

# Fanaticism - Its Development and Meanings in Consumers' Lives

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# **Abstract**

## **Objective of the Study**

The aim of the study is to understand the development and meanings of fanaticism in consumers' lives in order to gain a better grasp of the concept of fanaticism itself in terms of consumer research. More specifically, the main objective is to see how consumers' identities are related to fanaticism and its development. To further understand this, the study also concerns itself with how the overall phenomenon of fanaticism actually develops and what factors influence this development, as well as how communality is present in fanaticism. Based on drawbacks of previous research, this study will take a view that sees fanaticism as a positive and developing phenomenon that should be studied subjectively. Thus narrative identity theory is used as a basis for the study. Further, because fanaticism has not been thoroughly studied in the field of consumer research, but is nonetheless a relevant part of it, this study will hopefully bring new insights to the topic.

## **Research Method**

In order to gain a subjective understanding of fanaticism, the research data was collected through the means of narrative interviews. The data was then analysed by using narrative analysis, which involves constructing coherent stories out of the interviews followed by interpretation and analysis of said life stories in order to find common themes that present explanatory knowledge.

## **Findings**

The research presents a personal view on the subjectively felt experience of fanaticism, its development, and meanings in consumers' lives through the fan narratives. The concept of fanaticism is related to topics of loyalty, devotion, consumer-brand relationships, as well as identity building, and a connection of fanaticism to the creation of narrative identity is suggested. The four stages of development of fanaticism were identified, which allow for better understanding of the processes involved in being a fan. The fanatical relationship is further established to represent core values for the fans, which help build identity and become a common thread in the consumer's life as well as their diverse fanaticisms. Moreover, different factors influencing fanaticism and its development to start, and become more or less intense were presented. These included physical and emotional life changes, influences of the object of fanaticism, and influences of the society. The role of communality was also looked at, and it was established that consumers see belonging to a community as being a fan for others, while not being a part of a community is seen as being a fan for yourself. Nonetheless, both a need to belong to a bigger whole and to have a private relationship with the fanaticism is present in all fans. From these themes emerge the concepts of public and private fanaticism, a balance of which is present in all fanaticisms in different proportions. Understanding this relationship could further unravel consumers' attitudes and actions within fanaticism, as distinct combinations of the two elements could possibly result in differing development and meaning of fanaticism, presence of communality, and even overall consumer behaviour.

## **Keywords**

Fanaticism, fan, consumer-brand relationship, consumer, consumer research, identity, narrative

# Tiivistelmä

## Tutkimuksen tavoitteet

Tutkimuksen tavoitteena on ymmärtää fanittamisen kehitystä ja merkitystä kuluttajien elämässä, paremman fanittamisen ilmiön yleiskäsityksen saamista varten kuluttajatutkimuksen näkökulmasta. Tarkemmin, päämääränä on ymmärtää miten kuluttajien identiteetit liittyvät fanittamiseen ja sen kehitykseen. Tämän lisäksi, tavoitteena on saada käsitys siitä, miten fanittamisen kokonaisilmiö kehittyy, mitkä tekijät vaikuttavat tähän, sekä millä tavalla yhteisöllisyys on läsnä fanittamisessa. Perustuen edellisten tutkimusten varjopuoliin tässä tutkielmassa on otettu näkemys fanittamiseen, jossa ilmiö on positiivinen, kehittyvä ja subjektiivinen. Näin ollen, tutkimuksen perustana käytetään narratiivi-identiteettiteoriaa. Lisäksi, koska fanittamista ei olla tutkittu perusteellisesti kuluttajatutkimuksen näkökulmasta, toivon tuovani paljon uutta tuntemusta tähän aihepiiriin.

## Tutkimusmenetelmä

Fanittamisen subjektiivisen näkökulman saavuttamiseksi tutkimuksen aineisto on kerätty narratiivihaastatteluja hyödyntäen. Aineisto käsiteltiin narratiivianalyysiä käyttäen, jossa ensiksi haastatteluista luodaan johdonmukaiset tarinat, jonka jälkeen kyseisiä tarinoita tulkitaan ja analysoidaan yhtenäisten teemojen löytämiseksi. Nämä teemat tuovat esille fanittamista selittävää tietoa.

## Tutkimuksen tulokset

Tutkimuksen tuloksena on ymmärrys fanittamiskokemuksesta, sen kehityksestä ja merkityksestä kuluttajan elämässä hyvin henkilökohtaisesta näkökulmasta fanien narratiiveja käyttäen. Fanittaminen liitetään sellaisiin käsitteisiin, kuin uskollisuus, omistautuminen, kuluttajien brändisuhde, sekä identiteetin rakentaminen. Fanittaminen yhdistetään myös narratiivi-identiteetin rakentamiseen. Tutkimus identifioi fanittamisen kehityksen neljä vaihetta, jotka auttavat koko ilmiön ja sen prosessin ymmärtämisessä. Fanittamissuhteen perustaksi osoitetaan olevan tietty fanin arvo, joka avustaa identiteetin rakentamisessa ja josta tulee yhdistävä tekijä kuluttajan eri fanitussuhteiden välillä. Lisäksi, eri fanittamiseen ja sen kehitykseen vaikuttavat tekijät esitetään. Näihin kuuluvat fanin oman elämän muutokset, fanittamisen kohteen vaikutteet sekä yhteiskunnan vaikutteet. Tutkielmassa tarkasteltiin myös yhteisöllisyyden roolia kyseisessä ilmiössä. Tutkimustulosten perusteella todettiin, että kuluttajat näkevät yhteisöön kuulumisen olevan fanittamista muiden ihmisten vuoksi, kun taas yhteisöön kuulumattomuus on fanittamista itsensä takia. Joka tapauksessa, kaikki fanit kokevat tarpeen kuulua tiettyyn itseään isompaan kokonaisuuteen, sekä samalla luoda hyvin henkilökohtainen suhde fanitettavan asian kanssa. Näiden teemojen perusteella syntyy aineistosta julkisen ja yksityisen fanittamisen käsitteet, jotka ovat läsnä kaikissa fanisuhteissa hieman eri suhteissa. Näiden käsitteiden tasapainon ymmärtäminen voisi edistää fanittamisen yhteydessä tapahtuvan kuluttajakäyttäytymisen käsitystä, sillä julkisen ja yksityisen fanittamisen erilaiset yhdistelmät voivat mahdollisesti vaikuttaa fanittamisen kehitykseen sekä merkitykseen, yhteisöllisyyteen ja kokonaisvaltaiseen kuluttajakäyttäytymiseen.

## Avainsanat

Fanittaminen, fani, brändisuhde, kuluttaja, kuluttajatutkimus, identiteetti, narratiivi

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# 1 Introduction

Mass media is a huge part of the contemporary culture, and things like TV-shows, rock bands, and food brands have become as familiar to us as our own families (Thorne and Bruner, 2006). People form strong emotional bonds to things that may, to other people, just serve functional needs (Chung et al. 2005), and, as passing interest towards a brand grows over time into intense fascination, we become fans. (Thorne and Bruner, 2006) For a long time, fanaticism was dismissed as trivial and was thus ignored by researchers (Redden and Steiner, 2000; Chung et al. 2005; Thorne and Bruner, 2006). The phenomenon nonetheless deserves academic attention, as it affects a wide range of social behaviour, including consumer behaviour, through sharing beliefs, meanings, and experiences. (Kozinets, 1997; Thorne and Bruner, 2006)

The aim of this research is then to come to understand the development and meanings of fanaticism in consumers' lives in order to gain a better grasp of the overall phenomenon. At the same time, fanaticism is related to concepts of consumer-brand relationships, loyalty, devotion, attachment, and love, as these are essential parts of the phenomenon (e.g. Bristow and Sebastian, 2001; Chung et al. 2005; Thorne and Bruner, 2006).

Through using narrative interviews (Ricoeur, 1984; Polkinghorne, 1995; Atkinson, 1998), the research presents a personal view on the very subjectively felt experience of fanaticism (Smith et al. 2007). The stages of development of fanaticism as well as the different factors influencing these are identified. In addition, fanaticism's connection to identity creation and building is supported through the object's representation of value for the consumers. Communities and their absence in fanaticism are also observed, connecting them to public and private behaviour respectively. Further, public and private elements are concluded to be present in varying intensities in all fanaticisms.

The findings bring new insight into the topic of fanaticism, reinforcing its bond to other concepts, and, at the same time, bringing to light interesting new aspects of fanaticism itself mentioned above. The phenomenon is shown to be positive, subjective, and dynamic, as well as strongly associated with consumer behaviour. Understanding fanaticism and especially the balance of private and public within it could therefore help grasp actions and attitudes of consumers.

## **1.1 Research Background**

Fanaticism has been quite thoroughly studied in such fields as psychology and sociology (Passmore, 2003). However, when it comes to consumer research, a tremendous lack of studies has been noted (e.g. Redden and Steiner, 2000; Chung et al. 2005; Thorne and Bruner, 2006). This is quite alarming as brands and consumption have become a part of contemporary culture, and are now seen as the building blocks for people's identities and relationships (Holt, 2002). Fanaticism has this way also become a large part of culture and is essential in brand marketing, since it brings on loyalty and devotion towards brands (Chung et al. 2005, 2007, 2008).

The concept of fanaticism has been defined well by previous research. The nature and characteristics of fanaticism have therefore been determined, but little is known about how the phenomenon develops over time. (Chung et al. 2008) Fanaticism in consumer research literature has largely been studied as an already existing phenomenon, and researchers have thus noted the need to find out how fanaticism begins, how it develops in consumers, and how it possibly ends (Oliver, 1999; Chung et al. 2005, 2008). Furthermore, a general need for understanding consumers in context of temporality has been pointed out (Arnould and Thompson, 2005).

Another problem that has been noted in currently existing consumer research literature on fanaticism is the fact that the phenomenon has been studied as a negative one. Fanaticism is often seen as dysfunctional because of its connections to addictive and compulsive behaviour (Chung et al. 2008). This is possibly due to the fact that the phenomenon has been looked at through the lens of the norm and the socially accepted, which is, in fact, constantly re-written (Smith et al. 2007). Nonetheless, current research on fanaticism has slowly turned to viewing the phenomenon in positive light (e.g. Smith et al. 2007; Chung et al. 2007, 2008).

Lastly, fanaticism has largely been studied from an outsider's point of view. This way an experience that is very subjectively felt and understood by consumers is actually studied from an objective perspective. Therefore a more personal approach to researching fanaticism must be taken. (Smith et al. 2007)

## **1.2 Research Objectives**

The main purpose of this research is to study and understand the development of fanaticism from the point of view of consumer research, as well as in a light that is opposite to strong beliefs held by previous fanaticism research. Firstly, fanaticism will be viewed as a positive phenomenon, as this is the direction consumer research is taking in this particular field (Smith et al. 2007; Chung et al. 2007, 2008). Secondly, fanaticism will be seen as a developing concept, in contrast to previous research that has viewed it as a stable and unchanging phenomenon. This view is taken because fanaticism's development is not yet fully understood (Oliver, 1999; Chung et al. 2005, 2008). Thirdly, a more personal stance will be taken through the use of narrative interviews and narrative identity theory (Ricoeur, 1984, 1988) to study the phenomenon in question. As fanaticism is an extremely personal part of the consumer's life (Chung et al. 2007), and it is subjectively understood by consumers (Smith et al. 2007), such methods will allow the unravelling of meanings that techniques viewing the study subjects more objectively cannot attain. Lastly, as fanaticism has not been studied very much in the consumer research context, but is nonetheless a large and relevant phenomenon in consumer behaviour, I hope to bring new insights to this topic (Redden and Steiner, 2000; Chung et al. 2005; Thorne and Bruner, 2006).

The fundamental idea will be to study the development of fanaticism as well as the meanings it brings into consumers' lives. Identity of the consumer will play a large role in this study, as the self plays an important part in people's lives (Baumeister, 1987) and in consumption (Holt, 2002) through helping define who people are (Hermans, 1987). The research will be conducted from the point of view of narrative identity (Ricoeur, 1988), as so many aspects of fanaticism are intertwined with identity. This perspective allows for understanding how consumers build identity through fanaticism, as well as seeing the phenomenon from an insider's point of view. Moreover, an important aspect of this will be to see how different fanaticisms exist and interact within one person.

The development of fanaticism will be studied in the sense of how the phenomenon starts, develops, and ends in consumers, as these questions have been found to be unaddressed by previous consumer research literature (Oliver, 1999; Chung et al. 2005, 2008). How the development of fanaticism happens and in what direction it evolves are crucial here. Furthermore, the reasons behind the phenomenon, as well as the social, personal, and environmental factors that affect it will be studied. It is important to comprehend what drives



fanaticism, as this will help understand how the fanatical relationship evolves, as well as how meaning is created and modified within it. (Chung et al. 2008)

Another important theme will be communality in fanaticism. Fanaticism has often been studied from within fan communities as a very communal concept (e.g. Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Obst et al. 2002; Kozinets, 2001; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Richardson and Turley, 2008), but recent research has started to look at fanaticism as a personal phenomenon as well (e.g. Passmore, 2003; Chung et al. 2007, 2008). My goal will be to understand how communality is present in fanaticism.

Influenced by the need to understand communality's presence in fanaticism, the study will be conducted in varied contexts by picking research subjects with very diverse fanatical interests. I believe that researching fans of very different subjects will free me of the problems of previous fanaticism related research that concentrated on specific products or product groups and found that the research results were difficult to transfer to new contexts (e.g. Oliver, 1993; Russell et al. 2004; Thorne and Bruner, 2006; Harrolle et al. 2010). This will also help me research fanaticism better as a concept in itself and not as a part of a specific genre, group, or community.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

On the basis of the above presented research objectives, I have constructed the following research questions for my study:

- How is the consumer's identity related to fanaticism and its development?
  - o How does fanaticism start, evolve and eventually end in consumers?
  - o How do different factors influence fanaticism and its development in consumers?
  - o How are communal aspects present in fanaticism and its development?

## **1.4 Terminology**

*Fanaticism:* The extremely affective-laden and unique form of investment in the liking or interest of a particular person, group, trend, artwork, cause, brand, or idea characterized by strong and intense levels of loyalty, commitment, allegiance, devotion, passion, emotional attachment, enthusiasm and involvement. (Chung et al. 2005, 2008; Thorne and Bruner, 2006)

*Fan:* A person with an overwhelming liking or interest towards a particular person, group, trend, artwork, cause, brand, or idea. Behaviour exhibited by fans may be viewed by others as unusual or unconventional, but it does not usually violate prevailing social norms. (Thorne and Bruner, 2006) Just like recent research on fanaticism (e.g. Chung et al. 2005, 2008; Smith et al. 2007), I use the terms “fan” and “fanatic” interchangeably, as the two different words bring on confusion and negative views on the phenomenon of fanaticism, making the concept hard to understand.

*Fandom:* A subculture consisting of like-minded fans, i.e. a community consisting of fans of the same subject. (Thorne and Bruner, 2006)

*Identity:* The subjective perception of what the self is (Belk, 1988), and the various meanings attached to the self by the individual and by other people (Ibarra and Barbulescu 2010). Identity incorporates into itself the tangible and intangible possessions of an individual (Belk, 1988), and is actively created by the individual through experiences and events (Giddens, 1991).

## **1.5 Outline of the Study**

The study starts out by going over previous research on fanaticism, as well as themes connected to it, such as consumer-brand relationships, loyalty, devotion, love, and attachment. This is done in order to create a diverse and comprehensive understanding of the concept of fanaticism. Next, I cover the topics of consumer identity and narratives, which form the theoretical framework of the study. After this, the methodology is put forward, which represents the belief system that this research is based on.

The method is then presented, reflecting on how the research and analysis of the study are conducted. This is followed by the presentation of my findings in the form of two narratives. The findings are then expanded on in the discussion section. Lastly, the study is concluded with theoretical and managerial implications, suggestions for further research, and limitations.

## **2 Defining Fanaticism**

Fanaticism is a very complex term that takes on different forms and is connected with many meanings, as it holds within itself and can be defined through many other concepts (Smith et al. 2007). It is also a very important phenomenon in modern culture, marketing, as well as people's personal and social realities (Kozinets, 1997). This is because culture is now largely defined by brands (Holt, 2002), and the relationships that we create with these help us create our identities and structure our realities (Belk, 1988; Hopkinson and Hogarth-Scott, 2001; Ahuvia, 2005; Shankar et al. 2001, 2009).

In this part of the study, I present an overview of consumer research literature that has studied fanaticism, as well as concepts that are closely related to it or are a part of it. These include consumer-brand relationships, loyalty, devotion, love, and attachment.

### **2.1 Fanaticism**

Redden and Steiner (2000) make a point of fanaticism being a very fluid concept, which means that it has many features and that it cannot be simplified into an easily understandable concept. Smith et al. (2007) also talk about how it is difficult to define what fanaticism holds within itself because defining it as a vital commitment or dynamic pursuit is not sufficient enough. What makes it so complex is the fact that people can be fans of anything and the term can be applied to an endless amount of subjects. In addition, fans can be involved with objects of their fanaticism on different levels of intensity. (Redden and Steiner, 2000)

Researchers have taken different views to map what fanaticism is. Some have taken the view of the concept as excessive, concentrating on giving negative light to the attributes (e.g. Redden and Steiner, 2000). In recent years, however, research has taken a more positive view on fanaticism, seeing it to be more of a beneficial phenomenon even though it may lie beyond the limits of normal behaviour (e.g. Thorne and Bruner, 2006; Chung et al. 2008; Smith et al. 2007). This positive view is the one I take in this research, as it is the direction consumer research is taking in this particular field.

Fans are very valuable and attractive consumers as they are the most enthusiastic, creative, and loyal customers. They have extreme consumption drives as well as heavy usage patterns,

and they go to great personal and financial lengths to support the object of their fanaticism (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Chung et al. 2005; Smith et al. 2007). Fans' attachment is very consistent and they also tend to resist marketing messages of competitor brands (Funk and James, 2004; Chung et al. 2008). Through fanaticism, consumers form deep relationships similar to interpersonal relationships that are closely intertwined with identity (Chung et al 2005), resulting in passion and emotion being central parts of the concept (Smith et al. 2007; Chung et al. 2008; Lee, 2009).

Chung et al. (2005, 2008) put together a definition of fanaticism, which displays this concept as "an affective-laden phenomenon [...] and a unique form of loyalty characterized by strong and intense levels of commitment, allegiance, devotion, passion, emotional attachment, enthusiasm and involvement". Therefore fanaticism can be viewed to be made up of many other concepts, and to understand it better, topics such as loyalty, devotion, love as well as attachment should be looked at. Further, since this research will largely concentrate on consumers' personal development in fanaticism, defining the relationship between the fan and the fanaticised object is crucial.

### **2.1.1 Predispositions of Fanaticism**

Fanaticism has been studied and seen in a negative light for quite a long time, as was already pointed out (Thorne and Bruner, 2006; Chung et al. 2005, 2008). Fans have been labelled as extravagant, intolerant, and even violent (Passmore, 2003), and fanatical behaviour has been understood to be abnormal or just silly (Smith et al. 2007).

Fans are indeed inclined to think that their ideas are the correct ones (Chung et al. 2008). Redden and Steiner (2000) define this attitude as intolerance. These types of strong beliefs and extreme enthusiasm are often seen to be excessive (Passmore, 2003), but, as Chung et al. (2005) point out, fanatical consumers are not all extreme and are mainly made up of brand loyal customers who have a strong bond with the brand. By pointing out dysfunctional individuals, the whole concept is made to be dysfunctional.

Fans are also seen as being in opposition of mainstream society (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). This is actually true in many ways, but is in no way a negative aspect. Many fan-based cultural movements begin on the fringe of the modern world. These trends gradually work their way

to the middle of mainstream consumption, this way causing fans to actually take the role of innovators. (Smith et al. 2007)

Fanaticism's biggest problem has been its connection to addictive and obsessive-compulsive behaviours. In this light, fanaticism has often been dismissed as a disorder. (Thorne and Bruner, 2006; Chung et al. 2005, 2008) Studies have shown that fans do sometimes show signs of such behaviour, but, contrary to beliefs, these are never harmful to individuals. In fact, fans exercise a tremendous amount of self-control in order to avoid such negative consequences. (Chung et al. 2008) Also it should be noted that while both compulsive and fanatical consumption are very emotional behaviours, they are at their cores very different.

Compulsive consumption is defined by addictive behaviour and psychological dependence. This kind of behaviour is usually a type of escape, i.e. a reaction to stress or an unpleasant situation. Compulsive consumption is then related to negative feelings and can have very harmful effects on the individual and their surroundings. (Faber et al. 1987) Fanaticism can also include addictive and obsessive behaviour, but it originates from positive feelings. It brings to consumers, among other things, satisfaction, identification of self, and a feeling of belonging. (Chung et al. 2008) One can see, though, why compulsive and fanatical behaviour can be seen as one and the same: the visible actions of individuals are quite similar. It is what we don't see that makes the difference, as the motives, meanings, and feelings behind these actions are totally opposite.

Fanaticism is not always socially accepted or seen as normal. It is nonetheless important to notice that the norm can never be fully defined, as different groups of people make different rules and the norm is constantly re-written. (Smith et al. 2007) Passmore (2003) further argues that views on fanaticism are often very simplified and ignorant, which creates the negative view of it. Lastly, while fanaticism may have many negative predispositions, its positive attributes definitely outweigh them. Fans are extremely committed to the objects of their adoration and are very active in their regard, which results in positive things to both consumers and marketers. (Redden and Steiner, 2000; Smith et al. 2007)

## **2.1.2 Characteristics of Fanaticism**

There has been a lot of confusion as to what the characteristics of fanaticism are. This is largely due to the fact that fanaticism has often been studied in a negative light, and that the concepts “fan” and “fanatic” have been given contradictory meanings. (Chung et al. 2008; Smith et al. 2007) With the gradual acceptance of a positive view on fanaticism in consumer research as well as the merge of the two concepts to have the same positive meaning (Smith et al. 2007), the characteristics have become clearer.

Thorne and Bruner (2006) define the four main characteristics of fanaticism in their research. These are internal involvement, external involvement, a desire to acquire, and social interaction. Research by Chung et al. (2008) supports these, but points out that fanaticism does not always include social interaction, and can simply be a very personal phenomenon. Moreover, not all fans participate in fan activities with the same level of intensity (Thorne and Bruner, 2006), meaning that the characteristics of fanaticism can be seen in varying degrees (Hunt et al. 1999). I present the characteristics of fanaticism below.

### **2.1.2.1 Internal Involvement**

According to Thorne and Bruner (2006), fanaticism, firstly, includes internal involvement, which means fans “focus their time, energy and resources intently on a specific area of research”. Fans derive great pleasure from the source of their interest and express a lot more interest in this area than do non-fans (Kozinets, 2001; Belk and Costa, 1998). A fan’s internal involvement is defined by extraordinary levels of loyalty and devotion, which imply that attachment goes beyond ordinary levels (Chung et al. 2008).

Fanaticism becomes more than just a simple engagement between the consumer and object, and involves strong emotional attachment as well as feelings of love, intimacy and dedication (Pichler and Hemetsberger, 2007; Ahuvia, 2005). This can be seen e.g. through a fan missing the object of their fanaticism when they are away from it (Chung et al. 2008). The consumption process is this way turned into a highly personalised system of beliefs that support finding, establishing, and transforming the consumer’s identity (Smith et al. 2007).

### **2.1.2.2 External Involvement**

Fans also have a desire for external involvement, which means that they demonstrate their involvement with the area of their interest through various behaviours. The type of behaviour depends on the genre and the extensity of fanaticism, and can range from purchasing a magazine weekly to dressing up as a favourite character from a movie and re-enacting scenes. (Thorne and Bruner, 2006) The fanatic consumption and activities connected with it are usually seen as an end to themselves, and that is why they are continued (Chung et al. 2008).

### **2.1.2.3 Desire to Acquire**

Fans are characterized by an intense desire to acquire, and through that possess material objects related to the area of their fanaticism (Thorne and Bruner, 2006). Often fans desire to buy and re-buy specific products and “will not have any other” (Oliver, 1997, p.392). Fans themselves often cannot explain why some object is so appealing, but sometimes it is the desire itself that is found to be desired (Belk et al. 2003). Therefore fans find pleasure in not only possessing objects, but also in wishing for them (Thorne and Bruner, 2006). Like many individuals, fans choose to express themselves through consumption (Thomson et al. 2005). Desire can thus become the driving force behind consumption because it’s a pleasurable feeling invested with meaning. Desired objects can further become channels for love, respect, recognition and status. (Belk et al. 2003)

Moreover, fans largely identify themselves through the objects of their fanaticism, and these become an important part of their self-perception (Belk and Costa, 1998). Fans have been known to create shrines out of these kinds of items, and, in extreme cases, fanatical objects can even become more important than food or shelter (Kozinets, 1997, 2001). Apart from collecting products, fans also make items related to the fanaticised object, this way contributing to the culture and making it even more personalised (Brown, 1997).

### **2.1.2.4 Social Interaction and Personal Meaning**

Fanaticism brings out a desire for social interaction (Thorne and Bruner, 2006). This interaction can manifest itself in many different ways: fans may choose to converse online or meet in real life (Kozinets, 2001). Through the interaction, a person’s status or group membership can be established as fanaticism may also have social significance (Oliver, 1999).



While a lot of literature places fanaticism in community environments (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Obst et al. 2002; Kozinets, 2001; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Richardson and Turley, 2008), evidence has also been found that fanaticism can be sustained just as well without the support of other people or a community. This way fanaticism becomes an intensely personal phenomenon (Chung et al. 2007, 2008). It is therefore also important to notice that that being a fan can be both public and private (Passmore, 2003).

## **2.2 Consumer-Brand Relationships**

Fanaticism is at its core a relationship with the object of fanaticism (Oliver, 1993; Fournier, 1998). Usually a consumer maintains only a few core relationships, and these have a lot of impact on a person's identity, self-definition, and self-exploration, as well as on emotions, cognition, behaviour, and motives. Relationships bring people the feeling of belonging, which is a fundamental human need and the basic reason why people seek out relationships. (Giddens, 1991, p. 88-98; Russell and Puto, 1999; Baumeister and Leary, 1995) Because consumer-brand relationships are understood through such feelings as attachment, commitment, and intimacy, which have also been shown to be present in fanaticism (Chung et al. 2005, 2008; Thorne and Bruner, 2006), the importance of defining fanaticism as a relationship is brought forward (Russell et al. 2004; Acosta and Devasagayam, 2010).

### **2.2.1 Nature of Consumer-Brand Relationships**

Consumer-brand relationships are characterised by high involvement and connectedness, and have a large impact on individuals' social and personal lives (Russell and Puto, 1999). Relationships add and structure meanings into people's lives, and also allow people to create value by supporting and moulding their identities, as well as through giving them a means to express themselves (Fournier, 1998).

Meaningful consumer-brand relationships are very similar to interpersonal relationships, as they evolve over time, and generate feelings of commitment, intimacy, devotion, and attachment (Russell et al. 2004; McEwen, 2005, p. 4-13; Acosta and Devasagayam, 2010). Such products as TV-shows, movies, and digital games may have an even greater resemblance of interpersonal relationships as the viewers relate to and identify with the characters, as well as

participate in their experiences (Russell et al. 2004). Characters can appear as real people, evoking feelings of familiarity and modelling social phenomena, such as family life or lifestyles (Fiske, 1987).

Belk (1988) presents the idea that relationships with material things are actually three-way, not two-way. The relationship takes the form of person-thing-person, as it can relate to and express relationships to other people, places, and experiences (Ahuvia, 2005). Thus, relationships can mean and represent many different things to a person, and true relationships are, in the end, sought for the value that they can bring to the partners involved (Giddens, 1991, p. 88-98). An emotional bond is this way created between the partners involved in the consumer-brand relationship that creates a rich affective grounding similar to adoration and love (Shimp and Madden, 1988; Fournier, 1998; Thomson et al. 2005). The object in the relationship then becomes highly symbolic, and brings acceptance, reassurance, and self-validation (Russell and Puto, 1999).

Lastly, strong consumer-brand relationships must be interdependent, meaning both partners should affect, define, and redefine the relationship (Fournier, 1998). Both the consumer and the brand must then be contributing members in the relationship dyad. (Fournier, 1998) It should be further noted that, in consumer-brand relationships, it is often the experiences, not the actual properties of a brand that matter to the consumer in the long run (McEwen, 2005, p. 4-13). Therefore companies should strive to create experiences for fans in order to keep up their active involvement.

### **2.2.2 Starting Consumer-Brand Relationships**

The way consumer-brand relationships begin has not been studied very thoroughly in consumer research literature. It is, however, clear that it is attraction that brings people and brands together initially (Fajer and Schouten, 1995). Attraction largely consists of external factors and social influences, and originates the passion and enthusiasm that help the relationship grow and evolve. (Chung et al. 2007) This phenomenon is also called a peak in consumption. It is the first experience with the brand, which is used to acquire knowledge and get to know one another (Smith, 1995). Further, a similar concept of enchantment has been said to be the starting point of consumer-brand relationships. Enchantment happens when brands offer symbolic value through the transfer of cultural resources, individual experiences,

and social exchanges. (McCracken, 1986; Fuller et al. 2008) This way brands become a somewhat conscious resource for the consumer in their identity-building project (Holt, 2002).

While a certain spark is needed for grabbing the attention of a person, consumer-brand relationships are not made overnight. The consumer must first be engaged, after which meaning and trust must be created for the relationship to develop. For the relationship to truly exist, stay alive and prosper, it must be managed at all times (McEwen, 2005, p. 4-13). Investment and commitment are also needed for the relationship to grow and to be able to overcome difficulties (Fajer and Schouten, 1995). Furthermore, relationships require frequent interaction, as the perception of the existence of a relationship is marked by not only emotions, but also stability (Baumeister and Leary, 1995).

For a consumer-brand relationship to become meaningful and intense, the most crucial thing is the conversion point, which is when the object in the relationship gains increased significance and importance. What was originally an externally and socially driven involvement converts into internally driven enthusiasm and passion. The relationship therefore turns from a social experience into more of a personal experience. (Chung et al. 2007) The conversion point comes to be through consumption flow, i.e. the repetition of the intensely absorbing experiences seen in peak consumption. These experiences fine-tune skills, integrate meaning, contribute to the self of the individual, and develop the relationship. (Smith, 1995) Thus also trust and commitment are built, as individuals learn to know the object of the relationship better, making the enthusiasm and the passion of the relationship self-sustaining (Chung et al. 2007).

### **2.2.3 Ending Consumer-Brand Relationships**

Because relationships with brands resemble relationships with people (Fajer and Schouten, 1995), the termination of a brand relationship can be very similar to losing or breaking up with a loved person. Ending brand relationships is a natural part of life, as preferences and lifestyles change. This is never a spontaneous decision, though, but rather an on-going process of dissolution. When consumer and brand divorce, it has a very emotional effect on the consumer's life. This type of event is usually connected with personal transformations, major life events, changes, and developments. (Hemetsberger, 2009)

It is important to understand that meaningful consumer-brand relationships can end in very different ways. Firstly, one should understand the difference between relationship termination and brand detachment. Termination simply means the ending of the relationship. This can happen e.g. when the consumer gets physically separated from the brand. Detachment, on the other hand is the loss of feelings towards the brand. A person can break up with a brand, but still retain feelings for it and vice versa. (Fajer and Schouten, 1995; Hemetsberger, 2009) Nonetheless, detachment is a strong indicator of the consumer ending the relationship, because affective links are lost. Also brand commitment, buying behaviour, and even brand consideration are lowered by detachment. (Perrin-Martinenq, 2004)

Fournier (1998) presents two models of relationship deterioration and dissolution. Firstly, a brand break-up can be the result of lack of maintenance of the relationship. Consumer-brand relationships need constant support, and both partners have to actively contribute to the relationship. Secondly, deterioration and dissolution can be caused by environmental, partner-oriented, and dyadic stresses that result in sudden decline of the relationship. Environmental stresses can either be physical situations or the appearance of a new alternative, i.e. a new brand replacing the old one. Partner-oriented stresses are changes in personality, roles, needs, or even managerial decisions. Finally, dyadic stresses involve the breach of trust or unwritten relationship rules. Fajer and Schouten (1995) essentially present an identical model of break-up patterns, but stress that termination can also be caused by actions or pre-existing attitudes of either one or both partners. These can originate in incompatibilities, mechanical failure, failure to develop, and the appearance of previously unknown information.

The disposal of a relationship can be voluntary or involuntary, and both of these are extremely emotional and meaningful events for consumers (McAlexander, 1991). Objects and possessions carry self-concept- and identity-based meaning, and losing a connection to them can change values and meaning in one's life (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988). When disposal is voluntary, it usually has a lot of intended meaning attached to it (Black, 2011). Involuntary disposal, on the other hand, can be very traumatic, as it results in partial loss of one's identity (Belk, 1988). This kind of disposal can also feel like a violation to the individual's self (Cherrier, 2009), and can result in very negative emotions, such as regret, anxiety, and grief (Belk, 1988).

## 2.3 Loyalty

Studies have shown that loyalty is one of the major factors of fanaticism (e.g. Bristow and Sebastian, 2001; Chung et al, 2005, 2007, 2008; Richardson and Turley, 2008). Fans are extremely loyal of their fanaticised object and are very unlikely to sever ties with it even when fails their expectations (Bristow and Sebastian, 2001). Loyalty shapes the consumption experience and helps maintain it (Richardson and Turley, 2008). It is also in a way highly irrational, as it requires the consumer to believe that the chosen product continues to provide the absolutely best alternative (Oliver, 1999).

Loyalty is defined by a pattern of repeat purchasing and a positive attitude toward a given brand (Oliver, 1999; Back and Parks, 2003; Behi and Belaid, 2011). These are affected by direct and indirect experiences with the brand, which become significant through perceived personal relevance (Oliver, 1999; Suh and Yi, 2006). As loyalty behaviour is repeated over time, it becomes reinforced by commitment, and is shaped by social norms, other people and communities, an individual's budget, search costs, and availability of choice (Funk and James, 2004; Suh and Yi, 2006; Behi and Belaid, 2011).

Oliver (1997) presents a framework that defines four phases of loyalty. The first phase is based on preference of the product over others, while the second phase brings in liking and a positive attitude. The third phase is developmental as experience and episodes of positive affect evolve into commitment and motivation toward a brand or product. The last phase combines all of the above characteristics into ultimate loyalty that overcomes all obstacles, e.g. switching incentives. This form of loyalty is the kind seen in fanaticism.

Loyalty can often be quite mechanical and void of feelings. In this sense fanatical loyalty differs from other forms of loyalty such as repeat-buying or conditioned behaviour, as it is heavily driven by emotions. Its affective-laden characteristics give fanaticism the ability to always deliver positive experiences and overall product or service satisfaction. (Oliver, 1993; Fournier, 1998)

## 2.4 Devotion

Fanaticism has in many instances been defined as extraordinary devotion (e.g. Chung et al. 2008; Pichler and Hemetsberger, 2007). Pimentel and Reynolds (2004) were the first to address devotion as a distinct concept in marketing literature. They define it as emotional bonding and intense loyalty that survives poor product performance, bad publicity, high prices, and even the absence of promotional efforts. In devotion, objects are thus assigned extraordinary importance and personal value. Consumers even often go to their own expense to promote the brand, because the benefits they gain from the objects of their devotion are not merely utilitarian, but also affective (Pimentel and Reynolds, 2004).

Devotion involves extreme belief (Belk and Tumbat, 2005), implying a kind of religious fervour with elements of sacredness (Pimentel and Reynolds, 2004). For a long time, religion sustained culture with its ability to codify, symbolize, and sacralise beliefs, bringing people meaning and shaping their identity. As more and more people today are giving up religion, consumption has largely taken this role, because people still have a need to believe in something that fights against larger and more powerful forces. (O'Guinn and Belk, 1989) Devotion then highly relies on mythical icons and places, as consumption becomes similar to religion, providing a philosophy and a higher meaning that moralizes behaviour. (Kozinets, 2001; McCracken, 1986) Brands and consumption become the traditions of the modern culture (Holt, 2002), and the cult-like devotion helps consumers with self-actualization and self-identification through shared experiences and beliefs (Atkin, 2004, p. 81).

Communities of devoted consumers have this way escalated into brand cults that are very similar in structure to religion, as they have their own myths, heroic saviours and satanic opponents. (Belk and Tumbat, 2005) Devotion is expressed here through different kinds of rituals, collections, or even shrines. Objects of devotion thus come to bear very special meanings, and start to represent status and even identity. (Belk et al. 1989; Pichler and Hemetsberger, 2008) The objects of devotion become sacred, and consumers take on the roles of missionaries, spreading the word and trying to influence others. (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Belk and Tumbat, 2005; Pichler and Hemetsberger, 2007; Matzler et al. 2007; Chung et al. 2008)

Following this, devotion builds immensely strong emotional bonds between consumer and brand, this way also becoming a very private phenomenon. Emotional bonds are extremely

important, as they bring meaning to consumers' lives and help build the individual's identity. The bond created by devotion conveys a connection and very strong emotions, such as love and zeal. The object is then longer seen as a possession, but it becomes a partner in an equal relationship (Pichler and Hemetsberger, 2007, 2008).

## **2.5 Love**

Love is one of the most intense human emotions and definitely the most sought after (Sternberg and Grajek, 1984). However, the word "love" is used nowadays just as much with objects, brands, and activities as it is with people. Love has become a very common consumption related emotion (Ahuvia, 2005), and it has been described to be an essential part of the emotional bond created in consumer-brand relationships (Shimp and Madden, 1988; Fournier, 1998; Thomson et al. 2005). Love also has great influence on who we are because loved objects can serve as key elements of experiences, memories, and relationships. (Richins, 1997; Ahuvia, 2005; Hemetsberger, 2009)

The desire to love originates from the need to find things to value, to care about, to feel excited and inspired by (Branden 1980, cit. Whang et al. 2004). Love is dynamic, interactive, motivational, and evokes the need to nurture its object in order to enhance it. This is seen e.g. through consumers buying complementary products or constructing collections. Love is further a remedy for loneliness and a way to affiliate with the world. (Sternberg, 1986; Whang et al. 2004; Lastovicka and Sirianni, 2011)

While all love takes place in a relationship and is characterized with positive emotions and attachment, "love is not a homogenous monolith with one form" (Lastovicka and Sirianni, 2011). Many different kinds of love exist and many theories have been created to describe them in the contexts of loyalty and devotion (e.g. Shimp and Madden, 1988; Whang et al. 2004; Lastovicka and Sirianni, 2011). Ultimate love is often described to be identical to customer loyalty (e.g. Shimp and Madden, 1988), and, as loyalty is an essential part of fanaticism, love could therefore also be used to describe the fan relationship.

## 2.6 Attachment

Attachment is the desire for connection and the bond between person and object (Thomson et al. 2005; Behi and Belaid, 2011), which becomes the base for building and keeping relationships. In fanatic relationships, the degree of attachment is very large and often goes beyond ordinary levels, thus becoming an important part of the overall phenomenon. Attachment has even been said to be one of the defining characteristic of fanaticism (Chung et al. 2005, 2008; Thorne and Bruner, 2006).

Attachment is, at its core, an attitude that is positive, meaningful, symbolic, and important. For this attitude to be able to sustain itself, it is developed over time through interaction. (Thomson et al. 2005; Behi and Belaid, 2011) Consumers develop attitudes towards all brands as a reaction to interaction with them, but not all attitudes are meaningful. An attitude becomes attachment, as it is connected to memories, experiences, behaviours, and other people. This way attachment also helps build and sustain the relationship by adding new meanings to it. (Thomson et al. 2005)

Attachment becomes intertwined with the individual's identity and is used to define it. It is also largely used to infer meaning, to reflect self-development, and to signify self-extension. Attachment can even become so strong that objects are kept even when they become non-functional or useless, because they can still be a means to socialise and be involved. (Kleine et al. 1995) This way attachment becomes similar to Belk's (1988) idea of the person-thing-person relationship with material objects, as attachment essentially starts to represent affective and identity-related concepts to the consumer instead of just physical characteristics of the product or service.



### **3 Consumer Identity**

“We are what we have” (Belk, 1988). This suggests that identity is composed of the various meanings attached by the self and by others. These meanings are based on social roles, personal characteristics, and other attributes. (Ibarra and Barbulescu 2010) People perceive things that fit and describe them as a part of their identity and as extensions of themselves that incorporate the self into something greater. Through tangible and intangible possessions individuals categorize themselves, other people, and the environment, making sense of the world around them and creating their identity. (Kleine et al. 1995; Acosta and Devasagayam, 2010) The terms “self”, “sense of self” and “identity” are used here as a synonym for a person’s subjective perception of who they are. In today’s world, this perception has gained a very important role, as identity issues have become central in consumption (Belk, 1988).

We are also what we make of ourselves. The self-identity is not just something that is given or something that is a product of the social system. Identity is an organised system of elements that the person finds important in their life. It should also be actively created and sustained by individuals through interpreting events and experiences, such as consumption, and integrating these into the self. (Hermans, 1987; Giddens, 1991, p. 1-9, 47-55, 75, 137)

Understanding identity from the point of view of fanatical consumer-brand relationships is very crucial, especially as these relationships often take the form of person-thing-person. Thus fanatical relationships actually become a representation of something more than just physical attributes, e.g. memories, lifestyles, and the fan’s true identity. (Belk, 1988; Ahuvia, 2005)

#### **3.1 The “I” and the “Me”**

Based on James (1890), McAdams (1996) presents the concept of the identity actually being a duplex self, the “I” and the “me”. Together these two form the self, but they do not form a unified whole. The “I” is a process, while the “me” is the product.

The “I” is the process of creating the self through apprehending experiences, feelings, and other elements as one’s own. This way surrounding actions, ideas, and objects are seen as belonging to oneself, and the self is created out of experiences and thoughts that are

constantly organised and interpreted. The selfing process thus allows for an acquisition of a sense of self and distinction of individuality from others. (Hermans, 1987, McAdams, 1996) This is affected, amongst other things, by culture, interpersonal relationships, as well as mass media (Thompson and Hirschman, 1995), and this type of transformation of the self can take a physical, spiritual, or ideological form (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995).

The “me” is the product of the selfing process, and is essentially the concept of the self that one has in their mind, i.e. the constantly evolving collection of attributes collected in the selfing process. These include possessions that come from the material, social, as well as spiritual realms, and can therefore include not only important physical objects, but also other people, one’s beliefs, attributes, characteristics, and anything else that can be viewed to be “mine”. The way that things are felt to be one’s own is through appropriating, making, synthesizing, reflecting on, or even just observing them. Thus life stories also become a part of the “me”. The different possessions can change and develop over time, reflecting on the changes in the person’s life and identity. (Hermans, 1987; McAdams, 1996)

People have very different identities. Therefore also the selfing processes and products are very diverse and include a large array of different elements. Nevertheless, all individuals are driven by the two same basic motives when creating identity. The first motive is autonomic expansion of the self, which involves striving for self-enhancement, self-maintenance, and self-expansion. Essentially, this is a need to create and develop the self. The second motive is fitting the self into the environment, which encompasses the longing for contact and union with people and things in one’s surroundings. The two motives are mutually complementing and function as a basic orientation for a person’s search for their own well-being. The motives are not causal mechanisms, but more of directional trends that characterise the process of selfing. (Hermans, 1987) Moreover, the two basic motives of the selfing process are actually very similar in their goals to characteristics of fanaticism, such as internal and external involvement (Thorne and Bruner, 2006), meaning that the selfing process could be seen as an essential part of becoming and being a fan.

### **3.2 Core Self and Extended Self**

Belk (1988) introduced a notion in many ways similar to the selfing process. This also involves making surrounding elements of the environment a part of the self, but it takes the relationship of the identity and its surrounding material and immaterial objects further. Belk (1988) presents the idea that identity is made up of the “core self”, the true and authentic self, which is expanded to include various items that become a part of the “extended self”. The more central or close to the core these objects are, the more meaning is attached to them and therefore also more care is given to them (Belk, 1988). This is very crucial from the point of view of fans, as fanaticisms become central parts of their lives (Kozinets, 1997, 2001). Objects thus aren't simply self and non-self, but can range from intensely identifying with the self to marginally identifying with the self. This way, the core and extended self are not actually two different things, as McAdams (1996) concludes, but they one and the same. The core self reaches out through the extended self to incorporate things into one's identity, creating a unified whole out of the process and outcome of creating the self (Belk, 1988).

The idea of a core and extended self is very interesting from the point of view of fanaticism, as one of the main characteristics of being a fan is the desire to acquire things related to the object of fanaticism (Thorne and Bruner, 2006). As Belk (1988) points out, consumer behaviour, and in this case, fanaticism, can be best understood through the meaning people attach to their extended self. Culture, society, and marketers suggest meanings for different objects, and people start using these to derive, extend, and create a self-concept (Belk, 1988; Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988). Possessions that become a part of the self situate an individual's character and personality into context and bring meaning and value into the consumer's life. (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988) The objects thus start carrying identity-based meaning and become a very important part of one's life, self-perception, and -expression, as is seen in fanaticism (Belk and Costa, 1998; Thomson et al. 2005).

In this light, possessions become symbolic entities that carry emotional, cultural, and historical meanings into which the consumer extends him- or herself. (McCraken, 1986; Belk, 1988; Ahuvia, 2005) These meanings are not constant and therefore change with time, experience, and life events (Belk, 1988; Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988). This way objects help retain feelings, experiences, and memories, and are integral to sustaining a sense of who we are through our past. Lastly, it is important to notice that objects and items are not limited to just material things, but they can also include persons, places, and ideas (Belk, 1988).

### **3.3 Searching for Identity**

Searching for and finding one's identity is essentially a quest of self-fulfilment and self-actualization. For centuries this was something people didn't give much thought, as the self was considered as something to be hidden away from others. The open search and exploration of self was only established in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and was the result of abandonment of religious views and the increase of an individualistic upbringing. Finding one's identity has since then very quickly become accepted by society. (Baumeister, 1987)

Making a choice about one's true preferences or maintaining a coherent self can become an overwhelming problem (Ahuvia, 2005). There is a great deal of uncertainties about who to become in today's world, as there is so much choice (Giddens, 1991, p. 47-55; Ahuvia, 2005; Stillman and Baumeister, 2009), which is nonetheless restricted by social-cultural and historical contexts, images and symbols created by media as well as an individual's own experiences (Markus and Nurius, 1986). The modern world has brought upon us the problem of combining globalising issues and personal dispositions, as the self and the society have become directly tied into one another (Giddens, 1991, p. 1-9). Creating an identity thus becomes pressured by society (Ahuvia, 2005).

Consumers often turn to companies and brands when creating their identities, as these largely guide and engineer today's culture. Consumption is seen in the modern world as portraying traditions, social circumstances, and societal institutions that can be used as building blocks for the identity. Brands negotiate culture, meaning, and value, thus becoming a resource for consumers. (Holt, 2002)

A sense of self has both a public and a private side to it that is seen through public and private behaviour respectively. Public behaviour has a lot more impact on self-evaluation and self-perception than identical private behaviour, as it can leave impressions of the self to other people. Thus public behaviour is not as easily overlooked or forgotten as private behaviour is. Public and interpersonal contexts are also very important for supporting and producing identity change. (Tice, 1992; Connell and Schau, 2008; Ibarra and Barbulescu 2010) On the other hand, private behaviour affects the internal and subjective understanding and representation of the self. In private, people become more diagnostic of their true traits, as

environmental factors are not playing a part on the behaviour. Thus issues of reputation and social relationships become irrelevant. (Tice, 1992)

Lastly, it is interesting to notice that while finding one's identity is very much accepted and even pressured by society (Baumeister, 1987), fanaticism is not (Redden and Steiner, 2000; Passmore, 2003). Fanaticism is often seen as dysfunctional (Chung et al. 2008) and violating social conventions (Thorne and Bruner, 2006) in the age where people are expected to create their own identities and re-create meaning on a daily basis (Baumeister, 1987; Smith et al. 2007). Nonetheless, the most crucial characteristic of a fan's identity is defining oneself as a fan. Also, the higher the level of fanaticism grows, the more eager fans are to do so. (Kozinets, 1997, 2001)

## **4 Narratives**

Narratives are essentially stories, accounts, and descriptions (Shankar et al. 2001), and, according to Bruner (2004), there is no better way to describe lived time than through such stories. They are a fundamental form of human communication (Atkinson, 1998) and a basic sense-making mechanism that works by constructing events in time into patterns and unifying people, places, and experiences into them (Fiske, 1987). Humans are naturally storytellers (Bush and Bush, 1994), and narratives are the natural mode through which people make sense of their lives (McAdams, 1996). Narratives thus create shared meaning, such as history or culture, among people (Bush and Bush, 1994).

Narratives are a cultural process that is shared by all societies, as all human experience is mediated through language (Fiske, 1987; Giddens, 1991, p.47). Language shapes the course and meaning of the human condition, and manifests itself through narratives (Shankar et al. 2001). We often think and speak in story form, thus putting events, experiences, and feelings that have been lived into oral expression. This helps to discover deeper meaning in and reflect on life. (Atkinson, 1998)

It has become common to view a consumer's sense of identity as structured in terms of narratives (Ahuvia, 2005). For marketers, narratives have further come to be a helping hand in interpreting, as they give a richer understanding of consumers' consumption experiences (Shankar et al. 2001). Narratives are also a very fitting way to study identity, as life stories can become an essential part of the concept of the self (McAdams, 1996). Lastly, a collection of life stories has been suggested to be a good way to study fanaticism because it allows for the understanding of one's developmental progression towards the phenomenon (Smith et al. 2007; Chung et al. 2008).

### **4.1 Narrative Identity Theory**

Ricouer (1984, 1988) presents the theory of narrative identity, which suggests that in order to make sense of ourselves and to make time socially shared, we require a narrative identity for our self. Our identity and self-understanding is thus gained through telling and listening to stories (Ricouer, 1992, p. 147).

The central construct of a narrative identity, as well as narratives in general, is the plot. Events and experiences are selected, organised, grouped, and connected into a unified and meaningful story through the means of emplotment. Emplotment places the different elements into the temporally organised and goal-directed plot, allowing them to gain meaning as they are connected to each other and contribute to the development of the plot. (Ricoeur, 1988, 1992; Polkinghorne, 1995; Riessman, 2005) The plot essentially frames experiences into a larger structure through which connections can be understood. (Polkinghorne, 1995) These connections present an interpretation that adapts cultural and societal viewpoints into a unique personal context. (Thompson et al. 1994)

When consumers tell stories about their experiences, a temporal trajectory is created starting from the past and going into the future. This establishes a relationship between personal history, understanding, and meaning. (Thompson, 1997) The narrative therefore provides a causal mode for the individual by linking life events into a sequence (Riessman, 2005). The result is a coherent narrative of self-identity that holds within itself an organised set of experiences. (Thompson, 1997) Nonetheless, narratives are always open to interpretation and revision, therefore, both shaping and reflecting identity, and, through this, creating a circular relationship between the story and the storyteller. (Ricoeur, 1988, p. 248; Järvinen, 2004)

In narrative identity, individuals are defined as self-reflecting beings that build self-identity and self-awareness, continually redefining their personal stories (Atkins 2004, cit. Rojas and Bluemelhuber, 2010). While individuals are free to create their narrative identity, they are often bound by social and cultural contexts (Markus and Nurius, 1986). People form images of who they are and what they want to be through available symbolic materials and imaginable possibilities (Woodruffe-Burton and Elliott, 2005), which are provided by the individual's surroundings, and give structure and meaning to the complex and confusing life (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 41). Narrative identities are this way typical to culture and communities, making them easy to understand and be accepted by other people. (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 99)

## **4.2 Constructing the Narrative Identity**

Narratives are constructed through memory recall, interpretation, and reflection (Hopkinson and Hogarth-Scott, 2001). Elements, events, and beliefs in a person's life are pulled together and integrated into a whole in order to make sense of them and gain overall understanding of life (Atkinson, 1998). People then come to see themselves as a list of attributes and these attributes are linked in memory to key episodes in one's life. These are strung together in a form of a story that presents the self in time and place, helping the storyteller make sense of their identity and providing a connection of the past to the present and the possible future. (Ahuvia, 2005)

The narrative is not just a sequence of events, but it is also a plotline that is essential for making sense of things, as it gives meaning and purpose, and uncovers the narrator's personal truth (Atkinson, 1998). As I already mentioned, people create narratives through emplotment (Ricouer, 1984; Hermans, 1987; Riessman, 2005). Emplotment imposes an end point for the narrative in the present, where the author of the plot is situated. This allows for the identity to be constructed and the story to be seen as a whole, building up to the present and looking into the future. Nonetheless, the narrative does not only consist of the narrator's past and future, but it also presents their current experiences and commitments, as the conditions and causes of constructing a narrative are also valuable and relevant (Ricouer, 1984, 1988; Järvinen, 2004).

The narrative must continually integrate elements into the on-going story in order to keep itself alive. Therefore, the narrative identity constantly filters experiences and feelings, keeping alive a sense of self and integrity that is seen as worthwhile (Giddens, 1991, p.47-55). Moreover, material and immaterial possessions are constantly integrated into the self, as they become artefacts of life stories (Kleine et al. 1995).

## **4.3 The Contents of Narrative Identity**

Narratives are based on facts, but go beyond them (McAdams, 1996). They do not mirror the past, but reflect it, as the teller can re-imagine and reflect on their life. (Riessman, 2005) It is important to notice that facts are created rather than reproduced in narratives because the present always shapes the retelling of the past, changing its meaning (Josselson, 2004). The



past, present, and future are always seen through the lens of the present, i.e. current views, goals, fears, and self (Markus and Nurius, 1986). Also, different contexts or environments can cause people to present different versions of the narrative (McAdams, 1996).

Narratives are therefore never “truthful” in the whole sense of the word, as autobiographical accounts are highly susceptible to cultural and interpersonal influences, and are open to interpretation (Hopkinson and Hogarth-Scott, 2001; Bruner, 2004). A truthful recollection is never the goal, though. The most important thing is to see how connections between the past, present, and future are made (Riessman, 2005). While narratives may not be true in the external reality, they present the reality of the teller, i.e. the way they see the world and construct it in their mind. (Hopkinson and Hogarth-Scott, 2001) In view of this research, this “untruthfulness” does not present a problem, as the goal is to gain a subjective understanding of fanaticism from the consumers.

Structurally, a narrative should always have a beginning, middle, and an end (Shankar et al. 2001). In a more storied sense, the narrative follows a pattern of beginning to conflict to resolution, which works as a psychological blueprint and aids the storyteller (Atkinson, 1998). It is then sequence and consequence what makes a narrative (Riessman, 2005), meaning that the narrative should always make a point. (Shankar et al. 2001).

As the narrative is remembered, shaped, and shared, it also becomes clear how the self has developed. The narrative identity thus becomes a subjective perspective on how the self is created and changed over time. The self can then be seen as an on-going story and its creative interpretation, as well as a meaning maker with a place in culture, society, and history. (Atkinson, 1998)

#### **4.4 Goals of Narrative Identity**

A person’s narrative identity answers the question *who* she or he is in a form of a story (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 147-8). But the goal isn’t just to just tell us about *what* had happened, but also *how* and *why* (Atkinson, 1998; Järvinen, 2004). These questions allow illustrations, connections, and developments to be seen (Atkinson, 1998).

Academic literature has thoroughly studied and pointed out the more precise outcomes that the narrative identity presents. Firstly, narratives are about creating the self, or the identity

(McAdams, 1996; Atkinson, 1998), thus answering the questions *who*. Secondly, it has been pointed out that narratives help organise memories and events, and, therefore, create an organised life for the storyteller (e.g. Bruner, 2004; Conway and Holmes, 2004; Connell and Schau, 2008). This can be seen as answering the question *how*. Lastly, almost all research agrees that creating meaning is always an important outcome of a narrative (e.g. Atkinson, 1998; Järvinen, 2004), as life stories are a strong part of a person's identity (McAdams, 1996). Through this, the last question, *why*, is answered. All of the three questions are not separate from one another, but intertwined and supportive of each other. All three of them are also important from the point of view of this research, as I am trying to uncover the development of fanaticism alongside the consumer's life and identity.

#### **4.4.1 Creating the Self**

The main aim of the narrative is creating or verifying one's identity. It is a means of becoming who one really is, putting one's life together, and seeing it as a whole. (Atkinson, 1998) As it has already been noted, identity is a huge part of the concept of fanaticism (e.g. Belk, 1988; Ahuvia, 2005). It is therefore very important to understand how identity is constructed in order to find fanaticism's role and meaning, as well as establish its development in a person's life.

The identity is created by internalising and integrating elements into an individual's life story, and, through this, binding together the separate elements of the self. The narrative this way supports the process of developing the self, and helps create, reflect on, and verify an individual's identity (McAdams, 1996). Stories further affirm and validate a person's place in culture and community. (Atkinson, 1998)

Through narratives, people can expose their principles and values (Shankar et al. 2001) thus constructing and adapting their identities (Ibarra, 1999). People can also test and try out different identities in order to find their true self. The self-narrative in this context becomes an instrument that helps cross gaps between old, new, and future identities, and, through this, aids in transitions and big life changes of people. What's more, apart from helping people find identity, narratives also assist in being faithful to the true self through coherent and sensible story making. Individuals stay true to themselves through behaving across all situations in a way that upholds their authenticity, or real self. (Ibarra and Barbulescu 2010)

#### **4.4.2 Creating Organised Life**

Because a narrative is not the actual experience, but a representation of it, telling a story becomes a way of organising and segmenting events in an individual's life (Atkinson, 1998; Bruner, 2004). This happens almost naturally as narratives are constructed through memory recall, interpretation, and reflection (Hopkinson and Hogarth-Scott, 2001), and the organization is done through the process of emplotment discussed earlier (Ricoeur, 1984; Hermans, 1987; Riessman, 2005). Autobiographical memories then become of fundamental significance here, as they help shape the self, build relationships, and filter the way the external world is seen (Conway and Holmes, 2004; Connell and Schau, 2008).

The narrative story creates meaningful relationships between the past, present, and future by guiding the narrator from stage to stage. These are never objective recollections, but reconstructions through the perspective of the present. Current goals and projects thereby constantly guide this interpretation, as they are the most meaningful things on the mind of the individual. (Järvinen, 2004) This way narratives become just versions of the life story as time and new experiences give them different viewpoints (Bruner, 2004).

By organizing experiences in such a way, basic values and connections between different meanings start to appear, hence allowing the consumer and researcher alike to start gaining a better understanding of the subject in question. Experiences are also thus confirmed in moral, ethical, and social contexts (Atkinson, 1998).

#### **4.4.3 Creating Meaning**

A life story is always a way of creating meaning (Järvinen, 2004). The narrative presents events and experiences, but, most importantly, it also shows the reasons behind them (Järvinen, 2004). Telling a story then becomes a means of understanding events, people, as well as social and individual reality (Hopkinson and Hogarth-Scott, 2001). It also brings individuals more into accordance with reality, other people, and, most importantly, with themselves (Atkinson, 1998).

The individual constantly builds on what they have experienced, as past experiences would lack meaning if they did not grow out of on-going projects (Järvinen, 2004). The self always looks for explanations in order to link the present to the past, and re-establish continuity to

experience and identity. Moreover, elements of the past, most importantly previous identities of the individual, serve as reference points or guides in building the narrative (Järvinen, 2004), becoming motivational factors, as they establish the cognitive link to the past (Markus and Nurius, 1986).

All in all, it becomes evident that finding the different kinds of meanings that people attach to the objects and experiences connected with their fanaticism is one of the central building blocks of understanding how fanaticism develops. Therefore the narrative identity becomes an all the more useful way of studying such a phenomenon.

## 5 Methodology – The Narrative Paradigm

A paradigm is a set of basic beliefs that present a worldview, i.e. a definition of the nature of the world, the individual's place in it, and the relationship to that world and its parts. The belief system is based on ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions. (Guba and Lincoln, 1994)

This research makes use of the narrative paradigm, as such a worldview allows for attaining an intimate understanding of consumer fanaticism (Chung et al. 2008). Narratives provide lived experience in its purest and rawest form, enabling comprehension of context, motifs, connections, and feelings (Atkinson, 1998). Because narratives are the only way to truly get to know unique and individual experience, they allow fanaticism to be studied as it is lived and not as it is seen through the lens of “normality”. (Smith et al. 2007)

Below, I first present the overall goal of narrative research, after which the abovementioned assumptions for the narrative paradigm are introduced. It should be noted that the worldview presented takes its roots in the interpretive paradigm, and therefore shares many similarities with it (Shankar et al. 2001).

### 5.1 The Goal of Narrative Research

Paradigms or worldviews always have a fundamental goal, and in the narrative paradigm it is adopted from the interpretive paradigm. The primary goal of narrative research is to understand behaviour, but not predict it. (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988) Understanding here is gained through stories and it is further viewed to be a process rather than an end product. Meaning is interpreted, and a present version of understanding is always offered. All the while, past understanding as well as time and circumstances have an affect on current and future understanding. Moreover, shared meanings such as context, roles, rituals, and gestures, among many other things, also play a critical part in the process. A researcher must therefore be able to identify and grasp such meanings, as they can bring on new light to the subject of the study. (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988) All in all, the process of understanding becomes never-ending: *the* understanding can never be reached, only *a* version of it can be gained (Denzin, 1984, cit. Hudson and Ozanne, 1988).

Narratives are perfect for researching a phenomenon such as fanaticism because they present a personal view of the studied phenomenon. Fanaticism is a very subjectively felt experience (Smith et al. 2007), and personal life stories enable the researcher to gain the consumer's own understanding of it.

## **5.2 Ontological Assumptions**

Ontology is concerned with the form and nature of reality and social beings. It answers such questions as "what can be known about reality?" and "is reality external or created by the individual?". (Guba and Lincoln, 1994)

From the narrative point of view, realities are multiple and constructed (Shankar et al. 2001). That means that reality is not composed of facts and no one real world exists, as reality is socially constructed and mentally perceived. Reality then consists of different entities that are simultaneously being shaped by people. These entities are individually constructed, but also influenced by the social and cultural world. (Shankar et al. 2001) Nonetheless, people are not seen in the narrative paradigm as mere results of outside influences. Just as narrative identity sees people as self-aware self-reflective beings (Atkins 2004, cit. Rojas and Bluemelhuber, 2010), in the narrative paradigm people actively create and interact with their environment in order to shape their reality. (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988) Furthermore, the dimension of time becomes relevant in the narrative perspective, as temporality is a key aspect of our being. Narratives exist in the past, present, and future, all of which affect our view on reality. (Shankar et al. 2001)

## **5.3 Epistemological Assumptions**

Epistemology concerns itself with "the relationship between the knower and what can be known". Basically, it presents the nature and scope of knowledge, which is constrained by the ontological assumptions (Guba and Lincoln, 1994).

Any knowledge gained through the narrative paradigm is subjective, as the ultimate goal of the research is to understand, and not to explain. As was stated above, multiple realities exist, meaning that the final version of understanding can never be reached, and knowledge can

thereby never be apprehended before actual research. (Shankar et al. 2001) This way reality and knowledge become further intertwined and inseparable in this paradigm, as the fundamental goal is understanding subjective realities (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988).

Further, as reality, from this viewpoint, is time and context relevant, knowledge is also dependent of these dimensions. Understanding of motives, meanings, reasons, and experiences constantly changes, as people's interpretation of the world is also reshaped. Knowledge becomes further bound by time and space, as narrative research often concentrates on studying details of very particular phenomena. (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988)

#### **5.4 Methodological Assumptions – Hermeneutics**

Methodological assumptions refer to “how the inquirer can go about finding out whatever they believe can be known” (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Narrative methodology heavily relies on hermeneutics, as this method allows for reaching the same plain of understanding by offering multiple meanings (Shankar et al. 2001). Just like the ontological and epistemological assumptions imply, we are offered *an* interpretation, not *the* interpretation (Denzin, 1984, cit. Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). Therefore no one truth exists, but only current understanding can be reached (Gadamer, 1989).

Hermeneutics is “the theory of the operations of understanding in their relation to the interpretation of texts” (Ricouer, 1981, p. 43), and it is, thus, the art of interpretation of understanding and revealing the truth (Gadamer, 1989; Rojas and Bluemelhuber, 2010). Hermeneutics is highly relevant to consumer research as it tries to understand understanding itself, and refine the understanding in interpretive, or in this case narrative, research. In addition, the hermeneutic approach has also been shown to be very suitable for studying consumer identity and fanaticism (Ahuvia, 2005; Chung et al. 2008). Hermeneutics offers distinct implications for understanding consumers and consumer research through such concepts, as pre-understanding, fusion of horizons, and the hermeneutic circle. (Arnold and Fischer, 1994) These are discussed in the following passage.

### **5.4.1 The Nature of Hermeneutics**

Hermeneutics was originally developed in the context of religious studies, but, in time, it was generalised into a theory of interpretation of texts not restricted to religious works. Hermeneutics also originally focused on only studying texts, but today it includes a broader array of forms including interviews, recordings, and videos. (Arnold and Fischer, 1994) This is because all behaviour can be interpreted as text and therefore could be subject to hermeneutic analysis (Shankar et al. 2001).

The text is seen in hermeneutics as autonomous, and meaning can consequently be understood in ways the author did not intend or realise. Understanding is not seen here as finding the source's intended meaning, but as being interpreted by the researcher. It is therefore never just learning, as it is also self-understanding, self-reflection, and self-development. (Arnold and Fischer, 1994) The researcher further becomes a part of the created knowledge as the interviewer and interviewee interact, creating cooperative meaning. (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Shankar et al. 2001)

Hermeneutics becomes intertwined with the narrative identity theory through the concept of existential hermeneutics. This posits that self-interpretation is an essential task for all people. Individuals are this way constantly being confronted with the question of one's own existence, opinions, and potential. Therefore the creation and reflection on the narrative identity becomes an existential concern, not just an activity one can engage in. (Rojas and Bluemelhuber, 2010)

### **5.4.2 Pre-Understanding**

Pre-understanding is an important concept that is emphasised in hermeneutics. It originates from Heidegger's concept of being-in-the-world, i.e. the notion that prior to any interpretation we and the object of interpretation exist. We also belong to a cultural world, meaning that we constantly accumulate beliefs, theories, codes, and ideologies from our environments. Through culture and socialisation, these form a pre-understanding of whatever it is we are going to interpret. (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Arnold and Fischer, 1994) Pre-understanding is not a constraint, but an enabler and a reference point (Gadamer, 1989). As a person's understanding of their experiences always reflects a broader cultural viewpoint that is



conveyed by language (Thompson et al. 1994), without pre-understanding it would be impossible to observe, make sense, or create meaning. (Arnold and Fischer, 1994)

In context of this study, the basic idea of pre-understanding is that researchers and their subjects come into research with some kind of prior knowledge. A link is then made between the interpreter and the interpreted through context and tradition. (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Arnold and Fischer, 1994) Pre-understanding becomes the researcher's window to the individual's world and a base for recognition and comparison. Nonetheless, full understanding cannot once again be reached, as we never share all the elements of tradition with another person. (Arnold and Fischer, 1994)

In consumer research, pre-understanding comes to a completely new level, as the researcher is always both consumer and researcher. This means that researchers usually have extensive personal knowledge of the environment of the study and, thus, a more sturdy reference point for understanding meaning. This can be used to concentrate more specifically on the actual subject being observed. The research can also gain a totally new viewpoint, as the researcher can use his or her own experiences as a baseline as well. Self-understanding then becomes all the more important because the researcher's own reflections on the self become relevant in understanding meaning. The boundary between the interpreter and the interpreted becomes hazy, implying that a fusion of views is needed. (Arnold and Fischer, 1994) This is discussed further below.

### **5.4.3 Fusion of Horizons**

Both the interpreter and the subject of the research have their own horizons, which consist of background knowledge and underlying assumptions. A fusion of horizons then refers to combining these interpretations and understandings presented by the researcher and the subject of the research (Arnold and Fischer, 1994; Thompson, 1997). The merging of the horizons helps find specific characteristics and patterns in research data, and serves as a reference point for gaining meaning (Thompson, 1997). The horizons are finite, but they are not limiting to the individual because they aren't closed to new ideas and can move as understanding is developed or changed with the acquirement of new knowledge. (Arnold and Fischer, 1994)

Interpreters can and should never let go of their own views, as meaning is created through different conceptions and perspectives (Thompson et al. 1994). The goal of hermeneutic research is to open possibilities to new meanings, and not stick to predetermined systems of understanding. The researcher's own background and underlying assumptions can then bring forth new and unexpected patterns of meaning, and, conversely, the research data can cause the researcher to see things in a new light. (Gadamer, 1989; Thompson, 1997)

#### **5.4.4 Hermeneutic Circle**

The hermeneutic circle is the central idea of hermeneutics. It is a spiral of understanding, which represents the idea that meaning of the whole is determined from the individual elements of the text, and, at the same time, the individual element is understood by referring to the whole, which it is a part of. The objective of the hermeneutic circle is to achieve an understanding without any contradictions, i.e. an interpretation that is coherent and does not include errors. (Arnold and Fischer, 1994)

The hermeneutic circle has three meanings. Firstly, it is a methodological process for interpreting qualitative data (Thompson et al. 1994). This has been named the part-to-whole mode of interpretation (Bleicher, 1980, cit. Thomspson et al. 1989), and it involves interpreting and reinterpreting qualitative data in relation to the developing sense of the whole (Thompson et al. 1989; Thompson, 1997). This method is discussed further in the data analysis section of this study.

Secondly, the hermeneutic circle refers to a holistic understanding of consumers' stories, i.e. the meaning that specific experiences have in context of a broader life narrative (Thompson, 1997). This is a proposal that knowledge is ultimately based on assumptions and beliefs that originate from a culturally situated perspective. Therefore interpretation and pre-understanding are necessary for reaching understanding, but interpretation must constantly build on pre-understanding, and not just remain fixed in it. (Gadamer, 1989; Thompson et al. 1994)

Thirdly and lastly, the hermeneutic circle considers the researcher's role in interpreting the data (Thompson, 1997). This characterises the interplay between cultural and social tradition that is handed down and the personal meaning that individuals construct. These two do not

exist separately, because a person's understanding of a situation results from an interpretation that is based on cultural tradition of meaning. Therefore interpretive findings always reflect a fusion of perspectives of the researcher and informant, i.e. the fusion of horizons. (Thompson et al. 1994)

## **6 Method**

In this section, I present the method of my narrative research, i.e. how I actually come to know what I am researching (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). This follows from and heavily relies on the ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions of the narrative paradigm presented in the previous section.

### **6.1 Data Collection**

This research uses narrative interviews for data collection. Below, I present the concept of narrative interviews, as well as the process of choosing interviewees for my study and conducting the actual interviews.

#### **6.1.1 Narrative Interviews**

Narrative interviews are open-ended interviews, in which interviewees are allowed the floor without interruption for long periods of time. This leads to better free association of thoughts, and therefore deeper responses. The mood of the interviews should be quite informal and loose like in a conversation, but the interviewee should do most of the talking. (Atkinson, 1998) The actual data that is then produced consists of descriptions of actions, events, and experiences, whose analysis creates a plotline and a story (Polkinghorne, 1995).

The goal of the interview is to attain first-person accounts of experience. (Thompson et al. 1989) As narratives are created through reflection, the role of the interviewer becomes to guide the narrative by being responsive and flexible, as well as asking questions that are not pre-set, but stem from the conversation. Questions should be descriptive and encourage thoughtful and developed answers, as well as lead to feelings and true meanings in the interviewee's life. (Atkinson, 1998)

Apart from what respondents tell, it is also important for the researcher to see the structures and constructs being made as experience is told. How people talk about things, what kind of words and concepts they use, how they present themselves, how they organise events, circumstances, and perceptions are all very important parts of understanding the meaning of

the whole. The way people structure things can guide interpretation of the past and future information, as well as help keep to a timeline. (Atkinson, 1998; Bruner, 2004)

Lastly, the researcher must keep in mind that the story has a life of its own and should be allowed to go into any direction so long as it serves the purpose of the study. While the story can validate something already known, it can also bring totally unexpected insights. A life story can thus go beyond its own meaning and into something greater. (Atkinson, 1998)

### **6.1.2 Interviewees**

Altogether, I conducted 15 narrative interviews, out of which 7 respondents were women and 8 were men. The size of the sample was chosen on the basis of narratives being personal stories full of detailed data that is studied very closely. The method would therefore be much less useful with a large numbers of faceless subjects. (Riessman, 2005)

The main criteria for choosing the interviewees was that they had to define themselves as a fan, as this is one of the most crucial characteristics of being a fan (Kozinets, 1997, 2001). The definition of fanaticism was not given, so people were free to define the concept themselves. This is because fanaticism can mean so many different things to different people (Hunt et al. 1999; Thorne and Bruner, 2006).

Most of the interviewees, about two thirds, were my acquaintances, because this way some form of knowledge of one another was brought into the interview. A pre-existing relationship of the interviewer and interviewee can, to some extent, define or ease restrictions to what the respondent tells and how they tell it (Atkinson, 1998). Thus, being already acquainted with me, a trust existed that allowed the interviewee to get more personal and detailed in their narratives. About a third of my interviewees were not my prior acquaintances, but were nonetheless friends of friends. While we did not know each other, some form of trust still existed as we had mutual friends, and trust also formed quite quickly during the interview.

The object of fanaticism was not predefined, so the subjects of the interviews were quite varied. Most common subjects were TV-shows and music artists, but many other subjects, such as movies, video games, beverages, etc. were present. Most interviewees also had multiple objects of fanaticism, which were covered in the interviews. Not having a predefined fanaticism subject, but looking at fans of different things, in my opinion, frees the research of

the problems previous fanaticism research faced. Studies concentrating on specific products or product groups often found that their study's results were difficult to transfer to different contexts (e.g. Oliver, 1993; Russell et al. 2004; Thorne and Bruner, 2006; Harrolle et al. 2010). As this research will already cover different contexts, its transferability should be easier. This way, fanaticism can also be studied better as a concept in itself and not as a part of a specific group or community.

### **6.1.3 Conducting the Interviews**

The interviews lasted from 45 minutes up to 2 hours, and were held in settings that were familiar to the interviewees because this makes people feel more comfortable and at ease, as well as help them tell their stories (Atkinson, 1998). It is important to provide the right and appropriate kind of context in which the respondent can feel free to describe experiences in detail (Thompson et al. 1989). These settings were mostly people's own homes, and a few interviews were held at the interviewee's place of work or study.

I had a very basic and general outline for the interview that I used as a supportive tool. The questions then mostly originated from the conversation itself. The questions were chosen carefully as to lead the interviewee in the right direction and not to change the story through them (Atkinson, 1998). The follow-up questions relied on the interviewee's own words to be more understandable and descriptive to the person (Thomson et al. 1989).

The overall goal of the interviews was to help the interviewee tell a story and reflect on it. Another important aspect was to see how people presented themselves and their lives, as well as how events, circumstances, and perceptions were organised and synthesised. (Atkinson, 1998).

## **6.2 Data Analysis**

The data used in this study is processed through narrative analysis. This means that, first, explanatory stories are produced from the gathered data through the means of emplotment. The stories are then further analysed for common themes and ideas by using the part-of-whole method of interpretation. (Thomson et al. 1989; Polkinghorne, 1995) The view taken

on the analysis is one of hermeneutics of faith (Ricouer, 1981). I present these concepts, as well as the process of analysis of this study below.

### **6.2.1 Emplotment**

Narratives operate by combining elements into an emplotted story, as was described earlier. Narrative analysis is thus also largely based on the concept of emplotment. For the researcher, the plot becomes a type of conceptual scheme through which contextual and personal meaning can be displayed and understood. The narrative provides a context for understanding actions, experiences, and events, as well as seeing the personal significance these circumstances have for an individual. (Polkinghorne, 1995; Thompson, 1997)

The researcher's role is to synthesise and relate elements of the narrative to each other by configuring them as contributors to the advancement of the plot. The plot should display linkage among the data elements as parts of an unfolding development culminating in a conclusion. The result of the narrative analysis is an explanation that is retrospective, i.e. an explanation that has linked together past experiences to show how the final outcome may have come about. (Polkinghorne, 1995)

To understand the narrative story, first, the conclusion of the narrative must be identified, as it is the goal towards which the plotline will be constructed. Then, all the elements of it must be put into chronological order, as human experience is not a carefully crafted and congruent story, but is in a constant state of flux, including in itself many simultaneous projects and irrelevant details. This creates the plotline that essentially holds the narrative together. This plotline is modified and adapted in order for connections to fit and make sense better, as new events or actions come to light in the data. Thus, understanding the basic plotline is crucial because the final story must fit the data, while, at the same time, bring order and meaningfulness that is not apparent in the data itself. The plotline must also be constantly kept in mind while new elements are added and linked to the whole. (Polkinghorne, 1995)

As the plot starts to take form, the most important elements and events start to emerge. Once the central elements of the story are understood, the connections, causes, and influences among events can be identified. These don't have to be individual elements, but can actually

be combinations of many things. These answer the questions of how and why actions take place. Finally, the story is written out. (Polkinghorne, 1995)

### **6.2.2 Part-of-Whole Method of Interpretation**

As the narrative story is created, the elements aren't just compiled together on paper, but they present a systematic whole, each part of which must be understood through its relationship to the whole as well as to other parts of the story. Narrative analysis then requires "a to-and-fro movement from parts of the whole that is involved in comprehending a finished text". (Polkinghorne, 1995)

The part-of-whole method is the iterative process of interpreting qualitative data when using a hermeneutic approach (Bleicher, 1980, cit. Thomspson et al. 1989). In this process parts of qualitative data are interpreted and reinterpreted in order to develop a sense of the whole. The repetition is necessary, as holistic understanding of a text is only gained over time. Also, initial understanding often gets modified as the researcher becomes more informed and develops a sense of the text's meaning as a whole. (Thompson et al. 1994)

The part-of-whole process has two stages, which can overlap and interact with each other. The first is an intratextual cycle, during which individual texts are read in order to gain understanding of them as a whole, and relating separate passages to the overall content. Further reading may be done to gain further meaning. The second stage is an intertextual cycle, and it involves looking for patterns across the individually analysed texts. The texts are related to each other in order to find common themes. (Thompson et al. 1989; Thompson, 1997)

### **6.2.3 Hermeneutics of Faith**

Ricouer (1981, p. 6-7) presents two forms of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics of faith is the restoration of meaning of a text that comes in the form of a message from the author or, in this case, the interviewee. Hermeneutics of suspicion, on the other hand, regards hermeneutics as a decoding of meaning presented in the text in the form of a disguise. In this research, I will take the point of view of hermeneutics of faith.



The aim of hermeneutics of faith is “to understand the other as they understand themselves”. The researcher represents, explores, and tried to understand the social and personal world of the participant through hearing their subjective experiences and meaning making. The goal is also to see how the person understands who they are and what kind of message they send to other people. The interview therefore becomes a window to the interviewee’s reality. (Josselson, 2004)

The researcher assumes, in this type of hermeneutics, that the participant is telling the truth and is willing to share it. It is also assumed that the participant is an expert of his or her own experience. Further, the researcher’s own understanding of the world affects the results of the research, as shared social understanding and assumption are, to some extent, necessary to create any kind of understanding. That is why it is good for the researcher to somewhat know the subject of the interview. Over-identification, though, may bring too many of the researcher’s own views and meanings into the research, and this is therefore not a desired situation. (Josselson, 2004)

#### **6.2.4 Conducting Narrative Analysis**

Once the interviews were conducted, they were transcribed, thus transforming them into text that is composed of the respondents’ experiences and reflections. This text is seen as autonomous, which, firstly, means that there is no need to verify the statements externally. Secondly, interpretation should not include hypotheses or inferences that exceed the evidence of the transcript. (Thompson et al. 1989)

The first thing to do, while conducting analysis, was to create the narrative through the means of emplotment, a process, which was presented earlier. (Polkinghorne, 1995) Essentially, a story was written out on the basis of the data acquired in the narrative interview.

The stories were then interpreted and analysed using the part-of-whole method of interpretation described earlier. The main point here was to understand actions and the context that affects them in order to gain explanatory knowledge and the reasoning behind it. Together, the different stories presented a collection of individual perceptions, in which meaning moves from case to case, and not from case to generalization. The collection thus becomes a base for understanding by means of analogy. (Polkinghorne, 1995)

Further aims of the analysis were to identify common goals, motifs, and issues, as well as find developmental paths and define important relationships, highlighting influences, issues, and lessons of a lifetime. (Atkinson, 1998) All in all, emerging themes were determined and grouped conceptually (Polkinghorne, 1995). Apart from what was said, also the form of the language was important, as the what and the how together help understand true meaning, (Riessman, 2005).

The interpretations, just like the interviews, heavily relied on the interviewee's own words, as the goal was to describe lived experiences, not abstract terms (Thompson et al. 1989). It was also important not to mix in too much of my own opinions or perspectives into the interview (Riessman, 2005)

## **7 Findings – Fan Narratives**

In this section, I present two narratives that portray my findings throughout the research data. The following narratives were chosen because they are representative and exhaustive of the whole research data. Therefore, all of the conducted interviews were used in the analysis to understand the topic and to find common themes. The themes described below were thus present across the research data.

### **7.1 Harry**

Creativity, especially performing, is one of the most important parts of Harry's identity and the identity he constantly strives to have. Harry repeatedly states that as a child he was socially awkward and a bit "nerdy". He has always wished to be something else, and therefore strives to become the total opposite of what he was as a child. To do this he knowingly took up these creative characteristics, as he feels that through them he becomes social, brave, and interesting. In Harry's opinion, the themes of creativity and performing are always strongly present in all his fanaticisms, most intensely in the form of role-playing, as this helps him reach his desired identity. The fanaticisms then become a way to show other people and make sure they understand who he wishes to be, as well as a tool for himself to develop and observe how he evolves.

Harry's life story is presented through three big fanaticisms in his life. The first fanaticism is towards Pokémon, which was strongest during his elementary school years. After that came Harry Potter, which was a big part of his life throughout his teenage years. Lastly comes MADtv, a fan of which Harry became as an adult.

#### **7.1.1 Pokémon – A Shallow Fanaticism**

Harry's first fanaticism was Pokémon, a franchise that includes a TV-Show, video games, and a large array of collectable merchandise. These revolve around a fictive universe, in which hundreds of fictional species, Pokémon, exist. The goal of the TV-show, games, and merchandise is then to collect these Pokémon, train them, and compete with them against other "trainers". Harry doesn't quite remember how the fanaticism started because he was

starting elementary school at the time and was therefore quite young. Pokémon was then a huge trend in his age group. It was widely marketed and very popular among all of his schoolmates as well as other people around him.

The start of the fanaticism, as described by Harry, was a very strong attraction towards and interest in the object, which could nonetheless not be explained by him. Harry also felt that the hype that surrounded Pokémon and, more importantly, people around him being involved in Pokémon had a very big influence on him becoming interested in the whole subject. He didn't have many friends at the time and had quite low self-esteem. Therefore being interested in something popular made him feel that he fits in better.

He watched the Pokémon TV-show a lot and played some of the video games. One of the more important parts of the fanaticism for Harry was nonetheless the aspect of collecting. Firstly, he collected cards. He did not buy many at a time, but bought them little by little, because it was more exciting and interesting for him that way. He created an aspect of waiting for himself that got him to be more enthusiastic about the subject and was thus central in the whole experience. Secondly, apart from physical products, it was important for Harry to collect information on Pokémon. He read a lot about the subject and learned trivia by heart. Harry also mentions that, in his opinion, watching the TV-show was also collecting in a sense, as he waited for new episodes and checked them off in his mind as having seen them.

From the collecting he got the feeling that the more he knew and the more stuff he owned, the better a fan and person he became. All in all, Harry feels that the collecting and the creation of the aspect of waiting prolonged his fanaticism towards Pokémon and created an exciting sense of adventure. Through these aspects, he was also able to observe how he evolves and develops as a fan. The collecting was most intense in the start of the fanaticism when he tried to get as big a grasp on the whole subject as he could. After that, the intensity started to calm down somewhat, but the interest towards Pokémon nonetheless stayed very high.

Harry hung out somewhat in Pokémon Internet forums, where he got a lot of his information on Pokémon. He doesn't feel, though, that he was at all immersed in the fandom and he did not gain any friends through Pokémon. He did like talking to other people about the subject, but only individuals already immersed in the world of Pokémon. This is because he felt that it was not socially accepted for him to like Pokémon, and therefore he didn't want to advertise it to people outside of the fanaticism circle. He did engage in role-playing, which allowed him to

get more immersed in the fanaticism itself and be creative. He described this being one of the most important aspects of the fanaticism, as it allowed him to gain a different identity from the one he actually had, which he disliked greatly.

The fanaticism towards Pokémon became passive for Harry when he started feeling that the TV-show and everything surrounding it started repeating itself too much. He felt that there wasn't anything interesting left to do within the fanaticism, even though the TV-show still went on and new merchandise was produced. Now that he reflects on that time in his life, Harry feels that he grew out of being a fan to some extent, because at that time other things became more important and interesting in his life. He also believes that being a fan of Pokémon was much more shallow and materialistic compared to the fanaticisms that followed it, as it largely revolved around material products and did not bring any deep meaning into his life.

### **7.1.2 Harry Potter – A Communal Fanaticism**

Harry Potter is an extremely popular series of fantasy novels revolving around a boy studying at a school of magic. The seven books have been made into eight movies, and both have originated an immense amount of related merchandise, as well as very involved fan communities.

Harry originally got the first book of the Harry Potter series as a Christmas present when it originally came out. At the time he was not interested in it and put it away without fully reading it. Years later the book had become a huge phenomenon in culture and media, and Harry decided to give reading the fantasy novel another try, as everyone else seemed to like it. This time around, he got almost instantly enthralled in it. He really liked the actual story and subjects presented in the book, and he also identified with the characters, as he could see similar themes in them that were present in his own life. The characters became very familiar and close to him.

As the subject of Harry Potter became more interesting and close to him, Harry started to look into it more: he looked up information on the subject and bought all the available books. Harry also felt that at that point in his life he perhaps needed something new and different from his previous interests, as he was taking the first steps towards growing up, and this

enhanced his interest towards the book series. Slowly he started reading more and more, as well as gathering information on the subject so that he could become an expert in this field. He felt that at that point he became a fan, and the more things he knew, the more special and the better a fan he became. He also felt proud about knowing something that well.

The excitement about Harry Potter grew and got more intense. Harry felt that he was hooked on the fantasy book series, and devoted much of his free time to activities related to it. He bought and also made products related to the books. It is important to notice, though, that he did not want anything to do with the films, as he felt they represented a totally different atmosphere and were not directed at his needs and desires.

At this point Harry was in middle school, which he really hated as he was bullied and he didn't have any friends in "his real life". Through looking up information on Harry Potter, he found an online community for Harry Potter fans. He joined it and found many people with very similar interests. He got really involved in the community and got a lot of friends.

*Harry: It became my own community that I didn't have at school. [...] It was nice because there I felt appreciated and needed. It was a different world. The community was kind of like a saviour to me in middle school. It has definitely moulded who I am today, or at least made it possible. If I hadn't [been a part of the fandom] I probably would be really secluded and depressed now.*

Through the community he got strongly involved in role-playing, improvisation, as well as character and story development. He felt that this brought out creativity in him, which was a characteristic he really wanted to have. Through creativity, he could become different from the socially awkward and nerdy self, and take up an interesting and fun identity. Through it he could also show others, that he had changed:

*Harry: I want to show others that that's what I want to be, what I wasn't in middle school.*

He did not discuss his fanaticism or tell others of its existence outside of the fandom he belonged to, even though he wanted to. This is because he felt it was not seen as cool in his age group, and thus it was not socially acceptable to like it. He also felt that the fanaticism represented very personal things to him like creating a new identity, which he did not want to share with others. He even actively hid his fanaticism from people, even his family.

With time, the fanaticism started becoming more profound, serious, and emotional. Harry began reading the books between the lines and doing thorough analysis of them alone as well

as within his fandom. The intensity of the fanaticism came down somewhat, but the interest towards it still stayed high. Further, Harry felt that his emotional bond to the fanaticism became stronger and it became something more than just a cool story to be excited about.

As Harry started high school, the social setting of his life changed a lot. He got new friends and hobbies, and he felt that the new environment was more accepting of him and of Harry Potter, which allowed him to calm down a bit with hiding his fanaticism. At the same time, he felt that the environment pressured him to grow up, which resulted in him putting aside, in his opinion, childish excitement that was still somewhat present in his fanaticism. While he had less time for the fanaticism, it still stayed active. The relationship towards Harry Potter also became more analytical and adult in his opinion, but still very emotional and almost spiritual.

*Harry: I kind of changed it in my mind to create a fanaticism that was acceptable for someone of my age at that time [17-18 years old] so that it would be ok to be a fan. It became like more analytical which was ok for a person that age, so there wasn't much of that "Oh my god! Oh my god!" -thing going on anymore.*

When Harry went to the army at age 19, he became physically cut off from being able to do activities related to Harry Potter and the fanaticism became passive very fast. When his military service ended, he started working and studying at university, and Harry felt that as this new stage began in his life, his lifestyle and values changed. Harry Potter didn't thus feel that much to be "his thing" anymore and that there wasn't anything interesting left to do in this domain.

Harry Potter still holds nostalgic value for Harry, as it is strongly connected in his mind to very positive emotions and memories of the period in his life when he was an active fan. He kind of still misses the community, and even goes to look at the website once in a while to get the old feeling of being a fan back. He also plans to reread the books in the near future to regain that feeling of excitement.

Lastly, Harry feels that being a fan of Harry Potter profoundly affected him as a person. It helped him become more social and brave, and it also gave him confidence to go more into creative things, such as performing, that he had wished before he could do. Thus it helped him bring out and be aware of the important values and characteristics in his life. He feels that the fanaticism moulded his identity and supported becoming the person he is today.

### 7.1.3 MADtv – A Personal Fanaticism

MADtv is a comedy sketch TV-show that Harry found by accident online many years after his fanaticism for Harry Potter ended. He started to look at their skits online and became very interested in them because he really liked the humour: it made him cheer up and laugh. Reflecting on it now, Harry also generally feels that it fits his own style very much, and represents him well. It has good humour and supports his creativity, which started taking a turn towards comedy.

As Harry became more interested in the TV-show, he once again started slowly collecting more and more information on it, and buying the DVDs. He points out that he would have wanted to buy all of the seasons, but they are not available, and this frustrates him thoroughly.

At this point Harry became fanatic about the show. He learned skits by heart and listened to them on his mp3-player everywhere he went. This largely became a part of the creativity aspect of his life and Harry felt that the fanaticism actually developed such traits in him. He also found a few online communities, but did not join them, as he felt that he did not need them anymore at this point in his life. This was mainly due to the fact that he had a social community outside of any fanaticism. Nonetheless, he feels to be a part of the MADtv fan movement.

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

This fanaticism towards MADtv therefore became very personal and "his own thing" compared to the previous fanaticisms. Harry feels that this makes it more authentic and true, and even somewhat more durable. This is because he is no longer doing it for other people, and to fit in, but he is doing it just for himself and to set himself apart from others.

The show was cancelled quite soon after Harry started being its fan, which made him feel very anxious and empty inside. He is really sad that there are no new seasons coming, but still continues to watch the show quite regularly. He feels that the cancellation of MADtv did not make his fanaticism or involvement in it any less, but it did become less intense, as there is



nothing new to look forward to and be excited about. The fanaticism therefore calmed down somewhat and became stable.

Harry feels that MADtv is very much a socially accepted TV-show, and therefore he really likes discussing it with other people, even ones who don't know about the show previously. He feels that by sharing the fanaticism with others, he can share the excitement, happiness, enlightenment, and added value that it has brought into his life. Lastly, he can't see his fanaticism for MADtv ever ending because he can't imagine any factors or situations that would cause this to happen. The show has become a part of him, and its absence in his life would leave him somewhat incomplete.

## **7.2 Mark**

Mark is influenced a lot by the rock culture and feels that traditions and respectability are very important values in life. These aspects are strongly present in his life and in his fanaticisms. Mark further feels that his fanaticisms represent him as a person very well, as they communicate what he likes and what he finds important. He also points out that having talked about his fanaticisms more thoroughly in this interview, he can see how they are all interrelated and in a sense very similar. He also feels that he now understands how they relate to his whole life and his identity through the values that they represent.

*Mark: They all come together to this one big circle.*

Mark's narrative is also presented through three fanaticisms. The first is Coca-Cola, a fan of which he has been since he was a little child. The second fanaticism is the rock band Bon Jovi, which he became a fan of as a teenager. The last one is the guitar brand Gibson, which was started by the fanaticism towards rock music around the same time as the Bon Jovi fanaticism. All three are still strongly present in his life.

### **7.2.1 Coca-Cola – A Family Tradition**

Coca-Cola is a soft drink that is a big part of Mark's family's life. He can't really remember when he first tasted it or started liking it, as it has been present in his life ever since he was a little child. When he started getting his own money and was able to buy Coca-Cola himself, he

also really started appreciating the experience of drinking it. For example, he finds the whole experience of putting Coke bottles in the fridge and waiting for the time when he can drink them very exciting. Of course the actual process of drinking the soda brings very positive feelings as well, a sort of gratification. Furthermore, he loves the fact that you can get Coke in glass bottles, which is not possible for any other similar product brand in Finland. Mark feels that the soda tastes totally different and much better when drunk from a glass bottle. These aspects are central in Mark's fanaticism towards Coca-Cola, as he mainly drinks the soft drink at home and relates all fanaticism related activities to being at home and in private.

*Mark: You can't get Pepsi in glass bottles in Finland, but you can get Coca-Cola and it's much better that way. It's the only way I drink it now. It just tastes different that way [...] The best part is when you wait for it, and know that you can have some soon. You have to freeze it so it gets ice cold. And then you get it and it feels really good, it just tastes really good. It brings a sort of gratification. It just feels really good. It's not just the taste though, it's more than that, it's the experience.*

He drinks a small bottle of Coca-Cola every day, and he feels that it brings him a small joy and excitement every day. This way he always has something to look forward to and be happy about. Coca-Cola is then, in a way, his indulgence, a special thing that he can look forward to, which calms him down at the end of the day and relieves stress.

Interestingly enough, Mark actually thinks that Pepsi tastes much better than Coca-Cola, but he prefers to drink the latter because the brand appeals to him much more. He finds the Coca-Cola brand to be very traditional and appreciated, which he really likes. He also feels that by using this brand, these same characteristics are transferred onto him, and he will therefore be seen as very experienced and appreciated. Pepsi's image, on the other hand, is in Mark's opinion very pop and sporty, which is not his style at all. Moreover, Pepsi doesn't provide a similar drinking experience like Coca-Cola does with the glass bottles. To Mark all of this means that he cannot use the Pepsi brand.

*Mark: It's not really the taste [of Coca-Cola] that makes the difference, because I actually like the way Pepsi tastes more, but then I've chosen Coca-Cola because I think it appeals to me more as a brand. Like the advertisements are much better. Pepsi ... I can't really identify with that on any level.*

Coca-Cola has been a very important presence in most of Mark's life and it still retains that status to him today. Therefore Mark feels that he will always be a fan of Coca-Cola, and he could never give it up or stop consuming it. Mark can't even imagine a situation where this could hypothetically happen. He feels that if Coca-Cola were to disappear from his life, there would be a part of him missing and he wouldn't know how to replace it.

### **7.2.2 Bon Jovi – A Start to a New Style**

Mark was in his mid-teens when he decided he needed to change style. He wanted to leave childish things and especially childish music behind, and start something new. Around the same time he heard the rock band Bon Jovi's song "It's My Life" on the radio and really liked it. He liked it so much that he bought the CD album the song was on, and, through that, started exploring both the band and their music. He read about them online and in magazines, and listened to their music nonstop. Soon he had all of their CDs and Bon Jovi was all he could think about. He felt that the style and atmosphere the band communicated fit him very well, and that it was exactly what he had been looking for. He was really excited about finding this band, as for him it meant finding something totally new that fit him perfectly and was at the same time very inspirational.

With time, the fanaticism towards Bon Jovi started getting deeper and stronger. At first it was just about the music, but slowly Mark became enwrapped in the whole rock culture, taking up rock as a part of his style and identity. Becoming a fan of Bon Jovi thus started a new passage in Mark's life that revolves around rock music and is still prevalent in his adult life today. The fanaticism also gained special meaning for Mark: Bon Jovi started to represent traditions of rock culture, which he feels a part of through being their fan. Mark feels that at this point the fanaticism got very spiritual, as it became a part of him and something that defines him. Bon Jovi and rock music in general became not only his physical style, but a part of the certain image and status that he strives to have. The fanaticism represents him and communicates exactly who he is and what he likes. Further, he even took up playing rock music himself.

*Mark: I always try to get rock influences, so that it would be seen in me [...] I think it kind of communicates to people about the things that I like and what I am. I really want to bring that out.*

Mark feels that being a fan has had a tremendous affect on his buying decisions. For example, he has bought the band's CDs without listening to them or even reading some reviews, which is very atypical behaviour for him. He also owns the band's music in vinyl, even though he doesn't own a vinyl player. He bought them because, in his opinion, they are cool and represent the same kind of traditional values that the band does. What's more, he even owns band t-shirts for the sole reason that he believes that it is compulsory for any music fan. He then feels that you can't call yourself a fan without owning one. The physical merchandise related to the fanaticism is thus very important to Mark. The items, especially the band's CDs, represent the music and the feeling Bon Jovi communicates. Mark could never give them up, because, for him, these items are timeless and are a way of supporting the artist.

Another important part of the fanaticism for Mark is identifying with the artists themselves. The band's members became his idols, the people he strives to be, as, to Mark, they represent the rock culture, which he has taken up as a part of his identity. Identifying with the artists then further helps him acquire the rock style and lifestyle.

For Mark, the whole rock culture first really intensely revolved around Bon Jovi, but little by little he started finding other rock bands that he really liked. The fanaticism towards Bon Jovi then calmed down somewhat and became less intense, as he didn't listen to only to their music all of the time, creating room for other artists.

Mark doesn't listen to Bon Jovi's music that much anymore and there may be months apart between him even thinking about their music. Bon Jovi nonetheless stays as a very important part of Mark's life and it is still his overall favourite band. The emotional link and lifestyle connection is then still strongly there. Reflecting on that, Mark feels that the reason that the band is still so important compared to other bands or artists, which get forgotten over time, is the fact that it was the first thing of the rock genre that was a part of his life.

*Mark: It was the first band I had in the beginning, it kind of started my whole music hobby. I think it has held this important status because it was the first one. [...] It's not just the music, even though it's really good, but it's just really cool and they have a cool image.*

While the rock culture is an important part of Mark's life and identity, he has not joined any fan communities. He had considered it, but felt that he had no need for it, as he already has a lot of other friends in his own life. Also, the community aspect did not feel like a part of the fanaticism that was his. Nonetheless he feels to be a part of the Bon Jovi fan entity. He really

likes talking to people about the band and advertising it to them. Moreover, he defends the band passionately and tries to get other people to listen to their music.

Mark feels that he has, in a sense, grown up and matured with Bon Jovi. The band has changed its style often along the years, and Mark didn't mind, as he felt the change was natural and supported a typical development towards maturity or adulthood. Mark thus accepted the change, because he felt that he grew alongside Bon Jovi himself, this new bond strengthening the fanaticism. Lately, though, Mark has been a bit disappointed with Bon Jovi, as he doesn't like the new albums they have been making. It makes him sad and annoyed that the quality of their work has deteriorated, and he feels that this constant and long-term decline in quality brings down his overall appreciation of the band. He has also been annoyed with the behaviour of the participants of the band, as he feels they are not upholding the same values they used to. These things haven't stopped his fanaticism, though. While he finds many disappointing attributes in the band's current work, he tries to ignore the negative sides and concentrate on what he really likes about the band, which is mainly their older production.

Mark's fanaticism still continues on, even though it is not at its most intense stage anymore. At the moment it is quite passive, but the excitement gets reactivated with buying new CDs or attending performances. He feels that he will always be a fan of Bon Jovi, because it is such an important part of his life that upholds his values and lifestyle. Mark says that if the band were to break up he would be really sad, mostly because then he will know that no new music or shows will be made. This would nonetheless in no way affect his fanaticism, because it is such a big part of his style and identity. Therefore if the band were to completely disappear from his life, his identity and image would not feel whole.

### **7.2.3 Gibson – Upholding Values**

As Mark started listening to rock music and getting more into the rock culture, he realised that he wanted to play the music himself as well. He wanted to become a cool rock spirited person, just like his musical idols. He decided he wanted to become a guitar player, and he had to get a cool guitar just like all the rock legends have. Once he got to know the world of music better and started to understand how guitar-playing works, he settled on a brand used by famous rock musicians he likes – Gibson. He felt that this would fit his personal style as well as style of playing best. After quite little research on the subject, Mark got his first Gibson

guitar, which was just like one of his idols', the guitarist of AC/DC. He was really excited about the brand from the start and refused to use any other guitars.

The fanaticism towards the Gibson brand got deep emotional meaning very fast for several reasons. It was, firstly, really important that the guitar was like his idol's because Mark feels that the celebrity's status and possibly even skills are somewhat transferred onto him through owning the guitar. This transferral of values is both internal and external, meaning that Mark himself perceives that he gets these values and he also feels that other people give him these values through knowing his chosen guitar brand. Secondly, he finds that the Gibson guitar gives him a certain image that is very rock, and allows him to identify with his idols. Lastly, the actual brand is very traditional, respectable, and is a part of rock music history and culture. Thus Mark feels that he also becomes a part of rock traditions and history through being a fan of Gibson, as well as gets important values transferred onto him.

*Mark: The instruments that [my favourite rock bands] play, they are very traditional, they've been used a lot and are still used, so I really want the same kind of sound and feeling, so I had to buy the same kind of [instruments] myself.*

Mark does read a lot about Gibson online and in magazines, but he doesn't belong to any fandom, though, because he feels that it would have nothing to offer him. Also, he feels that he doesn't need such a community, as he already has a lot of friends in real life. Nonetheless, he does know a lot of guitar players and other musicians, and, through owning Gibson guitars, he feels to be a part of a bigger whole and a part of rock history along with them. Mark also really likes discussing the brand with other people, especially musicians, who know a lot about musical instrument brands. He enjoys advertising the brand to other people and getting them to like it as well. At the same time, Mark is very protective of the Gibson brand, and defends it against anyone trying to badmouth it. He does feel, though, that most people already have a very positive attitude towards the Gibson brand, and this makes him feel very appreciated and popular himself through being a fan of the brand.

*Mark: I think [showing the object of fanaticism to other people] is definitely a part of the whole experience. I mean I have the brand so I can show it someone. It's not just so I can sit here at home alone and look at it. It's important for all guitarists.*

Owning a Gibson thus becomes a way to socialise, especially with other rock musicians. It becomes an easy subject to talk about and bond over. Mark also feels that owning a good

guitar like a Gibson becomes a ticket to the rock music crowds, as well as a helping tool for being perceived as a good and rock credible musician. Connected to this aspect is the fact that Mark likes to display the guitars, as well as show them to people because he wants other people to know that he owns them. When people complement on Mark having a Gibson, it makes him feel very good. This way, owning and displaying the guitars becomes a way to affirm himself, especially in the eyes of “experts”. It makes Mark feel like he is a better guitar player and a better rock musician by owning such a good guitar. He does point out, though, that he only cares about the opinions of people knowledgeable of the subject, i.e. other guitarists and musicians. This is because only people with the same value for the brand can truly appreciate and understand it. In Mark’s opinion, other people’s opinions don’t matter that much in the context of his fanaticism. Further, he points out that he thinks that a Gibson is a must-have for every guitarist who is any good at playing. People with “worse brands” are then, in his eyes, seen as worse musicians.

Now Mark owns a number of different Gibson guitars, and they are each connected to a certain artist or band in his mind. Even though he doesn’t actually need new ones, he still continues to buy them. He can’t quite explain why, but it makes him feel good to get new guitars. Moreover, he feels that getting more guitars increases the value that is transferred to him through the fanaticism. For example, at the moment he wants to get a guitar model he already owns, but in a gold colour, as it is legendary and cool, as well as traditionally rock and brings with it a certain social status. The only thing that is stopping Mark from buying it is the lack of money, as the guitars are quite expensive. Mark is fully aware that, for the same price, he could probably get an even better guitar made, but that would be brandless and would not have the same emotional value and impact, which are the most important things for Mark in being an owner of a guitar.

Through growing up, attending university, and now being in the work life, Mark has less time for his music hobby, and thus his fanaticism towards Gibson has also calmed down somewhat. Mark then actually doesn’t play the guitar as much these days because of the lack of time for it. The brand is nonetheless still a very important part of Mark’s life, as he feels that it still represents him. While he doesn’t play the guitars, he still reaps their value by displaying them at his home, showing them to people, and talking about the brand to other people.

With the fanaticism being more calm, Mark can now also use other brands at times. Gibson is still his number one brand, though, because so many feelings, emotions, and memories are connected to it. At this point he therefore feels that he could never change his main guitar brand or even think of a situation where this could happen, as he feels he has found the best of them all. The fanaticism is thus still strongly present in his life and he doesn't see it ending at any point.

*Mark: If [Gibson] just disappeared and I had to replace it with something... it would leave an empty spot that I would have to fill somehow.*



## **8 Discussion**

In this section, I expand on my findings by grouping them into themes and elaborating on them through previous literature on fanaticism, consumer-brand relationships, identity building, and other relevant subjects.

I start by presenting the different stages of the development of fanaticism, which emerged in the research data. After that, I discuss identity issues present in fanaticism and its development. The different factors influencing fanaticism and its development are then presented, after which communality in fanaticism is discussed. Lastly, I talk about narrative identity and its relationship with fanaticism.

### **8.1 The Stages of Fanaticism's Development**

Throughout the research data, a quite clear structure of development of the fanaticism in consumers could be seen. From this structure four stages emerged, which I call in the following way: investigation stage, intense stage, steady stage, and passive stage. I present these below. The different stages took place in all the interviewees of my research data, but the amount of time the stages expanded over differed quite a lot with the different fans and their fanaticisms. Fans also went back and forth between the different stages at times as a result of different factors, which are discussed later.

#### **8.1.1 Investigation Stage**

Fans had a very difficult time describing why they actually started liking the object of their fanaticism. It just seemed interesting, attractive, and fitting their style. In some cases fans even said that the object of fanaticism seemed familiar somehow, and it was like something they had been looking for a long time, as was the case of Mark and rock music.

This process of fanaticism starting follows the lines of attraction described in consumer-brand relationship literature (e.g. Fajer and Schouten, 1995; Chung et al. 2007). Attraction is explained to consist of external and social influences, as well as originate the enthusiasm which allows for the relationship, and in this case fanaticism, to grow. This also works as a

first experience with the brand, which originates desire to acquire knowledge and get to know the brand (Smith, 1995). Such behaviour can also be seen in fanaticism: once fans become initially interested in their future object of fanaticism, they start to look into it more. As they get to know the subject and acquire information on it, fans become more and more excited about it, eventually becoming fanatical. The investigation stage is quite short, especially because, in today's world, information can be found fast, easily, and in large amounts through the Internet as well as social media.

### **8.1.2 Intense Stage**

The investigation stage of fanaticism quickly turns into an intense stage, in which as much information as possible is gathered and a lot of fan related products are bought, as Harry points out in connection with all of his fanaticisms. At the start of this stage the fanaticism is still quite materialistic and shallow, but as fans get really immersed into the subject, more deep emotional meanings become associated with the fanaticism. These meanings are found through time and development of the relationship. This is essentially the conversion point described by Chung. et al. (2007), where externally driven involvement turns into internally driven enthusiasm. The conversion comes to be through absorbing the intense experiences of consumption, which allows the integration of personal meaning into the consumer-brand relationship (Smith, 1995). Trust and commitment are also built, as a result of which the enthusiasm of the initial attraction is turned into true personal investment (Fajer and Schouten, 1995). The consumer becomes attached and devoted to the fanaticism, i.e. an emotional bond between them is made (Pimentel and Reynolds, 2004; Thomson et al. 2005; Behi and Belaid, 2011).

Throughout this stage, the object of fanaticism is consumed very intensely, and most of the fan's time and energy is devoted to activities related to the fanaticism. Therefore, while this stage is much longer than the investigation stage, it cannot be kept up for extremely long periods of time. Fans start wanting to create time for other things in their lives, which contributes to this stage ending. This can be seen in Mark's fanaticisms towards Bon Jovi and Gibson, which calmed down to make room for other interests in his life.

### **8.1.3 Steady Stage**

The steady stage starts to take place when fans no longer devote all of their free time to the fanaticism. Thus, the fanaticism retains its emotional link and involvement, but activeness from the fan's side drops somewhat. This can be clearly observed in Harry's fanaticism towards Harry Potter, which became less active as he got older, but became more analytical and emotionally deep. Harry remained actively and emotionally involved, but also made room for other things in his life.

The fanatical relationship grows even more emotionally meaningful throughout this stage and becomes a part of the person's identity. The interest for the fanaticism can also ebb with different external factors, such as new publications or seasons. This can even cause the fanaticism to become intense once again, as Mark points out when talking about Bon Jovi. While he is no longer actively fanatic about the band, he gets really excited about it if he attends their show.

The fanaticism is no longer as intense in this stage because its message and meaning are what become most important to individuals. Fans felt that the fanaticism became more real and authentic at this time, and that they became much better fans once the fanatical relationship gained this deep and emotional side. As it has been noted by previous literature, while attraction and enthusiasm spark the relationship, for the bond to grow and become meaningful, investment and commitment are always needed from the parties involved (Fajer and Schouten's, 1995).

### **8.1.4 Passive Stage**

The fans in my research all said that they don't see their current fanaticism ending, and can't even imagine a situation where they would consider parting with it. At some point the fanaticism nonetheless becomes more passive, which can take from years to decades. Fanaticisms usually became passive when there was nothing active left to do from the fan's point of view. This can either mean that the object of fanaticism ceases to be, e.g. a TV-show ends or a music band breaks up, or that the fan him- or herself feels that there is nothing interesting to do in the domain of the fanaticism. This can be seen in Harry's case when his interest towards Pokémon dropped, because it became too repetitive. Further, the start of the passive stage can also be connected with a fan being physically separated from the fanaticism,

as it can be seen in the case of Harry's drop of interest towards Harry Potter when he went to the army. This is similar to involuntary disposal or termination of the relationship (Fajer and Schouten, 1995; Hemetsberger, 2009). On the other hand, Harry still continues to be an active fan of MADtv, even though the show's production has ended. Therefore, it is important to notice that above described external factors aren't always associated with the reaction of becoming passive in fanaticism.

The deactivation of fanaticism was also strongly linked with either a dramatic change of values, or big physical life changes. In Harry's relationships with Pokémon and Harry Potter, the change towards a more passive fanaticism came through a new passage in life, where new interests and values were present. This aspect is similar to consumer-brand relationships, whose end is usually connected with personal transformation and major life changes (Hemetsberger, 2009). This can also be seen as voluntary disposal, as it is connected with the changing of the fan's self-concept and identity (McAlexander, 1991; Black, 2011).

As the fanaticism becomes passive, it still stays on as a very important and emotional part of the fan's life, which defines them. It gains a sort of nostalgic value for the fan because through it memories and emotions are revisited. No active things associated with the fanaticism are done, just like in consumer-brand relationships where buying behaviour and involvement are lowered with the deterioration of the relationship (Perrin-Martinenq, 2004). The fanaticism nonetheless stays in the background of the fan's life as a very emotional aspect, like both Mark and Harry point out in their narratives.

All in all, it seems that different models on consumer-brand relationships ending fit fanaticism as well. For example, all of the above-described occurrences, which prompt fanaticism to become passive, are, in fact, similar to relationship deterioration and dissolution described by Fournier (1998), in which the consumer-brand relationship can end due to environmental, partner oriented, and dyadic stresses. Therefore, fanaticism could indeed be seen as an intense version of a consumer-brand relationship, which requires more description and attention.

## **8.2 Identity in Fanaticism**

Fanaticism always has a deep personal meaning for the fan, which can be related to fanaticism's characteristic of internal involvement (Thorne and Bruner, 2006) and goes beyond ordinary levels of attachment (Chung et al. 2008). According to my research data, this meaning is attached to a core value that is very rooted in the person's identity, and is often very philosophical, spiritual, or sacred, just like in devotion (Belk et al. 1989; Pichler and Hemetsberger, 2008). This way fanaticism becomes a way of presenting one's values, striving for them, as well as constructing one's identity based on them. For these reasons fanaticism becomes so important, durable, and not easily changeable. Below I discuss these issues of identity in fanaticism further.

### **8.2.1 Representing Values**

The meaning people attach to the objects of their fanaticism is one of the central elements in understanding how fanaticism develops (Chung et al. 2007, 2008). It became obvious through my research data, that fanaticism always represents some kind of core value or meaning for the fan that is an important part of their identity. The value can be one that the fan already considers to be a part of their identity or one that they strive to have. This represented value becomes evident through the actual product's characteristics as well as participation in fanaticism-related activities. In Harry's case, for example, the value found in the fanaticism was creativity and performance, which became apparent through the Harry Potter book's own creative nature and the role-playing among other activities conducted by Harry in the fandom. Studies of people's identification with organizations actually point out that the link happens when people perceive the organization's attributes to overlap with their own (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Dutton et al.1994; Maignan and Ferrell, 2004). The perceived value of the fanaticism must then overlap with the fan's own principles.

The fanaticism's value is often brought out through some sort of human presence, e.g. a band's musician or a TV-show's character. These could, firstly, be characters that have gone through or are in similar life stages and situations as the fan, which can be seen in Harry identifying with characters of the Harry Potter series. Secondly, these could be types of people the fan would like to be, as can be witnessed in the case of Mark striving for the rock legend characteristics of Bon Jovi. This happens because people strive to identify with characters

they see and wish to participate in their experiences (Russell et al. 2004). The people in the fanaticism then further support the received value as well as its transfer onto the fan.

The actual object of fanaticism isn't thus a part of the person's identity, but the value or meaning it stands for is, making the fanaticism's role to represent this value and bring it into the fan's life. Fanaticism can then be viewed as the person-thing-person form of a relationship (Belk, 1988; Ahuvia, 2005), as the fanaticism in itself is not what the fan looks for in the relationship, but it is the values, emotions, and memories related to it that he or she strives for.

As was seen above, the value the consumer gets from fanaticism in the end becomes a combination between product attributes, consequences produced through consumption, and personal values of the consumer, connecting the fanaticism product with the self (Gutman, 1991). While the consumption of the fanaticism is done in order to accomplish favourable ends (Khalifa, 2004), the value that the consumer acquires and strives for is not the actual value found in the product. It is, in fact, a result of different mental and physical events that are affected by the consumer's learned perceptions, preferences, and evaluations, linking the product with the use situations and their related consequences. (Woodruff, 1997, Khalifa, 2004) In today's marketing it is the consumer, not the company that creates the value for the product or service. Companies can then only propose a value, and the consumer determines it through participating, interacting, and being in a relationship with the brand. The ultimate value emerges from the consumption, or in this case, the fanaticism. (Gronroos, 2000; Vargo and Lusch, 2004)

### **8.2.2 Transferring and Sharing Value**

Because the fanaticism represents a certain value that the fan either finds very important or strives to have, fanaticism always becomes a tool to acquire that value for the fans themselves. Fans believe that, through the fanaticism, the core value is transferred onto them. For example, Mark believes that through being a fan of Coca-Cola, Bon Jovi, and Gibson, which are in his mind very traditional and respectable, he also comes to be respected, appreciated, and a part of history himself.

Fanaticism becomes a way of showing the fan's identity and status in society, similarly to extreme devotion (Belk et al. 1989; Oliver, 1999; Pichler and Hemetsberger, 2008). Mark, for

instance, feels that through being a fan of Bon Jovi and Gibson, his rock nature and interests are communicated to other people. Fans then believe that their fanaticisms give people a certain picture of who they are and what their interests are, representing them as a person.

Moreover, the way one fan's different fanaticisms came together was also through the represented values, as the fanaticisms all shared the same meaning. This can be seen in both Harry's and Mark's case, where fanaticisms represented creativity and traditions respectively. Therefore the fanaticisms of one person didn't have to be of the same genre or even product group, but nonetheless presented the same core value to the fan. According to the fans, the fanaticisms send out the same message to them, as well as present the same emotions and atmosphere. Fanaticisms then become intertwined with each other, and in this way support and feed each other, as well as the value that they represent to the fan and communicate to the outer world.

Nonetheless, the value brought by the fanaticisms is not easily transferrable to seemingly similar objects. For example, Harry feels the Harry Potter books to be a huge part of his identity and wants to own everything related to them, but he hates the movies and wants nothing to do with them, as he feels they don't represent similar values to the books.

As Thorne and Bruner (2006) point out, fans have a need for both external and internal involvement, which can be observed here. While the fanaticism represents very personal inner values, it is also important for the fan to show these things externally to other people. Fans' relationships to brands thus impact their social lives (Russell and Puto, 1999), as the relationships become a way to structure their experiences and express themselves (Fournier, 1998). This relates to Belk's (1988) research of the core and extended self, which states that the self is extended through various external items that become a part of the self. Fanaticism seems to work in a similar way by appropriating the value it gains from the object of fanaticism onto the fan, resulting in a relationship that takes the form of person-thing-person. Furthermore, the fanaticism gets linked with the self (Gutman, 2000), and becomes a part of the selfing process (McAdams, 1996).

### **8.2.3 Being a Part of and Building Identity**

It has already been established that fans largely identify themselves through the objects of their fanaticism, and these become an important part of their self-perception (Belk and Costa, 1998). As the fan finds out more about the object of fanaticism and gets to know it better in the intense stage, they start to understand what the object stands for and what it could represent for them. The ultimate reason why fanaticism is then actually taken on and why it stays as an important part of the fan's life is that it perfectly fits the fan's actual or desired self, eventually becoming an essential part of the fan's identity and self-perception through the value that it represents (Belk and Costa, 1998). It is important to see that fitting identity is much more important to fans than even the product's or service's actual attributes. The fanaticism has to become the fan's "own thing" that defines and describes them. This was, for example, seen in the case of Mark being a fan of Coca-Cola: while he likes the taste of Pepsi more, he can't consume it, as Pepsi's image doesn't fit his context and Coca-Cola's does.

The emotional ties with the fanaticism deepen through the intense stage leading the fanaticism to the stable stage, and the more time goes by, the more important the fanaticism becomes to the fan from the point of view of identity and values. It helps fans understand themselves better, and mirror their lives, just like Harry points out in his narrative. His fanaticism towards Harry Potter helped him understand the values that he most appreciates and take this on as a part of his self. Also, as the fanaticism becomes passive, it becomes a reminder of who the fan was before and a representation of their previous identities and values. Harry continues that he likes to revisit the Harry Potter fandom in order to relive memories of that period in his life.

Fanaticism then, not only becomes a part of the identity, but also moulds, affirms, and helps build it. As the value represented by the fanaticism can be one that the fan is striving for, the fanaticism can become a tool for creating a desired identity. Mark, for example, used his fanaticisms to create a rock identity for himself, and Harry talks of his fanaticisms helping him become more social and brave, allowing the person he is today to be formed. Many fans thus feel that fanaticisms have had a profound effect on them as people. Fanaticisms help fans acquire characteristics and values that they strive for and, in their eyes, make them better people. It also allows for trying out new identities and searching for the one that fits the fan best.



It can be concluded that the fanaticism becomes a process supporting the identity-building project (McCracken, 1986; Fuller et al. 2008), as it helps absorb new actions, ideas, and objects that are gathered into the self (Hermans, 1987, McAdams, 1996). The self is created through external meanings, events, and experiences (Hermans, 1987; Belk, 1988; Giddens, 1991, p. 1-9, 47-55, 75, 137), and, through helping understand and organize these, the fanaticism becomes a very important extension of the self (Belk, 1988) and an essential part of the selfing process (Hermans, 1987, McAdams, 1996). At the same time, through representing the fan's core values, the fanaticism becomes a part of the product of the selfing process that creates the identity (Hermans, 1987, McAdams, 1996). Belk (1988) points out that the self reaches out to incorporate things into one's identity. Thus the process and the result are one concept, an essential part of which the fanaticism becomes. (McCracken, 1986; Belk, 1988; Ahuvia, 2005) Additionally, fanaticism clearly aids consumers' self-expansion, which in one of the main motives of the selfing process (Hermans, 1987).

Lastly, Kozinets (1997, 2001) discusses the idea that the most crucial characteristic of a fan's identity is to define oneself as a fan, but it seems to go even further than that, as a fan's goal becomes defining their whole identity. Today's society requires us and even pressures us into creating an identity (Baumeister, 1987), and fanaticism seems to become a convenient tool to do so.

#### **8.2.4 Fan Merchandise and Knowledge as Representations of Identity**

Fanaticism is characterized by a desire to acquire (Belk et al. 2003; Thorne and Bruner, 2006). Physical things, such as fan memorabilia, therefore become very important, because they are concrete representations of the fanaticism as well as the value that the fanaticism represents, bringing that crucial meaning into their lives (Belk and Costa, 1998; Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988; Thomson et al. 2005; Thorne and Bruner, 2006). It has been established that collecting is an important part of being a fan (Brown, 1997; Kozinets, 1997, 2001). It becomes evident that acquiring things actually further becomes a way to express and identify oneself for the fans, as well as a means to experience fanaticism and represent the fan status to others, as can be seen with Mark displaying his Gibson guitars. Often fans display objects related to their fanaticism so that they can show other people and remind themselves of an important part of their identity.

It is interesting to notice that fans presented information as an equal to merchandise. It was something to be collected as much as possible, making the person a better fan, as Harry points out in context with all of his fanaticisms. Then again, objects attained into the identity are, in fact, not restricted to physical items, but can also include people, places, and ideas (Belk, 1988).

Fans often have no actual need for the products. In a sense the actual consumption then isn't the end goal, but the desire to desire is (Belk et al. 2003). Fans feel that getting more stuff is a way for them to achieve a certain status in the eyes of others and to approve their identity. Some products or objects are even seen as a mandatory part of being a fan. For example Mark points out that every music fan has to own a band t-shirt. Otherwise, in his eyes, they cannot call themselves fans. Collecting things thus also becomes a way to prove that you are a fan.

Further, consideration time for products related to fanaticism drops significantly, and objects are often bought or even pre-ordered without any kind of investigation. The buying pattern changes and becomes very atypical of the consumer, as Mark explains in his narrative discussing his fanaticism towards Bon Jovi. This type of behaviour can be seen as similar to loyalty, which is highly irrational and changes purchasing patterns (Oliver, 1999).

Fans also have heavy and almost extreme usage patterns (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Chung et al. 2005; Smith et al. 2007). Consumers hoard all possible items at the start of the fanaticism in the intense stage, after which less items are available and the consumption seemingly gets less intense. Emergence of new obtainable fan items nevertheless seems to reignite the passion and desire for acquiring, sending the fan back to the intense stage of fanaticism, as can be seen in the case of Mark still being excited about new Bon Jovi albums, even though he is no longer actively involved in the fanaticism.

It is important to understand, though, that fanaticism's most important aspect is not physical and materialistic. While fan consumers are very drawn to the physical characteristics of the products and services they are fanatical about, it is the intangible side that counts most. Through identity building, as well as internal and external involvement (Thorne and Bruner, 2006), fanaticism becomes much more than just owning memorabilia: it becomes a part of the identity.

## **8.3 Factors Influencing Fanaticism and Its Development**

Many different factors influence the development of fanaticism in consumers, which can push the fanaticism to start, to become more or less intense, or to become passive. The factors most prominently present in the research data were changes in a fan's life, influences of the object of fanaticism, and influences of the society. These are discussed further below.

### **8.3.1 Changes in a Fan's Life**

Fanaticism is a very personal experience (Chung et al. 2007) and is thus connected to personal changes in a fan's life, such as personal transformations, major life events, changes, and developments (Hemetsberger, 2009). These changes are always emotional and meaningful events for the consumers that are closely connected to their identity and values (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988; McAlexander, 1991). Both physical and emotional life changes have an influence on fanaticism.

Physical life changes include such things, as change of style, moving to a new place, or experiencing some type of other very drastic change in one's life. Especially the start of fanaticism was heavily associated with such change. As a new page was opened in the fan's life, something that supports and accepts this change was needed. Fans therefore felt that the fanaticism would help them embrace the new situation, and it was then taken on because it fit the new lifestyle. Sometimes it was even the fanaticism that pulled the fan into a certain direction in a new lifestyle, as was seen in the case of Mark taking on a rock style through becoming a fan of Bon Jovi.

While major physical life changes often supported the start of fanaticism, they seldom had any part in the fanaticism becoming passive. Fanaticisms often work as a supportive factor in these situations that stays stable, while the environment or circumstances in the person's life change. For example, Harry stayed loyal to Harry Potter throughout changing schools and growing more mature. Getting physically cut off from the fanaticism, can, on the other hand, strongly affect it becoming passive, which happened with Harry's fanaticism towards Harry Potter when he went to the army (Belk, 1988; Black, 2011).

Emotional changes happening in the fan's life also play a big role in the development of fanaticism. Such changes include changing of identity, views, interests, or values in a fan, and

can have a big part in both starting and ending fanaticism. When a fan took on new identities or values, a new fanaticism that fit the new self of the fan was very easily taken on, as it became interlocked with the process of change and became a medium for expressing and processing the fan's emotions. When Mark became a fan of Bon Jovi, he was actively looking for a new style and identity, and the fanaticism thus supported the change process and strongly represented the new meanings in his life.

If a fanaticism existed before a change in the fan's values and views, though, it would often not fit the new identity anymore. Therefore the fanaticism would get discarded, as was seen in Harry's relationship with Pokémon, which ended with Harry feeling that he had grown out of the fanaticism.

Lastly, being the first thing in any kind of change, e.g. new lifestyle or interest, has a huge impact on becoming, and, more importantly, on staying an object of fanaticism. Mark points out that Bon Jovi holds such a special place in his heart because it was the first rock thing that was present in his life. Being a first of many makes the object of fanaticism special, as it stays in one's mind more clearly and becomes intertwined with the memory of change. Also, normally, a lot more time, effort, and information search is put into the first item of a new life stage, and it holds bigger newness and excitement value to the fan. Such a fanaticism can further overcome being discarded because of this special status, as Mark explains in his narrative.

### **8.3.2 Influences of the Object of Fanaticism**

The actual object of fanaticism also has its influences on the relationship with the fan, as strong consumer-brand relationships must be interdependent and require interaction (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Fournier, 1998). Most importantly, the values communicated by the source of the fanaticism are important, because these are the meanings, which may relate to the fans' personal values. Therefore, if the style, identity, or values of the object of fanaticism change in ways that do not fit the fan's own identity or values anymore, the fanaticism could be seen as alien and eventually rejected by fans. In a sense this is a breach in trust from the side of the company, which leads to relationship deterioration and dissolution (Fournier, 1998) If the change is natural though, i.e. the brand grows and develops alongside its fans into a more mature direction, this change would often be accepted and followed by

fans. For example, Mark followed the change and development of his favourite band, Bon Jovi, as he felt he could accept this change and wanted to grow with it. This type of growth is actually expected of the company and if it *doesn't* happen, fans would sometimes leave the fanaticism, as failure to develop can indeed cause relationships to break-up (Fajer and Schouten, 1995). This happened with Harry and his fanaticism of Pokémon, which didn't grow fast enough alongside Harry and he started feeling that it doesn't fit his self anymore.

It should be noted, though, that fans *are* actually very flexible customers, and would like to forgive their beloved brands all their mistakes. As has been noted in previous research, fans are very unlikely to sever ties with the fanaticism even when it fails their expectations (Bristow and Sebastian, 2001). Fans, thus, forgive mistakes and ignore negative qualities if they aren't constant or repeated too many times, as Mark explains when he talks about his frustration towards Bon Jovi's quality of music decreasing over the years. On the other hand, when these disappointing traits go on for too long, it becomes impossible to ignore them and the fanaticism becomes rejected. Harry, for example, could no longer be actively involved in activities related to Pokémon, as he felt it was too repetitive.

Lastly, it should be understood that the most important part of fanaticism is not the actual attributes of the product, but the experience it provides (McEwen, 2005). A crucial part of the fanaticism experience is excitement, which is a feeling sought after by people (Branden 1980, cit. Whang et al. 2004). This is at first created by the fan finding something new and something fitting their identity perfectly, but for the fanaticism to stay intense and active this excitement must be kept up. One of the biggest factors capable of doing this is waiting for and expecting something. This is somewhat similar to Belk et al.'s (2003) desire to desire, or Thorne and Bruner (2006) wishing for something, but is not limited to just elements directly involved with actual brands or products. This can, for example, be waiting for a new season or episode of a show to start, but it can also be expressed through waiting to do fan related activities such as role-playing in a fan community. As both Harry and Mark tell in their narratives, waiting for something is one of the most important parts of the fan experience, and that it is what essentially builds up the excitement. When this was not available from the source of the fanaticism, fans often created these instances of suspense themselves, e.g. Harry only buying a small amount of Pokémon cards at a time or Mark creating a perfect consumption experience for Coca-Cola.

### 8.3.3 Influences of the Society

Society constantly defines and redefines what is cool, normal, or socially accepted (Smith et al. 2007), and society's influences, such as peer pressure, fads, trends, and hype are noteworthy factors influencing fanaticism and its development. It seems that the more a fanaticism is socially accepted in the eyes of the fans, the more it was shown by them to the outside world, thus affecting their public behaviour and attaining social acceptance for themselves. Harry kept his fanaticisms of Pokémon and Harry Potter hidden, as he felt that they were not socially accepted, while he finds it ok to talk about MADtv because he thinks other people find it cool. Private behaviour in fanaticism was, on the other hand, less affected by society, as such behaviour could not be observed and judged by others. It is important to see that Harry was nonetheless a fan of Pokémon and Harry Potter, because he found the value in them so meaningful.

While commonly held opinions and movements of the society did have some influence over public behaviour of fans, as was observed, they nonetheless seemed to have very little to do with actual development of fanaticism. Fanaticisms that started through e.g. a trend were rarely long-lived, as they had no actual deep meaning to the fan, failed to become a part of their identity, and were quite shallow. This can be seen in Harry's fanaticism towards Pokémon, which was started from a trend in his age group, and, in the long run, turned out to be quite materialistic and lacking deep meaning. On the other hand, trends and hype do allow for the actual subject to be more known, and thus more people have a chance to look into them and possibly become fans. True fanaticisms did then often start from something that was hyped and was trendy, but the reason the fanaticism was taken on was not one of social pressure. For example, Harry initially became interested in Harry Potter because it was very popular, but he did it for himself and did not share it with other people, eventually gaining his own personal reasons of developing his creativity through it.

From the point of view of fanaticism becoming passive, society's influences had little significance. When a fanaticism gained a meaning for the fan, opinions of other people became trivial from the point of view of private behaviour. If the fanaticism was deemed unacceptable, it was not communicated to other people, but nonetheless continued in secret, as Harry did with his fanaticism towards Harry Potter.

What is affected most by the society is then the communication of the fanaticism to other people, such as promoting the brand and taking on the role of missionaries (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Pimentel and Reynolds, 2004; Belk and Tumbat, 2005; Pichler and Hemetsberger, 2007; Matzler et al. 2007; Chung et al. 2008). As Mark and Harry explain in their narratives, fans always want to advertise their fanaticisms to other people, because their fanaticism brings them a lot of happiness and support, and works as an added bonus that enlightens and enriches their lives. The desire to act as a missionary to their fanaticism then seems to exist in both socially accepted and unaccepted fanaticisms, but when something wasn't deemed cool by society, fans did not act on this desire. When Harry talks about his fanaticism towards Harry Potter, he points out that he would have liked to discuss it with other people and suggest it to them, but felt that it was not acceptable for a person his age to like something like that. Therefore he did not advertise Harry Potter to others, even though he wanted to. Mark, on the other hand, constantly talks about all of his fanaticisms with others, as he feels they are very cool.

It was interesting to note that, while opinions of other people mattered very much to fans from the point of view publicly announcing their fanaticism, approval and affirmation were only sought from a specific social group that is knowledgeable of the subject and has a certain status in the field, i.e. experts of the subject. For example, Mark points out that he only takes seriously the opinions on his Gibson guitars from other guitarists or musicians. Therefore people outside the pre-approved group had no effect on the fan's private actions or opinions.

In conclusion, the above-discussed behaviours could be explained by the fact that fans do seek some type of social interaction (Thorne and Bruner, 2006), as well as wish to gain social significance, approval, and affirmation (Oliver, 1999). Through this, the concepts of public and private fanaticism also emerge, whose surface has been only brushed by previous research (Passmore, 2003). It is already known that the self has both a public and a private side, and, as fanaticism is a central part of the identity (Tice, 1992; Connell and Schau, 2008; Ibarra and Barbulescu 2010), the emergence of the concepts is actually quite logical. Public fanaticism is the kind that is shown to other people, is influenced by the society, and creates a public self-image for the fan. It thus relies more on external involvement (Thorne and Bruner, 2006) and can be seen to be driven by fitting oneself into the environment, which is one of the motives of the selfing process (Hermans, 1987). Private fanaticism, on the other hand, is the kind that the fan experiences in private with little or no knowledge of it given to others. Thoughts and

actions in such a fanaticism seem to remain largely unaffected by influences of the society, and result in a personal image of the self. Furthermore, external involvement seems not be present as vividly here, with fans concentrating mostly on internal involvement (Thorne and Bruner, 2006) as well as being motivated by self-expansion, the second motive of creating the self (Hermans, 1987). All in all, fanaticism's characteristics thus get even more intertwined with identity and its development.

## **8.4 Community in Fanaticism**

Fanaticism has almost always been seen and studied as a communal phenomenon (e.g. Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Obst et al. 2002; Kozinets, 2001; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Richardson and Turley, 2008). Thorne and Bruner (2006) even single out social interaction to be one of the four main characteristics of fanaticism. Recent studies have, however, pointed out fanaticism could also possibly be a very personal phenomenon (e.g. Passmore, 2003; Chung et al. 2007, 2008).

Many fans in my research data pointed out a very interesting point of view: they felt that belonging to a fan community was more about being a fan for others, while being a fan alone and without a community was then being a fan for yourself. Also, while fans did or didn't belong to a community, they always felt both a sense of belonging to something bigger than themselves, as well as having a personal side to their fanaticism, meaning that both aspects are present to some extent in all fanaticisms. These themes are discussed further below.

### **8.4.1 Being a Fan for Others**

Belonging to a fandom was seen and described by fans as being a fan for others, as the main goals in this situation are fitting in and getting friends, as well as actively communicating values and identity to other people. It thus seems that people were more inclined to join fan communities when they didn't have their own social group or community outside the fanaticism, and had problems with socialising, fitting in, or making friends. Harry explains his joining a Harry Potter community as being a result of having been bullied at school and having almost no friends in his "real life".



This concept of being a fan for others could then be related to external involvement (Thorne and Bruner, 2006) and the selfing process motive of fitting oneself into the environment (Hermans, 1987), as communal fans seem to be more active in the fanaticism on the outside, seeking to become a part of a social group and expressing their fanaticism externally. Communitality can be further connected to the concept of public fanaticism discussed earlier, as both seek to create an image of the self for other people and gain status in a certain group.

The fandom becomes a way to socialise, make ties with other people, and express oneself for those fans that don't have other opportunities to do so. As belonging to a group is a basic human need (Giddens, 1991, p. 88-98; Russell and Puto, 1999; Baumeister and Leary, 1995), a fan community then comes to be an easy way to acquire one's own social group. It should be noted that for the fan to join, the community has to offer similar values to what the fan sees in the fanaticism. For example, Harry Potter meant creativity and performance for Harry, and the fan community offered him this through role-playing and improvisation. Mark, on the other hand, repeatedly states that fandom had nothing to offer him.

Through these similar values, the community reinforces the fanaticism and the value it represents to the fan, therefore also supporting the establishment of social significance and status. Again, Harry points out that he wants to show other people that he has changed into a better person, which he does through his creativity, which is, in turn, supported by Harry Potter and the Harry Potter fandom.

This communal type of behaviour is the type most often seen in previous fanaticism research (e.g. Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Obst et al. 2002; Kozinets, 2001; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Richardson and Turley, 2008). The reason why fanaticism was previously only seen as a communal phenomenon could be explained by the fact that it was only researched in community contexts. Therefore the only fans found for research were the ones that wanted to be a part of a fan community, and, as a result, all fans were labelled this way.

#### **8.4.2 Being a Fan for Yourself**

Being a fan alone and without being a part of a community was, in turn, seen by fans more as being a fan for yourself, because it had more personal meaning put into it and attached to it. This type of fanaticism was also viewed as more meaningful because it was found by the fan

on their own and it would represent only what the fan wanted it to. The fanaticism was therefore not influenced by other people, making it more independent, and perhaps even more mature. As Harry explains in context of MADtv, his latest and most personal fanaticism, being a fan on your own is more authentic and durable, because communal and societal pressures cannot affect it.

Fans who were not involved in communities felt that these had nothing to offer them. Mark talks about fandoms in both contexts of being a fan of Bon Jovi and Gibson. He points out that he knows about the different fan communities, but feels that they offer no value to him. He continues by saying that he already has a lot of friends. Having an existing social group was thus also a big reason for the lack of involvement in a fandom.

Interestingly enough, solitary fans still actively participate in fanaticism-related activities. Mark frequently visits Bon Jovi and Gibson related websites, is involved in music activities, and gladly advertises his beloved brands to anyone willing to listen. Therefore, external involvement (Thorne and Bruner, 2006) and being missionaries for brands, concepts, which were discussed earlier, are not fully excluded by the factor of being communal or not.

Nonetheless, this private type of fanaticism does concentrate more on internal involvement (Thorne and Bruner, 2006), as well as the motive of self-expansion (Hermans, 1987). This means that not belonging to a fandom can, to some extent, be connected to the concept of private fanaticism, as it has similar goals of creating a personal self. Lastly, these themes largely support Chung et al.'s (2007, 2008) research that points out that fanaticism can be an intensely personal phenomenon. Therefore fanaticism doesn't need a community to exist and can flourish outside of it.

### **8.4.3 Merging the Public and the Private**

While some fans did not belong to a fan related community, all fans still felt themselves to be a part of something bigger and were very proud of this. For example, Mark feels that he is a part of rock history and traditions through being a fan of Gibson and Bon Jovi, and even socialises with other musicians through these fanaticisms. He nonetheless finds no need to join a fandom. Incorporating the self to be a part of something bigger is very common in identity building and can be described as a human need (Kleine et al. 1995; Acosta and Devasagayam,

2010). This aspect can also be seen as fitting the self into the environment, which is one of the motives of the selfing process, therefore further supporting fanaticism's connection to identity building, as was discussed earlier (Hermans, 1987). This motive was earlier connected to public fanaticism, and it could thus be said that a public side then exists in all fans, not just ones who are a part of a fandom. While private fans don't show this external involvement through any kind of behaviour, the inner processes are nonetheless present.

It should also be noted, that fanaticism always has a personal and private side as well, even if a community is present, which was observed to be a part of private fanaticism through internal involvement (Thorne and Bruner, 2006) and the motive of self-expansion (Hermans, 1987). This emerges through the value and meanings the fanaticism represents to fans along with supporting the process of building their identity. As an extreme example, Harry, who has a deep value of creativity set in Harry Potter, was very private about his fanaticism, meaning he didn't talk about it to other people or participate in any activities that were public to people outside of the fandom, even though he was an extremely active member of the community.

Following these thoughts, it seems that a public and private aspect exists in all fanaticisms. Furthermore supporting the existence of the two aspects in all fanaticisms is the distinction of different realities put forward by both Harry and Mark. Consumers' lives are indeed often constructed around multiple realities based on consumption experiences (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Both fans further point out in their narratives the difference between their real lives and their fanaticisms. This is mainly done in context of communities, where a main reason for joining or not joining a fandom was based on the lack of or existence of friends in "real life". Therefore, fans do have a similar concept of fanaticism to some extent. Communal and non-communal as well as private and public fanaticism, then, are not different things, but just slight variants of the same, as the intensity of characteristics differ within them.

The proportions of the public and private sides of fanaticism thus differ significantly with different fans and their fanaticisms. It has actually been pointed out by previous research that characteristics of fanaticism may vary in intensity (Hunt et al. 1999, Thorne and Bruner, 2006). Such research implies that the change in characteristics of fanaticism results in variance of internal involvement as well. This is not necessarily true, as strong fanatical bonds can exist without them being expressed externally, as can be seen here. This way, the

internal and external involvement of a fan (Thorne and Bruner, 2006) as well as consumer behaviour resulting from them could then be said to be based the balance of private and public aspects within the fanaticism. Moreover, as private and public fanaticisms are possibly connected to the elements of communality in fanaticism, it is conceivable that the proportions of the two parts could define whether a fan joins a community or not. Lastly, as these proportions stem from developmental influences of fanaticism, it is quite likely that such balances will affect how the fanatical relationship develops and even possibly what meaning it represents for the fan.

## **8.5 Narrative Identity and Fanaticism**

Previous research points out narratives to be a very good way to study fanaticism, because they allow for a personal view on the phenomenon (Smith et al. 2007). Life stories also help look at the developmental progression of people (Smith et al. 2007; Chung et al. 2008), and become a tool for building and understanding one's identity (Ricoeur, 1992 p.147; McAdams, 1996). It seems, though, that fanaticism itself also largely aids the process of building narrative identity by supporting its construction and outcomes. More specifically, fanaticism helps understand narrative identity and its meaning, as well as create the plotline of the narrative and organize the fan's life experiences. These themes are discussed further below.

### **8.5.1 Understanding Narrative Identity and Its Meaning**

The main goal of the narrative is to understand one's identity, thus supporting the process of identity building and its result (McAdams, 1996; Atkinson, 1998). As it was already established, fanaticism becomes a supportive element of this process, because it helps gather experiences, emotions, and other elements from the environment in order to create the self. At the same time it supports the product of the selfing process through representing important values of the fan. Identity and fanaticism are thus interlocked concepts, as the latter supports the former. Because identity is actually a central part of narratives (e.g. Ricoeur 1984; Ahuvia, 2005), it can be concluded that fanaticism also supports the creation of life stories and the narrative identity that is gained through them.

The narrative identity becomes evident in the life story through exposing the narrator's values (Shankar et al. 2001). As fanaticism supports and represents fans' values, it could be said that it also helps expose such values and make the fan become aware of them. Mark, for example, concludes that telling the life story helped him understand the values that his fanatics represent, i.e. traditions and respectability, and how these relate to his life and identity.

Another important part of narratives is the fact that people get to test and try out different identities in order to find their true self. The narrative helps with transitions and life changes through aiding in crossing gaps between the past, present, and future. (Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra and Barbulescu 2010) This can be seen in fanatics being supportive in different changes of the fan's life, as was discussed in previous sections. The change of fanaticism itself is often influenced by a change of values or identity, with which the fanaticism is associated. Therefore through the different fanatics, the different identities of the person can be seen and reflected on. Mark, for example, explains how through Bon Jovi he was able to try out and gain a rock identity, which he now feels cannot be changed for any other.

Lastly, as Harry describes in his narrative, the different fanatics also help fans see their own development throughout their life, which is a critical aspect of gaining an understanding of the self in the narrative identity (Atkinson, 1998). Through the fanaticism, Harry sees how he progresses and changes through his life. For instance, the recollection of his fanatics allows him to understand how he grew out of his previous infatuations, Pokémon and Harry Potter, and the values they offered and represented for him. Fanatics thus start representing previous identities, which serve as reference points for building a narrative (Järvinen, 2004). These support the cognitive link to the past (Mark and Nurius, 1986), as past life situations are revisited through fanaticism-related activities. Harry sometimes goes back to the Harry Potter fandom website in order to relive the emotions and memories of that time in his life. It has been established that understanding one's history and origins is central in creating the narrative (Thompson, 1997). Fanatics thus help the life story create meaning through showing the reasons behind events and experiences in the narrator's life (Järvinen, 2004).

### **8.5.2 Creating the Plotline and Organising the Fan's Life Experience**

The narrative identity consists of diverse elements, events, and beliefs in a person's life that are pulled together through memory recall, interpretation, and reflection. These elements then form a unified plot that is used to make sense of a person's life, as connections, meanings and purposes are uncovered (Ricoeur, 1988; Polkinghorne, 1995; Atkinson, 1998; Hopkinson and Hogarth-Scott, 2001; Riessman, 2005). Here, fanaticism's important role in narratives can be further seen, as apart from representing core values of the fans' identities, fanaticism is also very strongly associated and intertwined with other important things in a fan's life, like memories, emotions, experiences, and even relationships with other people. These elements are often remembered better through fanaticism, and it becomes a common thread or plotline that keeps different memories and emotions together. For instance, Harry points out in his recollection of his fanaticism towards Harry Potter how it is attached to positive emotions and memories, which he revisits through activities related to the fanaticism.

Narratives are essentially based on memories (Conway and Holmes, 2004; Connell and Schau, 2008). As fanaticism is very thoroughly intertwined with life episodes, it then supports the fan's memories and aids in recalling as well as organising them. Through the experiences, behaviours, and emotions related to it, the fanaticism creates connections between the past, present, and future. These connections are the most important things in understanding narratives and seeing the identity they represent (Thompson, 1997; Ahuvia, 2005; Riessman, 2005).

Further, fanaticisms don't just create links in a person's narrative, but they also form bundles of meanings, which represent certain values or life periods. This happens with the continual integration of elements into the self (Giddens, 1991), as all fanaticism related behaviours, thoughts, and emotions become connected with the concept of the fanaticism itself. For example, Harry is able to recollect his teenage years, the activities he participated in at that time, and the friends he interacted with through Harry Potter, a fan of which Harry was in that particular life period. Reflecting on these now, he is also able to see the meaning this entity represents to him.

As can be observed, fanaticisms help create the narrative identity's plotline (Ricoeur, 1988, 1992; Polkinghorne, 1995; Riessman, 2005) through becoming a common thread in different elements of the fan's life. The plotline is essential for making sense of one's life and its goals

(Atkinson, 1998), and the life stories' purposes become better understood with the concrete thread created by the fanaticism.

The narrative thus becomes even clearer, as through the creation of the plotline, the fanaticism also helps organise the fan's experiences, memories, and life in general (Bruner, 2004) by confirming different events and experiences in the context of the fanaticism. Moreover, fanaticism assists the life stories in being faithful to one's true self, as the authenticity is upheld through creating a coherent and organised story (Ibarra and Barbulescu 2010).

All in all, it becomes obvious that fanaticism turns out to be a supportive element in the process of building and understanding narrative identity. And this doesn't just happen on a subconscious level, as many of the fan interviewees pointed out how discussing their fanaticism helped them see their life in a new light and make better sense of it. Mark describes how talking about his fanaticisms made him understand how they are interconnected and, in turn, related to his life and identity. Therefore an understanding of one's own identity is gained through telling the narrative (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 147), which is supported by fanaticism. Moreover, fans consciously build and strive to understand their identity, as well as the message they send to other people. With the help of their fanaticism, fans then become self-reflecting beings, which is essentially the pre-setting and goal of a narrative identity (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Josselson, 2004; Atkins 2004, cit. Rojas and Bluemelhuber, 2010).

## **9 Conclusions**

In this section I present the conclusions for my research accompanied with suggestions for further research. Managerial implications are also discussed in order to address the usability of the research results in the company environment. The section is concluded by the limitations of the study.

### **9.1 Theoretical Implications**

The objective of this research was to look at fanaticism's development in a new light by seeing it as consumer behaviour that is positive and evolving (Oliver, 1999; Smith et al. 2007; Chung et al. 2005, 2007, 2008). Moreover, the study was conducted using narrative interviews in order to gain a more personal and inside view on the phenomenon. A wholesome view on the concept of fanaticism was also gained through looking at fans of different objects, as well as fans in different stages of fanaticism. The concept of fanaticism was further related to such topics, as loyalty, devotion, consumer-brand relationships, as well as identity building, and the connection of fanaticism to the creation of narrative identity was also suggested.

The research has brought interesting insights to the phenomenon of fanaticism in the context of consumer research: a better understanding of the phenomenon was gained from the point of view of its development and its meanings in people's lives and identities. Four phases of the development of fanaticism were identified and related to previous research on the topic, allowing for better understanding of the processes involved in being a fan.

It was established that fanaticism represents certain core life values to consumers, which are then transferred onto the fan and used for identity creation and building (Hermans, 1987). The fanatical relationship thus takes the form of person-thing-person, with values being the goal of the relationship for the consumer (Belk, 1988). The value represented by the fanaticism is central in the fan's life and becomes the common thread throughout one person's different fanaticisms, that aren't necessarily of the same genre or product type. The transferability of such a value nonetheless stays tricky, as fans don't find the same value in seemingly similar objects.



Different factors influencing fanaticism and its development were also identified and observed in order to see their relationship to the phenomenon. These directed the fanaticism to start and to become more or less active. Firstly the physical and emotional changes in the fan's own life came up, most important of which was the fanaticism being the first element in a new lifestyle. Secondly, influences originating from the fanaticism itself play an important role. For example, creating an experience of suspense and excitement turned out to be one of the most important aspects of the whole fanaticism for the fans. Lastly, influences of the society were discussed, out of which the concepts of private and public fanaticism emerged. These concentrate on internal and external involvement respectively (Thorne and Bruner, 2006), and are connected to the motives of the selfing process, i.e. self-expansion and fitting oneself into the environment (Hermans, 1987).

The role of communities in fanaticism was discussed and unravelled a bit more: it became apparent that belonging to a fandom was perceived as being a fan for other people, while being a fan alone was done for yourself. Through the goals of the two behaviours, they were connected to the concepts of public and private fanaticism. Nevertheless, all fans felt that they belonged to a greater whole and simultaneously had a private side to their fanaticism, meaning that a private and public side is present to some extent in all fanaticisms with their proportions and intensities differing significantly. Therefore no different fanaticisms exist, as they are just slight variations of the concept.

Following this, understanding the balance of the proportions of private and public within fanaticism as well as the reasons behind them, such as influences of larger and smaller social groups, may be relevant for better comprehending their effects on consumers' choices and actions. Different combinations of the two parts in fanaticism could possibly result in differing consumer attitudes and behaviour or even the presence of communality, meaning that understanding how the two pieces work together could be of foremost importance. Lastly, the different characteristics' proportions in fanaticism could have an immense influence on the phenomenon's development and meaning to the fan, all the more accentuating the importance of comprehending this balance within fanaticism.

## **9.2 Suggestions for Further Research**

Future research should concentrate further on the proportions and weights of the private and public aspects within fanaticism. The nature and influences of these concepts on the consumer, as well as their relationships to such issues as communality and the development of fanaticism should be comprehended, as it could provide insight into the overall concept of fanaticism. The roles of the public and the private in fanaticism together with factors influencing the balance of these elements should be studied more closely to understand their link to different consumer behaviours that stem from fanaticism. In addition, it could be relevant to map how individual characteristics and their weights influence consumer behaviour and involvement, as it is in marketers' best interests to understand whether different types of fanaticisms have distinct influences on the actions of consumers. Furthermore, other characteristics should be looked into to find out whether they influence and exist within fanaticism in similar ways as the private and public fanaticism do. All in all, understanding the above-mentioned concepts and their relationships could help comprehend the hands-on use of fanaticism in marketing.

## **9.3 Managerial Implications**

The study gave new overall insight into the concept of fanaticism, which can prove to be very useful to companies. It has already been established that fans are the most loyal and flexible customers, who hoard products and ignore their negative characteristics, as well as advertise their beloved brands to other people. Moreover, fans' consideration time for fanaticism-related products drops significantly, and their buying behaviour becomes atypical for them. Fans even claim that there are certain mandatory fan products, without which fanaticism cannot be declared. Fanaticism-related objects are then often bought when there is no actual need for them. Looking at all these attributes, it becomes evident that the development and maintenance of fanaticism can bring many concrete benefits to the company.

While actual products are a big part of being a fan, these are merely tools for representing values as well as the fan status. The most important aspect of the fanaticism is then not physical, but emotional. It should be noted, though, that the value that fans perceive in their fanaticised product is not necessarily the one that is communicated by the company, as was seen in my research data. It is often the consumer's own interpretation of the value, which is

the result of product attributes being intertwined with consumption experiences and existing life views. Therefore fanaticism maintains the idea of co-created value that is supported and created, but not distributed (Gronroos, 2000; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Very careful planning and execution of communication is then needed for handling the fan relationship correctly.

Further, the different factors influencing the start and development of fanaticism should be understood. The company obviously has most power in managing influences originating from the object of fanaticism, and, while the influences of the society and of the fan's own emotional and physical life changes cannot be directly controlled, they can be observed and utilized.

Lastly, companies should keep in mind that it is the experience of fanaticism that matters most to fans. Creating an environment of excitement prolongs active fanaticism and makes it more interesting. Maintaining such an environment could then prove central in developing fanatical relationships from the point of view of the company.

In conclusion, companies should take time to understand the fans of their brands to get a thorough picture of the value that they see in the offering. An appropriate environment and communication for the fanaticism should be initiated, thus creating an interdependent relationship with the fan, which is central for the survival of the fanaticism (Fournier, 1998). It should also be kept in mind that products are not restricted to physical items that are related to the fanaticism. Immaterial goods, such as information can be just as important to fans in the ways that were discussed above and should therefore also be utilized by companies (Belk, 1988).

## **9.4 Limitations**

The study took a step forward in seeing the concept of fanaticism as a whole by looking into fans of different subjects and by studying fans in different stages of fanaticism. Nonetheless, the research subjects were restricted to the country of the study, Finland, and to my personal social network, making the research stick to a certain type of demographic. The influences of fanaticism in different types of people may have therefore been overlooked, and further research may want to concentrate more on studying the fanaticism of different specific demographic groups.

The research also mainly concentrated on internal processes of the consumers involved in fanaticisms. Therefore the aspects of concrete consumer actions and their interaction with e.g. companies stayed more in the background. Future research should then look more into the actual consumer behaviour associated with fanaticism and its development.

Lastly, the scope of this research does not allow looking at fanaticism from every possible view that it has been studied. Issues of identity and communality were chosen to be more central, as these have been given less attention in previous studies. Therefore other important elements of the phenomenon that have been researched more, such as item collecting and identification with human representatives of the fanaticism, were given less thought. Further, negative aspects of fanaticism have been largely overlooked in this study because the new positive outlook was taken. Such aspects nonetheless do exist, and should be noted in future research.

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