, often the discovery of the band. In evidence for Van Dijck's (2006) argument that autobiographical reasoning is both social and personal, making use of shared repositories for the construction and sharing of musical memories, some fans' lifetime soundtrack is inextricably connected to fan activities, with one poster opening a thread to reminisce about the early fan forum 'Overcast Kids':

If any of you are there, thank you so much for many happy times in my early teen years, the boards were a pretty big part of my life back then! (fobrboardie 2021a).

I remember when Carpal Tunnel of Love was leaked and was being shared on the boards. To this day it's one of my favourite songs of theirs because I remember the excitement of feeling like I was one of the 'first' to listen to it on the boards! (2021b).

One user theorises on the former identity of 'One of [their] old bosses' who had admitted to also being an Overcast Kids board user in his youth (millennialmonster755 2021), using context clues to guess at his board identity: 'he could be our mysterious answer to where those people are now'. Autobiographical reasoning in a social context becomes biographical reasoning, as fans attempt to connect former online identities of fellow fans to the people they could logically be today. Further, in evidence for the argument that long term fandom converts the fan's existence into textistence, as key markers of a personal life course become intertwined with the text, some fans connected fandom memories to major traditional life course markers and transitions:

I'll be 35 in October, me and the wife got engaged in Glasgow at the Infinity on High gig. Can't wait for the next album! (Warden\_Sco 2016).

I will be seeing them in Chicago IL at Wrigley Field this June, actually right after my June wedding! (AmberRowlett 2023).

Contra Harrington, Bielby and Bordo's (2011) argument that traditional life course markers are substituted by fandom, it seems that fannish memories here supplement and reinforce traditional life course markers like marriage, home ownership and in other examples, having children. Similarly, whilst fans held up the band members own increasing ages as evidence for the all-age appeal of concerts, they were generally commended for ageing 'appropriately' rather than attempting to cling to an outdated vision of youth. Many fans expressed a feeling of growing up and growing older with the band, commending the maturity of recent lyrics and compositions and relating them to the changing circumstances of their adult lives. One user referred to the band as a figurative 'older brother' (Ganjisseur 2016). This aligns with the findings of Stevenson (2009), who argued that David Bowie fans look to the musician as a guide for growing older whilst remaining receptive and adapting to new ideas, thus as a resource to manage negative feeling about ageing inculcated from broader culture. The

phrase ‘soundtrack to my life’ was often repeated (an instance of how fan discussion and academic theory often overlap).

There is a sense in which age is judged (internally and externally) as a prerequisite for this kind of long-term fandom and the capital associated with it. When asked for stories relating to their experience of fandom over time, younger fans tend to hedge their responses. ‘I don’t know if I count or not,’ admits one, ‘I’m 20, but I’ve been a fan for about a decade’ ([deleted user] 2015). Some younger fans negotiated this by linking albums to their birth year, making idiosyncratic bids for capital not via memory, but via this coincidence of time:

I love being an 07 baby because I get to refer to my birth year as the Infinity On High and Riot! Year (No-Construction-6004 2023).

being born the same year as [*Take This To Your Grave*] makes me feel quite proud, i honestly feel like some sort of twin to it (fungalittlefreak 2023).

This autobiographical reasoning attempts to circumvent the construction of age/longer investment as key to subcultural capital by implying a sort of ‘fated’ property to their fandom, as though the fan were naturally connected to albums which came out in their year of birth. Moreover, in accordance with the earlier findings that punk fans tend to moderate their expressions of subcultural identity with age, several fans expressed that the responsibilities of adult life have inhibited their fan activities in some way, specifically, concert attendance:

I was going to have to miss my local stop on the Hella Mega Tour because of my brand new baby (noble\_land\_mermaid 2020).

Great [about being an older fan]: I have a job for tickets Bad: I have bills to pay that keep me from buying tickets (thatsnotgneiss 2015).

Sometimes, the life transitions that accompany age deplete fan capital, as experiences become more inaccessible and fannish investments wax and wane.

### 5) *Critique of nostalgia*

We have established that the accumulation of subcultural capital grounded in age and experience is often held in tension with the establishment of a cross-generational ‘we-sense’. But two categories of comments challenged the alignment of age with fan capital. These were a) the critique of nostalgia and b) the concept of fannish generations. The critique of nostalgia is theoretically simpler, so we will address it first. The critique of nostalgia tended to centre around defences of the 2018 album *Mania*. *Mania* is a stark departure from most of the band’s previous output, relying more on synthesisers and music technology and less on guitars. For many fans, this album produces what Garner has described as ‘intra-object antifandom’ (2018), which is to say, it produces feelings of dislike because it presents a challenge to the story we tell ourselves about the fannish object and the self-conception we identify with it. Popular music discourse aligns traditional rock instrumentation with authenticity, creativity and skill (as well as with masculinity, via the discursive sleight of hand that aligns masculinity with the mind and reason). *Mania* poses a challenge to this construction, and so to the fan’s self-conception as a connoisseur of ‘real’ music. There were several posts attempting to counter the prevailing discourse that *Mania* was a bad album, by criticising the tendency to use nostalgia and the pretence of exclusivity as fan capital:

This sub can be like a bunch of aging hipsters that talk about how good music used to be back in their days and how every time an album tries something different it's terrible, along with extra hate for songs that get too popular (wyzwunx 2023).

Other fans defend their right to dislike *Mania* and claim this is due to its posited 'obnoxious writing' rather than nostalgia, but nostalgia for the style of pre-hiatus releases as opposed to post-hiatus did seem to be a strong theme. Fans critique their own nostalgic tendencies by comparison with other media properties. Much has been written on the latent racism and misogyny posing as 'critique' of the new *Ghostbusters* film (e.g. Kies 2022), for which Fall Out Boy re-recorded the iconic theme song. User Titand120 writes:

In terms of the *Ghostbusters* track, I really like it, mostly for the guitar in the chorus. I've never seen the *Ghostbusters* films so I don't have that nostalgia bias that a lot of people have, but I can still see where they're coming from because I have similar feelings for the upcoming Power Rangers movie. [...] This is for the new generation to experience their own Power Rangers. I'll still go see it and try to judge it as this new universe that's separate from mine. I hope that fans of the old school *Ghostbusters* will see it that way and give this reboot a chance before immediately rejecting it cause it's not like the original (2016).

Matt Hills (2017) describes this process as a movement towards disillusionment, or the understanding that long-time fans must make that new instantiations of media properties are not necessarily designed for them. Fans recognise that 'the whole point of the reboot is to reintroduce it to a younger fanbase so the song's no exception' (RedStarburstsAreBest 2016). Fall Out Boy fans describe a process of adjustment that allows them to internalize this understanding and appreciate newer releases:

I had to take a step back and not compare [...] and realize that this is the direction that they want to take, so I could act like a hipster and boycott their new stuff, or I could adapt, go over the songs a few times, and support what came to be my favorite band (thewordjunkie 2015).

One fan contends that 'the people that hate that fob has evolved are mad because their favorite bands that didn't, and are washed up and disappeared off the face of the planet' (AnyFaithlessness1279 2023). Change is considered as a necessary process of retaining relevance. What is striking, though is how age seems to be a prerequisite for making a sound argument against nostalgia, as though fans must gather the subcultural capital earned through longtime fandom *before* they can critique gatekeeping based on age: 'I seriously wish I wasn't fifteen and hadn't discovered them a year ago,' says one user, 'because it negates this argument a little bit' (WedFreasley 2017). This nicely encapsulates the tension between the pursuit of subcultural capital based on age and experience observed across this study, and the perspective that fandom does or should comprise a holistic 'we-sense' regardless of participants' age.

#### 6) *The concept of fannish generations*

Finally, there was a category of comments metatextually reflecting on the concept of fan generations. The most commonly drawn dividing line was between pre-hiatus fans and those who joined as post-hiatus fans. Those invested in maintaining this divide are typically critical towards the posited younger generations, invoking gendered stereotypes associated with Bad Fandom (see Fathallah 2020): that is, fandom that is excessively emotional, physical, sexualized, and emotionally invested, as opposed to a rational model of 'proper' musical appreciation. For example, one fan writes:

I've noticed that FOB has two main groups of fans- their fans pre-hiatus (20's-30's) and their fans post-hiatus (12-18). [...] I've observed that the younger fans tend to idolize band members more than the older ones and whatever they produce. [...] younger fans seem to really like the [*Ghostbusters*] cover, probably because they mostly like post-hiatus music which has featured a lot of sampling and production (wryybird 2016).

Note again the discursive slide between 'authentic' musicianship, masculinity, rationality, and 'proper' musical appreciation on one hand, and 'sampling and production', insincerity, youth and the feminine on the others. To 'idolize' is to express 'inappropriate' devotion, bordering on the sexual. But other fans criticised the possibility or usefulness of dividing fans into stratified generations. In the internet era, an artist's entire catalogue is instantly available, and fans find various entry points into listening. For example, one thread opened a poll to compare user's ages to their favourite album, 'wondering where the loyalties of favourite album lie for the different generations of Fall Out Boy fans' (Ash3r 2022). As was quickly observed by respondents, the thread demonstrated no correlation between age and favourite album, with several questioning the definition of new or old fan. Even the hiatus was questioned as a dividing line. Some fans questioned whether 'idolizing' band members is really a property of one fan generation:

I think that the older fans more than likely idolized the band just as much as the younger ones back in the day, it's just that modern kids have so many more outlets to share photos, information, and commentary of/about the music and band members so it might just seem like they're comparatively more 'obsessed.' Also, teenagers have always idolized bands/celebrities...it's just that the older fanbase has pretty much long grown out of the 'omg they're so cute' phase (RedStarburstsAreBest 2016).

Excessive, feminized (sexualized) emotion is still *slightly* denigrated (as a property one most 'grow out of'), but this is most likely influenced by the norms of Reddit, which privilege rational, masculinised, logocentric discussion. Still, as we observed above, some older female fans did make space to reclaim a feminized fan identity, though it is associated with youth.

## Conclusion

Ageing fandoms must negotiate a tension between the fannish impetus to build subcultural capital based on long experience, and the recognised necessity of newer, younger fans and changes in the fan-text if the fandom is to endure. Many fans remain attached to the construction and demonstration of subcultural capital based on long-term fandom, and the experience of having been 'physically' at early live experiences gains more salience in an era when media from any decade is instantly available to all (c.f. Hills 2015). However, I also found that most fans were reflexively self-critical regarding excessive nostalgia, and those who sought to denigrate younger fans directly were criticised for violating a cross-generational 'we-sense' that unites the fandom as a whole. This 'we-sense' unites parents and children; older fans and younger fans; and allows fans to deconstruct the idea that being a chronologically younger fan necessitates liking newer media only.. Older fans negotiate a changing 'textistence' that incorporates various life stages and markers. Contra Harrington, Bielby and Bordo (2011), this study established that ageing Fall Out Boy fans supplement traditional life course markers with fannish memories, rather than their fandom standing in for traditional makers like marriage, careers and child rearing. Ageing fandom must also be negotiated with reference to external norms and age markers, which are inherently gendered, as youthfulness and immaturity are gendered feminine in broader culture. It remains for future scholars to investigate how different kinds of fandom in different arenas negotiate and

maintain a 'we-sense' as their participants age, and newer fans of differing chronological ages negotiate a range of entry points to their texts.

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