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Thesis Title: Toying with Identity:
                  Adult Toy Collectors,
                  Material Fandom,
                  and Generational Media Audiences

Author's Name: Jonathon Nicholas Lundy

Submission Date: 12/10/2021

The signatures below certify that this thesis is complete and approved by the Examining Committee.

Role: Chair   Name: Wesley Shumar
Title: Professor
Department: Communication
Approved: Yes   Date: 12/10/2021

Role: Member   Name: Ernest Hakanen
Title: Professor
Department: Communication
Approved: Yes   Date: 12/10/2021

Role: Member   Name: Hilde Van den Bulck
Title: Professor
Department: Communication
Approved: Yes   Date: 12/13/2021

Role: Member   Name: Jonathan Gray
Title: Professor, Media & Cultural Studies
Institution: University of Wisconsin - Madison
Approved: Yes   Date: 12/10/2021

Role: Member   Name: Katriina Heljakka
Title: Post-Doc
Institution: University of Turku
Approved: Yes   Date: 12/13/2021

Toying with Identity:

Adult Toy Collectors, Material Fandom, and Generational Media Audiences

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty

of

Drexel University

by

Jonathon Nicholas Lundy

in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

of

Doctor of Philosophy

October 2021

Drexel
UNIVERSITY

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I could not have completed this project without the support of many others. First and foremost, I'd like to thank my dissertation supervisor and committee chair, Dr. Wesley Shumar, who was an invaluable mentor and friend throughout this process. He showed unfailing kindness and patience with me and there is no way to adequately thank him for his efforts. I would also like to thank the members of my committee who provided both the intellectual and emotional support needed to finish my work. Secondly, Dr. Ernest "Ernie" Hakanen is one my favorite faculty members at Drexel and one of the most knowledgeable media scholars I'm encountered in my time in the discipline. His understanding of mass communication history and theory is enviable. I always valued Ernie's insight into the field and him keeping my apprised of conferences and professional opportunities. Thirdly, I want to similarly express gratitude to Dr. Hilde Van den Bulck, for taking time away from her many duties as Department Head to help me with my research. Her insights into fandom studies from an international perspective helped steer my study in several unplanned directions. I would also like to sincerely thank Dr. Van den Bulck for her continued support as an instructor, and especially during a rather tense issue with a student last year. Forth, sincerest thanks must also be extended to Dr. Rachel Reynolds for being supportive mentor, sounding board, and sympathetic ear during my time at Drexel. She was responsible for bringing me into the program and a consistent source of positive energy and nerdy-musings that got me through rough times. Fifthly, I wish to thank my two external committee members, Dr. Jonathan Gray from the University of Wisconsin – Madison and Dr. Katriina Heljakka of the University of Turku. I have admired their work for some time and early in the development of my research, it was clear that they were central figures in scholarly realms I hoped to enter. I am incredibly grateful and honored that they saw merit in my

work and were willing to be part of the project. A sixth thank you is necessary for Dr. Alexander Jenkins, a kindred pop culture spirit and generous faculty member who was always willing to help me with statistical design and analysis. Lastly, I need to say thank you to some of my CCM colleagues, without whom I could not have finished. For the sake of space, I will only acknowledge them by name, but each should know that I greatly appreciated their friendship and professional support: Dr. Fei Jia, Dr. Julie Richmond, Dr. Julia Hildebrand, Greg Loring-Albright, and Nick Coffman.

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ABSTRACT

One need only look at current toy aisles to see the industrial legacy of *toyetic* transmedia franchises like *Star Wars*, *Transformers, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Masters of the Universe, Care Bears,* and *My Little Pony*. However, the increasing popularity of vintage toy collection, curation, and commerce by adults of specific generations, suggests a deeper connection to the media of that era.

Today, the toys, animated series, and other media are collectible connections to the past and markers of generational belonging for a significant number of adults who fell in love with toyetic media as kids. The fandom around these toys and their transmedia narratives should not be dismissed as pure nostalgia, nor should this decade's impact on children's consumer culture be overlooked. The Reagan era of deregulation in 1980s paved the way for advertisers, animation studies, and toy manufacturers to synergistically cultivate a new *toyetic* approach to children's marketing which significantly impacted Gen Xers and Millennials.

Toyetic is a term commonly used by marketing professionals to describe the potential for making toys from a media property. Toyetic also describes a specific transmedia genre that emerged in the 1980s, specifically to sell toys, not as ancillary merchandise, but *the* primary product sold through highly coordinated transmedia systems. Adults who came of age during this period were the first to be groomed under this new toyetic transmedia genre which cultivated a new children's consumer culture and planted the seeds of brand loyalty that now manifests in vintage toy fandom. Toy fandom is also illustrative of how recent generations are socially constructed media audiences that nostalgically share collective memories and comradery built around the books, comics, films, television shows, cartoons, and toys of their youth as part of both their individual and social identities.

INTRODUCTION

On December 12, 2015, NBC's infamous late-night comedy show *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) debuted a humorous toy commercial parody for the film release of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015).[1] The fictional advertisement, fashioned in the style of a vintage toy commercial, featured SNL cast members Bobby Moynihan, Taran Killam, and Kyle Mooney as overly enthusiastic adult toy collectors disrupting the fun of three young boys who only wished to play with their toys as intended (Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Portrayal of 3 Adult Toy Collectors in SNL Commercial Parody*

The boys attempt to enjoy the new action figure line while the stereotypical obsessive grown-ups encouraged them to "leave them in the box and never touch them" or "just look at it!" One of the kids shares that he has two of his favorite characters when Mooney's mullet-rocking character brags that he has "…three of each. One to display, one to open, and one just in case." The puzzled boy looks up at him and asks "Why?" Although the

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[1] *Saturday Night Live*, "Star Wars Toy Commercial – SNL," December 13, 2015, video, 2:06, https://youtu.be/EYyuo7gm-aQ.

children seem perfectly happy with their unboxed figures, the adults were more concerned in keeping the toys in pristine condition and maintaining cinematic fidelity. At one point the music stops and Moynihan's character is shown meticulously cleaning one figure before carefully placing it within a museum-style sliding glass doored display case along with the other items in his collection. The three boys look at him with disapproving confusion. (Figure 2 below).

Figure 2. *Another Scene from SNL Commercial Parody*

This creative spoof that was both a nostalgic nod to classic toy commercials and a satirical jab at the adult toy collection phenomenon. The skit continues to be immensely popular with SNL's official YouTube channel, amassing over 6 million views and 3,100 comments. For some viewers, the sketch's deeper resonance comes from its critique of nerdy *Star Wars* fan culture, particularly adults who not only collect the vintage toys of their youth, but everything produced for the modern films as well. Moynihan, Killam, and Mooney masterfully portray the single, geeky, white-male adult toy collector archetype, best illustrated when one boy asks Killam's character, "Does your wife like toys too?" With the John Williams' somber music coming to the aural foreground, the camera zooms in to reveal the man's dejected realization. Ultimately meant to make people laugh, this commercial

brilliantly highlights the contemporary rise of toy fandom around toyetic media properties like *Star Wars* predominantly, although not exclusively, by members of the Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Millennial generations.

Traditionally, generations have been described as subgroups of similarly aged individuals, united by shared sociohistorical experience. However, as Western cultures like the United States have become more mediatized so too has generational identity become more media centric. Accordingly, the contemporary process of *generationing* is not only achieved through shared History [*sic*] but through similar relationships to media artefacts, encountered in their formative years. In many ways, generations are audiences that developed similar media diets as children and as adults share collective memories and comradery built around the books, comics, films, television shows, cartoons, and toys of their youth. These audiences often manifest in the respective media fandom of generational members. One illustration of this is the increasing popularity of vintage toy collection, specifically of toyetic media properties, by adults who experience their formative years in the 70s, 80s, and early 90s.

This need to recapture the past is not a new phenomenon, but in the case of these toy collectors, is a direct effect of a new type of transmedia system that developed during their formative years and that was specifically designed to stimulate brand loyalty. This loyalty manifests as fandom, expressed, not exclusively but frequently, through the continued desire for, acquisition, and possession of material media, in form of vintage toys.

Given the above framing, the following research questions will guide this mixed-methods investigation of the toy fandom and generational identity:

Research Questions

1. How do vintage toy collectors communicatively construct their fandom?

a. How does adult toy collection constitute fandom?

2. What motivates adults to collect toys from their childhood?

3. What role does toyetic media play in the generational experience of adult toy collectors?

In addressing these questions, this project aimed to accomplish several things. First, I investigated vintage toy collection as a form of fandom. Specifically, I examined the ways in which vintage toy fans communicate their fandom as well as what influence *toyetic* media has in fostering personal and social identity for collectors. Second, I explored the centrality of this type of media in the socialization and constitution of the generational experience. In so doing I hoped to contribute to the growing area of research that conceptualizes recent generations as media audiences connected, not merely by kinship, age, or historical events, but by common media-centric experiences. Third and finally, I, primarily through a systematic literature review, forwarded a conceptual argument that *toyetic* media is a new media genre that developed in the 1980s toys and that toys are material mediums. Ultimately this study was an overly ambitious transdisciplinary attempt to connect several complementary areas of research; media/fandom studies, generational theory, and consumer culture research. The blending of these, perhaps seemingly distinct, disciplines are ideal for addressing the goals above as well as the significance of toyetic transmedia, toy collecting as fandom, the commodification of nostalgia, media materiality, and media's overall influence on identity. The following review of literature will begin with an explanation of toyetic media.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The desire to collect a piece of one's childhood is, as it always has been to some extent, fueled by nostalgia, and in the case of the more contemporary consumers, part of a strategic commodification of nostalgia targeting specific generations. This, in conjunction with Hollywood's continual remediation of media-properties with established audiences like *Star Wars* and *Transformers* keeps certain franchises in our collective consciousness and familiar toys on store shelves. In particular, many of the mass-produced toys produced in the 1980s as part of transmedia networks have made a resurgence. Merchandise once considered purely ephemeral is now integral to the continued memorialization of popular media texts, whether that be the movie, cartoon, or comic book. For sure, previous generations were also exposed to nostalgic marketing which influenced their decisions as consumers. However, the current collectability of properties from the 70s and 80s among Gen Xers, older Millennials, and all those in between, is importantly different because they were the first cohorts to be groomed for this type of enduring toy fandom through *toyetic* media systems they were exposed to during their formative years.

A New View of Toyetic

Toyetic is a concept used by marketing professionals that describes the suitability of a media property for merchandising, particularly in modes amenable to children through play or collectability (Bainbridge, 2017). Products may take the form of plush creatures, dolls, figurines, playsets, games, coloring books, stickers, or other novelties. If merchandising is "the materiality of licensing, an extension of virtual screen texts into physical paratexts," then toyetics is the "interactive 'make-and-do' aspect of merchandising, encouraging audiences to engage and play with aspects of the screen text" (Bainbridge, 2017, p. 25). Toyetics is more than simple character marketing or the use of brand mascots. Shoes,

bandages, and cereals can all be stamped with a character's image and granted a playful aura, as it were, but it does not inherently allow for playability. The toyeticity then of a product "invites the user to play and handle, connecting users to the pastimes and activities of childhood" (Hind, 2003, p. 1). Toyetic properties possess characters, creatures, technology, and settings that easily translate into toys. Characters have toyetic potential if they exhibit unique physical attributes, powers, gadgets or an identifiable "personality that can be easily transferred to dolls and playset environments" (Wasko Phillips, & Purdie et al., 1993, p. 285). Superheroes are especially "toyetic" (Bainbridge, 2010, 2012; Cross, 1997; Wasko, et al., 1993), given their distinctly colorful costumes and often bizarrely recognizable physical characteristics. Essentially then toyetic, as generally conceptualized, is a quality or totality of qualities that a film, TV show, book or other narrative construct possesses, that can materialize into ludic merchandise.

Toyetic, I argue, also describes a unique transmedia genre that started in late 70s with the original *Star Wars* (1977) film and exponentially proliferated throughout the 1980s due in no small part to the deregulation of children's television. In line with a cultural studies' approach (Mittell, 2001) to genre, this chapter will analyze toyetic media through a brief history of its political-industrial formation, a breakdown of some constitutive conventions, and a discussion of the genre's influence on contemporary generations as it manifests in adult toy fandom.

The Toyetic Genre

Genre is commonly viewed as a category of literature, music, film, or other texts. The word itself comes from the French (origin Latin) word for 'kind' or 'class' (Chandler, 1997). Media genres are a practical shorthand making production profitable and reception predictable. Media industries rely on genres for branding (Cartoon Network), market

segmentation (teeny boppers), and scheduling (daytime soap operas) (Chandler, 1997). Streaming services like Netflix and Spotify use genre to organize content and steer subscriber interest. Consumers rely on genre every day to bypass choice paralysis and organize personal media diets. Television and film genres typically manifest through shared textual elements or conventions like setting (post-apocalyptic New York City), prominent content or activity (science fiction, action adventure), audience effect (comedy, horror), or narrative structure (murder mystery). The American Western for instance has well-established conventions in radio, film, and television. Westerns are generally set in the Western United States of the 1800s, have stock characters (sheriffs, gunslingers, Native Americans, town drunks, greedy cattlemen, preachers, prostitutes), and feature kidnappings, horse chases, train robberies, as well as climatic shootouts. The repeated use of these shared conventions has come to define the genre and are now expected by audiences.

This type of analytical approach treats genre primarily as a component of text. However, such an analysis should move beyond *just-the-text* to explore how genres manifest in the "complex interrelations among texts, industries, audiences, and historical contexts" (Mittell, 2001, p. 7). Genres are not created in a vacuum and therefore cannot be adequately explored through texts alone. Audiences also play a role in the formation of genres through their interpretive practices as do the power structures in which they come into being. Accordingly, scholars should look at the "ways in which genres are culturally defined, interpreted, and evaluated" (Mittell, 2001, p. 9). This more critical method acknowledges the subjectivity and fluidity of genres over time as well as their relationship to audience reception.

The toyetic genre is constituted by its purpose as much as it its conventions, consisting of properties that exist explicitly to sell toys through synergistic transmedia

systems including animated series, comic books, and the toys themselves. Prior to the era of toyeticism, the primary narrative, usually in the form of a film or cartoon preceded the toy tie-in. If sufficiently popular or to proactively mitigate financial losses, licensed merchandise would be developed from that property. However, toyetic media operates in reverse where the toy is developed first, or concurrently, then the narrative is constructed to promote it and inform play.

A Toyetic History Lesson

Toyetic properties have diverse and complicated genealogies. Most works comprising the genre emerged in the 1980s with earlier prototypes like Mattel's 1969 *Hot Wheels* cartoon which featured their line of miniature car toys as characters. Transmedia franchises like *Masters of the Universe (MOTU)* and *Thundercats* are clearly toyetic in that they were purposively created to sell toys through joint ventures between advertisers, toy producers, and animation studios (Pecora, 1989). Some characters like the *Care Bears* existed on greeting cards before being developed into toyetic transmedia properties. Others like the Hanna Barbera cartoon *Snorks* (1984-1989) were seemingly toyetic in that its characters and story world lent itself to collectible toys, but not being designed to do so, lacked the intentional synergistic production, transmedia storytelling, and loyal audiencing (Fiske, 1992) that unites the genre. While the story of toyetic media is primarily set in the 1980s, it began a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away.

The Toyetic Force of Star Wars

The term *toyetic* is apocryphally attributed to Bernard Loomis, famed Kenner toy executive who passed on the merchandising rights for Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), because it wasn't "toyetic" enough, instead acquiring the license for George Lucas' *Star Wars* (1977). *Star Wars* became an unprecedented mega-hit, setting new

standards for film making and for extending the filmic experience beyond the theater through licensed products. Lucas' high-concept space opera was toyetic because it had the look (imagery), the hook (market appeal), and the book (accessible narrative) (Wyatt, 1994, p. 22) to produce toys. Kenner capitalized on the diversity of characters, creatures, and technology present in *Star Wars*, by designing their action figures significantly smaller (3.75") than the industry standard size. Considering the 70s' oil embargo this meant more plastic toys could be produced and sold for less alongside a scalable plastic galaxy of toy vehicles, creatures, and playsets that the figurines could inhabit (*The Toys That Made Us*) Furthermore, and more importantly to Kenner, the ever-increasing multiplicity of toys also encouraged frequent purchases and collectability. Kenner's profits eclipsed $2.5 billion by the end of the first three films (Engelhardt, 1995 p. 269) and in 1985 there were more Star Wars action figures on Earth than U.S. citizens (Taylor & Shackford, 2016). Competitors eagerly sought to replicate Kenner's merchandising miracle. Though instead of acquiring the rights for a potentially toyetic property like *Star Wars*, toy makers, animation studios, and advertisers collaboratively developed their own playful properties. So then, *Star Wars* was a catalyst for the emergence of toyetic media, but this new genre was also aided by good timing.

Adults Toying with Children's Television

Before the 1980s, the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) regulated children's media under the belief that broadcast airwaves should primarily serve kids' educational and informational needs. In the 1960s public concern arose over television's potentially negative effects, championed by parents, and groups like Action for Children's Television (ACT). In 1969 ABC aired *Hot Wheels*, a cartoon created to promote Mattel's line of diecast toy cars. Due to pressure from ACT and rival toy car producer Topper Toys, the FCC ruled that this type of program degraded children's programming to half-hour

commercials and subordinated public interest to salability. ABC had to log the opening song and all references to "Hot Wheels" as advertising leading to its cancellation as an unprofitable venture (Ronstron, 1996). ACT again petitioned the FCC in 1974, leading to the first federal policies restricting children's advertising (Kunkel, 2001, p. 385). In a landmark report, the FCC formally acknowledged children's inability to recognize the persuasive intent of commercials or distinguish advertisement from program (Fleming, 1996, p. 59). Voluntary guidelines were established regarding time limits and the clear separation of commercial from content.[2] Enforcement was undertaken by the industry's self-regulatory body, the National Association of Broadcasters who encouraged the use of bumpers and prohibited host selling.[3] Despite leaving compliance in the hands of the industry these measures actually slowed the tide of program-length commercials (PLCs) for most of the 1970s. Ultimately though these half-hearted seawalls did little to turn away the tsunami of toy-based television that rode in on the Regan-era wave of deregulation.

Mr. Fowler, Tear Down This (Regulatory) Wall!

In 1981 President Ronald Reagan appointed like-minded capitalist Mark Fowler as FCC chair who viewed television like other appliances, calling it a "a toaster with pictures" (Engelhardt, 1986, p. 76). Fowler believed free market forces should determine what is best for children (Minow & LaMay, 1995, p. 106) and in 1984 the FCC lifted its unofficial prohibition against PLCs. The FCC's new regulatory position was that all matters of popular culture would be determined "through the marketplace mechanisms of consumer choice" (Kline, 1993, p. 278). Regulation would only occur if there was provable harm, leaving the

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[2] Commercials during children's programming were limited to 9.5 minutes per hour on weekends and 12 minutes during weekdays

[3] Bumpers are short voiced-over segments, announcing a pause in programming or its resumption. Host selling is the use characters from a children's program to advertise a related product during adjacent commercial breaks.

burden of proof with researchers and advocacy groups. This opened the proverbially floodgates for toy manufacturers, animation studios, and advertisers to implement a new transmedia marketing approach that intentionally blurred the lines between product and promotion.

Toys on Television

Even before deregulation, forward-thinking Bernie Loomis successfully licensed the American Greetings' Strawberry Shortcake characters which Kenner developed into their 1980 toyline. The dessert-themed, pleasantly scented dolls were released alongside stickers, clothing, a video game, and an animated TV special. Kenner's toyline grossed over $100 million in the first year and this early success in character marketing inspired others to use the "Shortcake Strategy" (Engelhardt, 1986) where television would drive licensed product promotion (Kline, 1993). *Star Wars* and *Strawberry Shortcake* showed that characters with accompanying stories were more effective at selling toys to kids than straight forward product promotion, so companies began to align themselves with animation studios and comic book publishers. Action figures were particularly profitable when promoted by "advertoons" (Kline, 1993) like Filmation's *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* (1983-1985) was an animated television series created to promote Mattel's Masters of the Universe toyline. The expansion of independent television stations in the United State greatly increased the impact of these PLCs like *He-Man*.

Independent stations increased from 85 to 226 between 1976 and 1985 (Pecora, 1989) and syndicated toy-subsidized programming was a low-risk, cost-effective means of filling airtime.[4] *He-Man* was the first syndicated toy-related series, debuting weekdays in 1983

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[4] National networks like CBS, ABC, and NBC had traditionally supplied children's entertainment, with most programs relegated to the Saturday Mornings.

during the after-school timeslot.[5] By 1985, nearly one third of weekly syndicated programs were product-based (Pecora, 1989) and *He-Man's* success led to industry-wide adoption of these mutually beneficial barter systems (Erickson, 2005). There were only 13 toy-related TV programs in 1983 but by 1988, there were over 70, with sales of related products increasing from $26.7 billion to $64.6 billion. Several toy producers were even ranked in the top 10 of the Standard and Poor Index of the top 100 US companies (Seiter, 1995, p. 196). The toyetic approach was so effective that by 1989 certain blocks of TV guide resembled a Toys "R" Us catalog. Cultural critics of this period argue that this change reduced animated programs to "little more than poorly drawn, glorified half-hour commercials" (Hilton-Morrow & McMahan, 2003, p. 78) for a range of figures, robots, plush dolls and toy sets that were being produced cheaply in Asia and being sold in America (Burke & Burke, 1999, pp. 57-58). Over the past 40 years, the children's consumer market became incredibly lucrative, and this golden era of transmedia led the way for consolidation of the 'children's culture industry' where toy and television production were synergistically and strategically coordinated (Engelhart, 1986). The success of these supersystems drastically changed the industry and the toys themselves.

Toys produced in the late 19th and early to mid-20th century, were largely generic or made to introduce children to aspects of adulthood. Building blocks, dolls, tin soldiers, toy cars, and train sets were often bought for one child and handed down through families, or even, generationally. Mass production and the proliferation of children's film and television had already started the change but by the 1980s these legacy toys were largely superseded by

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[5] Syndication is the sale of a ready-made program to a station, generally for cash and a predetermined amount of commercial airtime, that producers can sell to advertisers (PecorEtacousin, 1989).

what Beryl Langer (1989) coined "commoditoys" or toys that by design stimulate rather than satiate consumptive desire. According to Langer (1989):

> Each act of consumption is a beginning rather than an end, the first or next step in an endless series for which each particular toy is an advertisement, first because its package is also a catalogue and second because it is part of a tantalizing universe without which the one just purchased is somehow incomplete. (p. 36)

The profitability of toyetic media in the early 80s inspired formulaic replication in toy aisles and on television sets across the United States leading to the emergence of a new transmedia genre of consumer entertainment.

The First Transmedia Genre

In addition to their profit-driven synergistic origins, another constitutive element that unites works within the toyetic genre is their transmediality. Transmedia storytelling is the unfolding of a narrative "across multiple media platforms, with each text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 95-96). Texts within a transmedia network add something substantive to the story, helping the audience understand the master narrative in a new way. In its ideal application the medium itself contributes meaningfully to the storytelling experience. For instance, a video game offers a much more interactive and immersive experience than a film. The Holy Trinity of toyetic transmedia storytelling in the 1980s was the intertextual web formed by syndicated animated television, comic books, and the toys themselves. Some of the properties like *Transformers* and *Care Bears* also had feature films released in theaters or special tv mini-series but they were not as uniform across the genre. The toys themselves also acted as mediums, enabling media consumers to explore characterization in a personalized, tactile, mimetic manner. These three nodes in the toyetic transmedia systems contributed meaningfully to the storytelling

experience, but the continuity and consistency between the mediums weren't always manifestly coherent. For example, the stand-along mini-comics packaged with He-Man action figures portrayed a darker Eternian lore that often contradicted the eventual Filmation cartoon and the full-sized DC comic book series that would be more in-line with the animated series. Moreover, as is this case with all transmedia systems, the narrative elements were adapted to the medium they were to be consumed through. Visual characterization was representationally consistent in that children could clearly identify characters between mediums however the toys looked different, particularly in humanistic facial features and level of detail, than their animated or hand-drawn counterparts. This inconsistency sometimes frustrated young consumers and adult collectors alike. Some toyetic properties were more consistent both in narrative coherence and transmedial visualization, particularly as technology got better. Participants in this current study corroborated previous scholars' contention that cartoons were essential nodes in the 80's marketing supersystems that had broad audience appeal, transcending demographics, and fostered 'collectability' (Kinder, 1993, p. 123). Animated television was multi-modal, vibrantly engaging, and offered unlimited storytelling potential in an era of true national audiences. The syndication of cartoons in particular breathed life into children's plastic playmates five days a week and of course on Saturday mornings.

Saturday Morning Cartoons

Experimentation with animation began as early as the late 1800s but the cartoons didn't emerge in its modern recognizable form until the 1920s with the synchronization of sound and film, as illustrated in Disney's 1928 *Steamboat Willie*. Technological innovations propelled animation forward throughout the next several decades and by the 1950s animation was a familiar storytelling medium in theaters. During the 1960s however the time

and cost of producing feature films increased significantly and the presence and popularity of cartoons in theaters waned. Cartoons would eventually find a home on television where cost saving animation techniques like "limited animation," made the process more cost effective and less time consuming.

When cartoons migrated from the big screen to small ones, they had to be adapted for the new platform. Celluloid animation was a slow labor-intensive process, with frames hand-drawn, one at a time. The "full animation" techniques used to in classics films like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) allowed animators to create characters with smooth full range naturalistic motion and highly detailed settings. This however required some 5,000 to 6,000 drawings for a mere six-minute cartoon (Jones, 1989, p. 185). Full animation not only took a long time, but also cost a lot of money. For animation to work profitably on television the process was adjusted to require far fewer individual frames, less movement, and the recycling of certain action sequences and backgrounds. Unfortunately, this also reduced the overall aesthetic quality of the animation seen on screen so greater emphasis was placed on sound and dialogue, rather than action, to advance the plot (Maltin, 1980, p. 338). Accordingly, "television production transformed animation as profoundly as the advent of sound or color" (Solomon, 1989, p. 229). To meet the demands of weekly syndication these cartoons were rushed into production, frequently outsourced to overseas animation "factories" like Toei Animation in Japan that animated Hasbro's *Transformers, G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero,* and *My Little Pony*. Because of this critics regard the 1980s as "the worst moment in animation history" (Banet-Weiser, 2007, p. 184). Animated television was already viewed as a cheap form of entertainment suitable only for children and the hypercommercialization of toy-based cartoons reinforced the notion that they were "universally 'formulaic', 'inane', and 'mind-numbingly banal'" (Buckingham, 2000, p. 160).

An example of this "Limited Animation" as it came to be known, that many toyetic media fans remember is the reuse of the transformation sequence in *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* when Prince Adam transforms into He-Man (Figure 3).
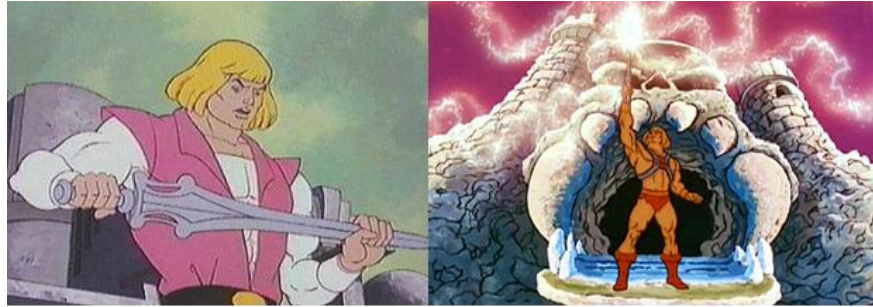
Figure 3. *Example of Reused Cels for Limited Animation Technique*

The big three networks (CBS, ABC, and NBC) initially aired cartoons across a variety of time slots to reach a variety of viewer demographics. The most successful example is Hanna-Barbera's *The Flintstones*, which premiered in primetime, unheard of at the time, on ABC in 1960. Unfortunately, most cartoons did not receive *Flintstones*-type ratings and cartoons that failed to sustain an audience on primetime were relegated to locally produced after-school blocks or the "least attractive time slot on television," (Banet-Weiser, 2007, p. 183), Saturday mornings. Unintentionally, this would lead to the cultural phenomenon known as "Saturday Morning Cartoons" (Burke & Burke, 1999) and the creation of ideal landing spot for advertisers to reach young consumers.

Although children were present in a variety of advertisements as early as the late 1800s (Cross, 2004), early adverts, even for toys and other children's goods, were targeted at parents. As television advertising became more common in the 1950s advertisers recognized children as potential consumers but did not think the products being sold on tv would necessarily appeal to kids and they had little reason to sponsor cartoons (Alexander & Morrison, 1995; Mittell, 2004) because they possessed no direct purchasing power (Pecora,

1995). This would quickly change however with early successes like Mattel's 1955 "Burp Gun" advertisement during ABC's *The Mickey Mouse Club* which encouraged other toy companies to market directly to kids. Thus, the 1960s saw a significant increase in the number of goods television advertisements for children and more time allotted for commercials on Saturday mornings (Kunkel & Roberts, 1991). By the early 1970s children's programming, mostly cartoons, almost exclusively aired on Saturday mornings, creating a very attractive and somewhat captive audience for advertisers (Kunkel & Gantz, 1993). The commercial impact of this was a predictable growth in the children's consumer market. The unintended effect was the creation of a national mediated experience that connected disparate members of several generations and created the space for toyetic media and the generational fandom it would eventually inspire. For Baby Boomer, Gen Xers, and some older Millennials, "Saturday morning [became] a crucial generational rite of passage for the children who consumed it, a gold mine of in-jokes and cultural reference points" (Burke & Burke, 1999, p. 8).

Ironically though, toyetic media would be the beginning of the end for Saturday Morning Cartoons as in an effort to broaden the reach of their half-hour toy commercials, animation studios reached syndication agreements with networks to air cartoons like *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe*, *Transformers*, and *G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero*, five days a week, either before or after school. Kids no longer had to get up early on Saturday mornings to watch their favorite animated characters. Other factors were the proliferation of home video and the popularity of family video game systems like the Nintendo Entertainment System (1985-1995, United States). Then in 1989 *The Simpsons* aired on Fox as part of its primetime lineup, ushering in a renaissance of sorts of primetime (Banet-Weiser, 2007), adult oriented animation which changed the cultural perception of cartoons as merely children's

entertainment. Furthermore, the growth of the cable industry in the 1990s increased the number of overall options for animated programing including, MTV, Nickelodeon, Toon Disney, and the Cartoon Network, which launched in 1992. Similar to CNN, Ted Turner's new network provided a 24-hour venue for classic theatrical cartoons produced by Warner Bros. and MGM as well as traditional Saturday morning fare produced by Hanna-Barbera, all of which he owned the rights to.

The real death knell for Saturday Morning Cartoons however came a few years earlier, in 1990, when Congress passed the Children's Television Act (CTA) mandating that all broadcast networks, the traditional homes of SMCs, air a minimum of three hours of primarily educational children's programming. The CTA resulted from several decades of legitimate to some extent, concerns that children's cartoons were too violent, too subversive to traditional values, too vapid, and too concerned with selling things to kids. The new restrictions in conjunction with already waning viewership made dedication of an entire block of children's programming on Saturday mornings a far less profitable venture for networks. It didn't immediately kill SMCs, but it pretty much guaranteed its eventual demise. Saturday Morning Cartoons officially died on Saturday, September 27, 2014, when the CW aired the final installment of Vortexx, its Saturday morning block of cartoon programming, ending an oft criticized but significant multigenerational mediacentric tradition in the United States. Cartoons were the transmedia nodes that had the broadest reach however comic books were also significant contributors to toyetic systems, often preceding animated series as they were cheaper, quicker to produce, and less regulated than children's content broadcast on television.

Comic Books

For example, Hasbro's *G.I. Joe: The Real American Hero* toyline launched in 1982 alongside a Marvel comic book featuring stories roughly related to new toys available on the store shelves. Similarly, Mattel's Conan the Barbarian inspired *Masters of the Universe* (MOTU) toys were each packaged with stand-alone minicomic books portraying a darker somewhat different Eternian lore than the eventual Filmation cartoon and an additional full-sized DC comic book series. *Transformers*, *Thundercats*, *SilverHawks*, *M.A.S.K.*, and *Dino-Riders* toylines also debuted concurrently with comic books providing character histories and story world mythologies. Where animated series were more episodic in nature, neatly wrapped up in 22 minutes, comic books allowed for greater seriality where larger story arcs could unfold, sometimes ending in a cliff-hanger, or the suspension in the narrative continuity that occurs from issue until the next. The serial format also was conducive to more in-depth characterization and world building. Additionally, the artwork in most comic books was superior to that of cel animation of the day. Furthermore, comic books were not subject to FCC regulation leaving the door open for more mature content including violence, language, and romance, which appealed more to an older audience. The contributions of toys themselves in transmedia networks can often be overlooked as they are generally not considered storytelling texts in the same way that cartoons, or comic books are.

Don't Forget the Toys

In most modern media franchises, and especially within those of the toyetic genre, toys were central to the transmedia storytelling experience as they were the means by which a child's agency in a story world could be realized (Dinehart, 2008; as cited in Harvey, 2015). Toys were officially licensed props and analog avatars that children used to replay, reject, or revise the narratives seen on screen or read in comics. Action figures and dolls were

interactive texts that were read semiotically and performed through scripted play informed

by the toy's material affordances, established narratives, and associated histories of use

(Wohlwend, 2009, p. 60). Toyetic transmedia narratives also included television commercials

that blended children demonstrating intended play and animation as well as information

gleamed from toy packing. Collectively these elements contributed to world-building, a key

trait of transmedia storytelling where each textual extension helps construct and enrich a

broader fictional environment to create a more cohesive entertainment experience for

audiences" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 95-96). While frequently associated with children's media, the

toyetic element is also a concern of producers of big budget, high-concept, fantasy, science

fiction, and action films. Toyetic stories as portrayed in animated television exhibited

similarities that over time became conventions, expected by consumers.

Toy Stories

Storytelling in toyetic media served the interests of marketing first and had to instill

"the promise of an imaginary world that can be entered not just by watching television but

also by owning and playing with a specific toy line" (Kline, 1993, p. 280). The toys generated

a certain amount of buzz on their own through traditional advertising, shelf appeal, and

word-of-mouth on the playground, but narrativized mythologies facilitated a stronger

emotional connection to the products. The most effective storytelling medium within the

toyetic transmedia networks was the animated TV series. Syndicated cartoons were mostly

episodic narratives requiring only 22 minutes to tell, usually ending with good triumphing

over evil. Daily episodes shuffled the focus through ever-expanding casts of characters and

vehicles to highlight new toys on the shelves (*Toy Galaxy*, 2019). Story plots involved heroes

fighting villains, rescuing comrades, foiling a theft, or stopping a countdown to catastrophe.

Larger narrative arcs played out in multi-episode mini-series, feature-length films, and comic

books that delved more deeply into mythology and introduced new characters/toys. Given the age range of target consumers and the overarching goal of selling toys, mythologies in toyetic narratives were accessible, repetitive, and over time formulaic.

Transformers (1984-1987), Challenge of the GoBots (1984-1985), Thundercats (1985-1989), Dinosaucers (1987), and Dino-Riders (1988) all chronicled the adventures of displaced warriors, marooned alongside their mortal enemies while fleeing their war-torn or dying home worlds. Although disadvantaged, the heroes must bravely defend themselves, their adoptive homes, and its inhabitants against their evil counterparts. Settings varied, but action figure stories usually played out in vaguely futuristic variations of Earth, an alien planet, or a world blending fantasy and science fiction. He-Man and the Masters of the Universe (1983-1985), She-Ra: Princess of Power (1985), and Thundercats respective fictional settings, Eternia, Etheria, and Third Earth, blended sword and sorcery with futuristic technology, providing limitless storytelling options and toy development avenues. My Little Pony n' Friends (1986-1987), Rainbow Brite (1984-1986), and Care Bears (1985-1988) featured communities of friends adventuring happily in magical fantasy lands. Their harmonious villages were constantly disrupted by evil witches, shadowy kings, monsters, and other heartless antagonists living in dark, cold, feelingless or color deprived worlds. As toyetic media came to dominate the children's mediascape this formulism assisted viewers in competently navigating multiple series simultaneously. Similarities in plot structure often obscured some of the more complex subject matter dealt with in PLCs like exploitation of natural resources, humanity's evolving relationship with technology, and the power of friendship. Despite the similarities among toyetic concepts children of the 1980s were critical consumers and not all toy tie-ins survived school yard scrutiny. Successful properties developed compelling characters both

on screen and in toy aisles. The most profitable characterization templates were recycled and became representative of toyetic genre.

Toyetic narratives were typically built around one of three protagonist types that set the tone for content: muscled superheroes, mechanical transformers, and nurturing caretakers (Hendershot, 1998). Superheroes like He-Man from *Masters of the Universe* and Lion-O from *Thundercats* were tall, superhumanly strong, muscular, deep voiced, and undeniably manly, presumably to appeal to young boys. Guided by destiny, they utilize their special, often supernatural gifts to fight evil, with the main story action centered around impressive displays of their extraordinary abilities. Mechanical transformers, like Optimus Prime from *Transformers*, could alter their physical form through technology and while technically asexual were also coded male through brawny robotic physiques and masculine voice acting. These mechanical soap operas emphasize the power of advanced technology and the key moment in each episode involved a key transformation. Nurturing caretakers like Rainbow Brite and Jem were marked as girl through feminine body types, big eyelashes, makeup, hairstyles, clothing, and higher-pitched voice actors (Perea, 2015). They were also stereotypically maternal and "loving problem solvers who nurture not only each other but also natural phenomena" (Hendershot, 1998, p. 98). *She-Ra* was somewhat of a hybrid in that Adora was a nurturing caretaker who transformed into a superhero. Central heroes in the toyetic genre were also defined by formidable archnemeses who were equally evil as they were morally upright.

Good heroes are made by bad villains. He-Man had Skeletor, She-Ra had Hordak, Lion-O had Mumm-Ra, and Optimus Prime had Megatron. Even series about friendship communities like *The Smurfs*, *Care Bears*, *Rainbow Brite*, and *Strawberry Shortcake* had antagonists like Gargamel, No Heart, Murky Dismal, and The Purple Pieman. Villains' attributes were in

direct conflict with those of the heroes. Heroes of girl franchises tended to be prepubescent children while the villains were usually adults, and often more comical and less menacing those in boy cartoons. Where protagonists were brave, strong, kind, and collectively minded, antagonists were cowardly, devious, powerful, and self-serving. Heroes led through inspiration and villains ruled with fear. Toy designers and animation studios used clear visual and auditory cues to help young viewers clearly identify the "good guys" and "bad guys." Harkening back to black hat/white hat dichotomy of early Westerns, villains were clearly distinguished through clothing and color scheme. Villains were colored or clothed in black, purple, dark blue, and red. To mark their evil otherness, baddies wore menacing masks, eye patches, or resembled beasts or monsters, with spikes, fangs, associated with traditionally evil iconography like snakes: Snake Mountain, COBRA, Serpentor, V.E.N.O.M. The sound of villainy was melodramatic, either voiced deep and raspy like Megatron, Venger, and Shredder or high pitched and grating like Skeletor, Star Scream, and Cobra Commander. Menacing laughs were particularly indicative of the level of evil a hero faced. The heroes' mythologies were anchored in shared themes that supported specific play concepts.

Play Concept to Plot Contrivance

The real message in toyetic media was "buy the toys" but from a narrative standpoint a variety of themes were present. Transformation was a prominent motif, handy plot device, and popular toy concept narrativized in the 1980s. *Transformers* and *The Challenge of Go-Bots* were toylines that premised on a puzzle-solving, form changing toy gimmick, given meaning through two different, albeit similar, mythologies about giant alien robots that transform from anthropomorphic forms into vehicles and weaponry. *He-Man*, *She-Ra*, *TigerSharks*, and *Jem* similarly featured protagonists who transformed from mild-mannered alter egos into more powerful, or in the case of Jem truly outrageous, heroic forms. The extent to which the

toylines reflected their transformative concepts varied. Mattel produced two distinct figures for Prince Adam and He-Man. Princess Adora could transform into She-Ra by turning her crown around and adding her cape. Jerrica's metamorphosis into Jem required a more fabulous wardrobe change. LJN's *Tigersharks* (1987-1988) figures flip-head gimmick allowed them to assume both of their forms from the animated series. Although not as prominent in the toys, main characters in *Rainbow Brite* and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* had transformative origin stories that granted them special abilities. Children perhaps liked the idea of a transformative secret power or a dual identity and from a toy perspective it gave the appearance of two toys in one. Though transformation was popular the most ubiquitous theme in toyetic media was the conflict between good and evil that promoted a specific type of play.

Good versus evil, toys.

Conflict is central to all good storytelling but characters in toyetic narratives were perpetually locked in interpersonal conflict narrativizing war play-based toy concepts. In action figure stories battles between heroes and villains involved "hand-to-hand or weapon-to-weapon battles" decided primarily through "brute strength, superpowers, or advanced technology (Seiter, 1995, p. 161; Valade 2019). These mythologies supported a play concept based on both the literal and figurative "clash" of character toys, suggested by the durable nature of the plastic figures and vehicles themselves, their special action features, packaging ("Twist waist & he swings back with a punch"), and commercials showing children demonstrating battle play. Narrativized conflict justified a range of figures and weaponized accessories that heightened the overtly masculine aspects of action figure narratives narrative (Roman & McAllister, 2012). Kids were impelled to choose sides emotionally in fictional battles and financially through the purchase of character toys and other tools of war that

sold for a higher price point. Cartoon episodes inevitably saw a central hero facing off against their arch enemy, but climaxes involved epic showdowns between opposing teams. The team approach is a "uniquely American wrinkle on the superhero" monomyth (Lewis, 1991, p. 36) that historically was the journey of a lone hero. However, large confrontations between opposing teams offered "more potential for character proliferation than small-scale battle or one-one-one conflict" (Hendershot, 1998, p. 100). This led to the frequent introduction of new characters and vehicles in syndicated series. The multi-character conflicts shown on screen compelled kids "to buy whole teams of good guys and teams of bad guys" (Engelhardt, 1986, p. 90). The frequent conflict was a concern of parents and advocacy groups in the 1980s, so producers came up with several clever ways of reducing the potential harmful effects of the battle depicted in animated series.

He-Man and the Masters of the Universe (1983-1985) was one of the first cartoons created explicitly to sell toys and the sword and sorcery themed show was already under the watchful eyes of many concerned parents and the FCC. One way Mattel and Filmation staved off criticism was to never depict He-Man harming another living creature. Throughout all 130 episodes of the original cartoon, He-Man's The Power Sword was only used for blocking other weapons, blocking laser blasts, and removing obstacles and he never even punched anyone (robots don't count). He-Man saw his fair share of physical confrontation, but it usually ended with his opponent being thrown somewhere safe like a muddy pond. *G.I. Joe: RAH* was also a toyline and cartoon designed around traditional war play however the battlefield was shifted to a more futuristic science fiction setting where lasers replaced bullets and the consequences of battle were sanitized. No characters died on screen and even when you thought one would surely perish in a fiery vehicular explosion the driver or pilot could always be seen jumping out at the last second or parachuting to safety. Both *He-Man* and *G.I.*

Joe also featured another convention of the toyetic media genre meant to divert attention away from the constant conflict: the prosocial message.

Toyetic media cartoons introduced many things into the public consciousness but perhaps none more fondly remembered than the pro social messaging (PSM) the ended each episode. *G.I. Joe: ARAH* became well known for it as each episode culminated with a 30-second public service-style announcement featuring a member of the Joes teaching kids a lesson about safety. There is a significant portion of the population who learned not play with the stove or touch down powerlines because of *G.I. Joe*. Dan Larson, Owner, Host and Writer of *Toy Galaxy*, a YouTube series dedicated to toys, comics, and other pop culture media credits *G.I. Joe's* call-and-answer mantra that ended each PSA with uniting the fan base in a significant and enduring way.

> *These PSAs were part of a shared experience for an entire generation of media consumers. The PSAs were part of a visual, educational, cultural, and entertainment language consumers were able to speak due to their daily exposure to that content. To say, 'and knowing is half the battle' is to instantly articulate your experience in a manner fully understood by other members of that community with that experience. – (Toy Galaxy, 2019)*

Jem and the Holograms similarly featured a "doing the right thing makes you a superstar" mantra at the end of their PSMs. For some properties, the prosocial elements were more than critical inoculation.

He-Man episodes were built around singular moral principles and at the end of each show a character recapped the story and explained what lesson young viewers should have learned. These prosocial messages were less about safety or being a good citizen and more about being a good person. Rankin/Bass, the production company behind *Thundercats* (1985-1989) hired a psychological consultant to read and evaluate episode scripts, ensuring that each contained a positive moral lesson. This was most evident in the cats' regular efforts to uphold the Code of Thundera (Justice, Truth, Honor, and Loyalty) on their new home

world. The presence of PSMs in these animated series was at least in part to counter public concerns over the rampant conflict and purely advertorial intent of toyetic media. Producers often touted the educational merit of such shows, using the PSM as their go-to example.

Conflict was also central in storylines for girl toys however these programs tended to avoid direct physical violence in favor of relational conflict resolved with rainbow energy, photonic charms, or emotional insight that proved to be "the most powerful force in the world" (Seiter, 1995, p. 161). Although large scale warfare was not the play structure designed into girl oriented toylines, friendship necessitated the acquisition multiple scented dolls, pastel ponies, or plush bears. Perhaps the real reason community building was so central in girl cartoons was that new friends meant more toys could be produced (Hendershot, 1998, p. 100). Both fighting and friendship play concepts led to ever expanding character toy rosters, fostering a completist mentality in young consumers. The figures/dolls' collectability stemmed from their unique personalities, looks, and abilities designed into the toys themselves and given life in narratives. Each franchise did this a little differently but adhered to a similar template.

Collectible Characterization

Characterization started with names indicating a character's attributes, personality, or special abilities, as presented in narrativization or the toys themselves. Kenner's Strawberry Shortcake doll designs matched their respective dessert-themed names. Strawberry Shortcake had red hair, freckles, a strawberry-spotted bonnet, a red dress, and smelled like strawberries (sort of). Variation was key for keeping large rosters of characters straight. The uniquely colored Care Bears had signature belly badges related to their name and emotionally driven personality. Bedtime Bear's badge bore a sleeping crescent moon with hanging star. Birthday Bear had golden-yellow fur and his tummy symbol was a frosted cupcake with a single

candle. Some of the plush bears were even designed with corresponding facial features like Bedtime Bear's drooping eyelids. With a few exceptions, *G.I. Joe: RAH* characters/figures were designed with physical appearances and codenames consistent with their military specialization, personality, or distinguishing feature. Avowed pacifist, DOC, was the Joe's cool medic, dressed in sunglasses and khaki BDU fatigues, accented with orange medical crosses. Masters of the Universe names often dually identified a character's primary attribute and toy action-feature like Ram-Man, a stumpy, somewhat dim-witted, human battering ram whose figure had spring-loaded legs. Diversity in characterization also served a purpose in narrativization. Teams consisted of members with complementary skills or personalities that supported the central hero and aided in their ongoing struggle against their rivals.

Teaming Up To Sell Toys

The Thundercats were a heroic team of anthropomorphic cats each with a special ability, temperament, weapon, and name representing the feline they embodied. Panthro was the jovial, quick-tempered, grayish-blue panther-like Thundercat, who carried nunchucks, and was physically the strongest. Cheetara had a yellowish coat with blonde hair and black cheetah spots. She was the emotionally intelligent member of the team who used a variable length baton and possessed superhuman speed. Tygra, the integrous, level-headed nobleman, had an orange and white coat with black tiger stripes, a bolo whip, and the power of invisibility. Brother and sister Thunderkittens Wilykat and Wilykit were the group's cunning youngsters, providing playfulness and support through their trickery, gadgets, and hover-boards. They all supported Lion-O, their powerful scarlet-maned leader, who was physically mature yet 12-year-old cub in a lion's body. Collectively the *Thundercats* were a composite character or multiple "facets of a complete and fully-realized super-individual" (Lewis, 1991. P. 35). Kids naturally gravitated toward their favorite characters but to authentically recreate

the adventures in their homes, a true fan would need to purchase the entire team along with someone for them to fight. As was true of other properties, the action figure line progressively expanded, and new *Thundercats* and their adversaries were accordingly incorporated into the animated series. Teams provided creative avenues for storytelling, with entire episodes sometimes exploring a single character's backstory, though their true purpose was to encourage multiple purchases among young consumers. Heroic teams were primarily comprised of male characters but also usually featured at least one female protagonist.

A Gendered Genre

Strong female characters like Teela and Cheetara were central to the *Masters of the Universe* and *Thundercats* mythologies as well as the toylines, but their presence was illustrative of another gendered convention of toyetic media, the "Smurfette Principle."[6] Coined by American author, poet, and critic Katha Pollitt, the "Smurfette Principle" describes the lack of female representation in media, specifically in stories featuring a group with only one central female character (Pollitt, 1991). This concept was illustrated most notably in animated series related to "boys' toys" like *Thundercats* (Cheetara until the later appearance of Pumyra)*, Dinosaucers* (Teryx)*, TMNT* (April O'Neil)*, Sectaurs* (Stellara)*, SilverHawks* (Steelheart)*, Sky Commanders* (Red McCullough)*, The Centurions* (Crystal Kane)*, The Real Ghostbusters* (Janine Melnitz), and *Visionaries: Knights of the Magical Light* (Galadria). The importance of the lone female character varied as did her portrayal between media platforms. Cheetara, the fastest Thundercat, was as an equal to her male counterparts both in intelligence and combat as well as a nurturing caretaker. April O'Neil was a capable news reporter and outspoken advocate for the turtles but also was relatively useless in battle and frequently played the damsel in distress. Cumulatively the message was clear in these action

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[6] Smurfette was the only female Smurf until Sassette appeared in a later season of *The Smurfs* (1981-1989).

figure cartoons, boys were the norm and central to the story while girls were the variation and peripheral (Pollitt, 1991). "Boys define the group, its story and its code of values. Girls exist only in relation to boys" (ibid). To be fair the reverse of this principle was often illustrated in toyetic media targeting girls. The "Smurfette Principle" highlights the stark gendering that was also a defining convention of the toyetic genre.

Toyetic media was as gendered as the aisles in which the toys it promoted was sold. While gender neutral toys gained some popularity in the 1970s, the 1980s saw a return to the stereotypical segmentation of earlier decades, exaggerated through fantasy-based depictions of femininity and masculinity (Sweet, 2013). Toy producers largely developed product along a strict gender binary, designed in separate divisions for "girl toys" and "boy toys." As animated TV series became the de facto promotional tool, this separation in toys naturally "translated into the definitive split of girl cartoons and boy cartoons" (Perea, 2015, p. 189). Action figure-related characters were primarily adults, male, human or anthropomorphic machines. Maleness was clearly identifiable through exaggerated muscular physiques and overtly masculine voice acting. Girl cartoons featured mostly prepubescent female characters (*Rainbow Brite,* 1984-1986; *Strawberry Shortcake*), with exceptions like *Jem and the Holograms* (1985-1988) and *She-Ra: Princess of Power* (1985-1986), also identified through physical attributes, over-feminized voices, colored in pink or "soft" pastel colors. In programs with anthropomorphized animals (*My Little Pony n' Friends, Care Bears*) "gender [was] marked as girl in a standardized feminine way with eyelashes, higher-pitched voice actors, and girl-gendered hairstyle and clothing" (Perea, 2015, p. 190). Gender was also implicitly coded through stereotyped subject matter. Boy properties revolved around dominance over nature, justice through physical aggression, militarism, and competition, whereas stories associated with girls' toys were structured around femininity, passivity, physical appearance, and

friendship (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1990; Kline, 1993; Seiter, 1995; Valade, 2019). This subject matter in toyetic narratives was a product of the toys themselves.

Where girl toys were designed around "friendship, appearance, domesticity and hyper-femininity, media-scripted toys for boys [were] infused with notions of hegemonic masculinity" (Valade, 2019, p. 3). *G.I. Joe: ARAH*, *He-Man*, and *Transformers* set a precedent for action figure mythologies featuring conflicts between good and evil, sanitized violence, mechanical transformation, sorcery, lasers, and military vehicles within stereotypically masculine worlds of monsters, dinosaurs, and machinic ascendency (Kane, 2006, p. 159). Conversely *Strawberry Shortcake*, *Rainbow Brite*, *Care Bears*, and *My Little Pony n' Friends* established gender normative parameters for girl cartoons like rainbows, unicorns, star sparkles, and cute critters. This gender divide was certainly intentional, but despite what some critics contend it was likely less about a sexist hegemonic agenda and more about profitable market segmentation (Kline, 1993). Conventional industry wisdom at the time was that girls were not interested in action figures for any number of reasons, including gendered play patterns, either inherent or socially constructed. Furthermore, the popularity of gendered toy-related media for girls in the 1980s was in part due to the Reagan-era backlash against the feminist movements of the 1970s that were critical of traditional toys and sex roles (Hendershot, 1998, 124). There were attempts in the 1980s to bring girls into the action figure market. Mattel discovered that one third of the audience for *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* were girls. Accordingly, Mattel and Filmation collaboratively created a new heroine for young girls to identify with (Hernandez, 2003, p. 5). In 1985, He-Man's twin sister Adora, better known by her heroic alter-ego, *She-Ra*, was introduced in the *Masters of the Universe* spin-off series *She-Ra: Princess of Power*. She-Ra, "The Most Powerful Woman in the Universe," was also the centerpiece of Mattel's *Princess of Power* toyline that was sold in

the action figure aisles but stereotypically designed and marketed as a doll with long brushable hair, numerous accessory options, and a strongly pink and pastel color scheme.

For these reasons toyetic girl cartoons of the 80s are often criticized for reinforcing feminine stereotypes however what gets lost in the excessive use of pink and emotional responses to crisis is the empowering portrayal of heroic and self-assured female leaders (Perea, 2015, p. 190).

Amidst the "syrupy sweet" tropes of these friendship communities "motivational girl leaders that displayed confidence, determination and savvy while processing emotions and solving conflicts through communication" (Perea, 2015, p. 189). "The 1980s US toy-based girl cartoons created an empowered girl media genre" that continues to influence contemporary animated properties like *The Powerpuff Girls* (Perea, 2015, p. 190). Regardless of intent this separation of boys toys and girls became an expected trope toyetic media, and it certainly didn't seem to hurt sales as the volume of toys both produced and accumulated, during childhood increased exponentially during the 1980s.

Given the force of commercial interests behind toyetic media and the deregulatory environment of the time this seemed predictable. What could not have been predicted however is that 40 years later a significant number of adults who were children during this period would still be collecting, curating, and connecting generationally because of these toys. Of all the different toys being collected by adults today, toyetic properties are the most popular, especially among nostalgic members of Generation X and Millennials.

Homo-Collectus: Collecting in a Consumer Culture

Human beings seem to have a natural predilection for acquiring material objects of practical value or significance. Some contend that the desire to collect is as old as civilization itself (Rigby & Rigby, 1994; Belk, 1995; Case, 2009) while others note that collecting as a

ubiquitous activity, as we conceive of today, emerged with the creation of the middle class, scientific discovery, and geographic exploration that came about during the European Renaissance (Blom, 2003). In the United States, collecting notably took root in the 1930s when it became viewed less as a specialized hobby and more of a serious leisure activity (Case 2009). During the 20th century, the collection of consumer goods became quite prevalent, especially in the United States, but also somewhat universally. It is now generally accepted as both a hobby and a professional activity across all segments of society.

Collecting can be defined several ways, but essentially it is the "process of actively, selectively, and passionately acquiring and possessing things removed from ordinary use and perceived as part of a set of non-identical objects or experiences" (Belk, 1995, p. 67). Although it is often criticized as a compulsive form of consumption, collecting proper is a much more intentionally discerning endeavor tied to the presentation of self. According to scholars like Lincoln Geraghty (2014) "collecting is less a pathology centered on economic consumption and more of a process, where the identity of the collector is self-fashioned through the accumulation of collectibles" (p. 127). With this in mind, a collector then might be described as "an individual motivated to accumulate a series of similar objects where the instrumental function of the objects is of secondary (or no) concern and the person does not plan to immediately dispose of the objects" (McIntosh & Schmeichel, 2004, p. 86). Collectors collect all manner of things.

Existing academic literature concerning collecting tends to focus on material objects however individuals may also collect more immaterial things. For example, people who travel extensively or regularly attend live music performances for pleasure can be said to collect experiences (Belk et al., 1988). Individuals may also collect ideas in the form of "jokes, proverbs, and tall tales" (Danet and Katriel, 1986, p. 258). Some may even collect

animate beings like animals (e.g., zoos, pet breeders) or plants (e.g., bonsai trees, gardens, decorative flowers) (ibid). The literature on collecting, in aggregate suggests that to be a collection "the objects, ideas, experiences, or beings in the collection [musts] form an interrelated set, … are the product of a highly selective process, …[and] are removed from their profane, utilitarian role and made sacred" in some way (Spaid, 2018, p. 655). This removal of goods from their intended use as commodities is a necessary step in making collection a meaningful practice, opposed to just another form of passive consumption.

Commodities are generally things to be consumed then discarded either with a specific use or exchange value dictated by market forces. However, select commodities like vintage toys, because of popularity, rarity, or historical (personal or cultural) importance can transcend their disposable nature. Deeming a commodity, a collectible, grants it a significance that elevates it above the superficiality of everyday consumption. "For an object to become part of a collection it must be reframed as a collectible, that is, as a potential member of a category of objects that can be treated as aesthetic objects" (Danet and Katriel, 1994, p. 225). This process of *decommodification* is a strategic, although seldom conscious, means of moving an item from the amoral market to a moral communal sphere (Kopytoff, 1986, p. 64). Thus, the collectible is ascribed with new meaning removing it further from commodity value chain from whence it originated. These objects are thus transformed as part of the collector's reflexive "self-project" (Giddens, 1991) where concurrently the collectible (the object) becomes something new and comes to define the subject (the self). Some collectibles may never be fully disconnected from their utilitarian value, but their aesthetic value as collectibles is a key factor that differentiates them from other non-collectible objects (Carey, 2008). Furthermore, according to Carey (2008), collectibles also have a social value to the collector and despite previous literature primary focus the personal

or economic motivations, the social nature of collectibles also influences collecting behavior. For vintage toy collectors their collectibles are ways to build social capital among members of their generation and their respective communities, as illustrated by the sharing of their new finds and completed collections on Facebook.

Generally speaking, a collection is a grouping of objects under a unifying theme however, according to Pearce (1994) a collection is not a collection, until someone thinks of it in those terms (p. 158). Collection is both process and product for collectors, as the term describes both the pursuit and acquisition of objects as well as the cumulative outcome. For toy collectors, a collection tells a personal story (Kopytoff, 1986) and the development and arrangement of that collection is a dynamic and creative act. For instance, toy fans "actively arrange and rearrange their toys in displays or specially built and decorated dioramas" (Heljakka, 2017, p. 101). Much time and effort are granted to the meticulous practice of displaying one's collection. Collectors may "devote inordinate amounts of their time and energy to a particular group of items, spending years, decades even, assembling and reassembling them into collections" (Morrison, 2010, p. 3). This process is deeply personal as "collectors come to be associated with their collectibles, building an entire social history and personal reputation on the basis of their collecting activities" (ibid). Adult fans may also attempt "to 're-create the toy store' in their homes by aesthetic arrangement" of their collections (Heljakka, 2017, p. 101). Some super fans, like Stephen J. Sansweet have even turned their collections into fully functioning museums as is the case with Rancho Obi-Wan. Collections don't always achieve the official status as a museum but in the minds of their creators the grouping of these objects represents a highly personal and meaningful history that should be celebrated and preserved. For adult toy collectors, collecting is a creative and playful expression of their passion for their favorite toyetic franchises. Adult toy collectors

exhibit many of the distinctive traits of other media fandoms and their activities can be better understand from this lens. Although more visible than ever, adult toy fandom is an underdeveloped area of study that this project hopes to contribute to.

Toy Fandom

Toy collection is not a new phenomenon. Most children learn to collect toys before they can event speak and as they age their toys become the economic and cultural capital of their social environments. Toys are played with, loved as cherished friends, fought over vehemently, traded on school yards, sold in yard sales, and destroyed in any number of ways. Furthermore, in a consumer society like the United States, the mass-produced toy is a key component in the material culture of childhood. However, adults are becoming increasingly interested in collecting character toys such as dolls, soft toys (or plush) and action figures (Heljakka, 2013) associated with established media narratives. There appears to be a newly recognized and "growing adult fan culture centered on the remembering and recollecting of childhood where memory forms the basis for active online communities that engage in the trading and (re)purchasing of new and old toys and games from their youth" (Geraghty, 2014. P. 9). The recent collectability of toys, either vintage (actual old toys) and retro (inspired and designed after old toys), is in part because these pieces of cherished plastic are tied to a "nostalgically remembered relationship with the text that came at least in part from the toys" (Gray, 2010, p. 185). Not all fans are collectors nor are all collectors' fans, however the collection of significant objects does seem an essential part of performing one's fandom (Hoebink et al., 2014). Furthermore, the prevalence of fan collections suggests that fandom and collecting are interwoven phenomena (ibid). Though some scholars dismiss collection as neo-liberal materialism, and less valued then seemingly more valid fannish endeavors, it can be as creative and transformative as other expressions of fandom.

Material Fandom

Few studies have specifically explored collection as fandom (Hoebink et al., 2014) and adult play, adult engagement with children's toys, and collecting behavior in general are all understudied areas of academic inquiry (Bryant, Bielby, & Harrington, 2014; Heljakka, 2017). The research that has been conducted ranges across a variety of disciplines and tends to focus on the type of object collected, or the process of collecting itself, such as the point at which objects become valued as collectables. Activities related to adult toy play are often categorized as hobbyist and the existing scholarship does not "do justice to contemporary creative practices that link their solitary object play with socially shared play experience" (Heljakka, 2017, p. 91). Within fan scholarship specifically, material or object-oriented forms of fandom, like collection, are often neglected or even devalued, over more seemingly creative pursuits like fan fiction and costuming, perhaps because of its roots in consumption (Hills, 2009; Hoebink et al., 2014). This is perhaps because for much of fan studies' early history, scholars tried to redeem previously pathologized fannish activities tied to consumerism that conceptualized fandom as exceeding conventional norms of spectatorship (Jenson, 1992; Tulloch & Jenkins, 1995; Nygard, 1997). As collection is inherently linked to the seemingly hollow consumption of mass-produced commodities (Fiske, 1992), some scholars may be reticent that its study will revive past misconceptions about fans.

Conceptually then many fan scholars still tend to champion more seemingly *transformational* fan practices, like the unauthorized appropriation or *poaching* (Jenkins, 1992) of source material to continue, divert, or completely revise their favorite media texts. Activities like *fan fiction* are valorized as they demonstrate creative agency and subversively *challenge* a narrative's preferred reading (by producer) while more purely *affirmational* fandom like watching a show or purchasing merchandise, *celebrates* authorial intent, is more chastised

because it merely "restate[s] the source material…supposedly [reinforcing] the official author's power and control over their own works" (Hills 2014, ¶2.1). Since collection plays into expected mass audience behavior and involves consumption, it is perceived as less valid for critical fandom scholars, which many claim to be.

Practically, however, scholars may tend to privilege studying traditional "texts" over material artifacts because they fit more comfortably within their established academic traditions of analysis (Hills, 2010). Accordingly, as Hoebink, et al., (2014) contend, "fan scholarship has preferred to focus on texts and on the interconnections between reading, writing, and receiving them" (p. 1). While this scholarship has been vital in demonstrating how fans interpret, understand, and utilize their favorite texts, in addition to highlighting fan creativity and productivity (Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 1992, 2006; Jenson 1992; Hills 2002; Sandvoss 2005; Hellekson & Busse 2006; Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington 2007; Booth 2008), it hasn't provided a proper framework for understanding the role of more material-oriented fandom practices (Hoebink, et al., 2014) like toy collection. Thus, there are significant gaps to be filled in in this area which I hope this examination of collecting helps fill.

Toy Collection as Fandom

Collecting is an "active and discerning process" (Geraghty, 2014, p. 14) and the pursuit and acquisition of collectible toys requires research and in-depth knowledge of both the materiality of the toys themselves, their production histories, and the transmedia narratives that they are so often a part of. Like other media fans, collectors interpret their toys semiotically (discussed more below) on a variety of levels, including material considerations which are rarely a concern of other texts. "Articulation, poseability, and possible 'huggability' of character toys (dolls, action figures, and soft toys) are considered key affordances" for adult toy collectors (Heljakka, 2017, p. 101). There are many idiosyncratic

facets to both collection and collectability even extends to the packaging, where a toy's

original price tag can have value. Some collectors prize seeing the old price or progressively

reduced cost stickers, as many of these vintage toys were, surprisingly, considering their

current value, originally purchased in bargain bins. Packaging and tags often also include vital

character information related to larger transmedia narratives in the form of backstory or

personality, which is also of value to collectors. The collections themselves are rarely

complete and neither do they remain static on the literal or figurative shelf.

Contrary to the critical views of collection by fan scholars presented above, toy

collecting can also be a transformation act as collectors rely "on many of the same strategies

and processes fans employ in poaching and creating new texts" (Geraghty, 2014, p. 14). One

example is the process of "modding" or making modifications to collectibles in new and

creative ways, where, like fan fiction writers, collectors delve into their favorite fantasy

worlds, appropriating fictional elements, and adding to expand existing universes. This type

of do-it-yourself (DIY) crafting includes customization of character toys, the creation of

elaborate dioramas, homemade doll houses, clothing, weapons, and the re-appropriation of

everyday materials. In many of these more creative performances toy fandom manifests as a

form of adult play where "acquiring toys or creating a toy collection is an individual project

with multifaceted motivations linked with either ludic goals of completion or paedic

pleasures gained in reference to creative play" (Heljakka, 2017, p. 103). By their very nature,

toys are meant to be played with and manipulated, however what constitutes play for adults

and children differs, respectively. Bryant, et al. (2014) found that adult collectors of *G.I. Joe,*

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, My Little Pony, and *Hot Wheels* children's toys described and

understood their toy fandom, as aspect of their adulthood both similar to and distinct from

their play with toys as children. Some collectors only collect unopened toys in their original

packaging to retain their economic value as investments where others only want the unboxed toys so they can "play" with them. In 2021, vintage toy collection is a complex phenomenon, with one foot in the physical world and another in the virtual realm.

Like other fandoms communication technology has greatly impacted toy fan culture. Adult toy fandom is not a new phenomenon per se, but it is much more visible today because of the proliferation of social media and the relative ubiquity of smart phones with built-in cameras, allowing "once-hidden toy treasures … [to be proudly] … displayed to the world through unboxing videos, collection run-throughs, play tutorials, and published "photoplay" – imaginative, creative, and socially shared storytelling" (Heljakka, 2017, p. 94). Technology facilitates some of the more creative acts of toy collection like "photoplay" or the photography and digital display of cherished toys. This toy portraiture often involves the replaying of popular media narratives through toy modeling or like fan fiction, toys are more creatively to continue, divert, or completely revise favorite media texts. The examples above suggest that toy fandom involves creativity, and that collection is a process that is displayed, performed, and interpreted collectively within toy fan communities.

Popular media depictions of adult toy collectors frequently rely on the trope of the solitary collector competitively pursuing and hoarding cherished objects. While aspects of collecting are a conducted individually, collectors tend to form communities around the material objects they collect (Hills, 2009; Heljakka, 2017). Like other fandoms, vintage toy collectors seek out like-minded individuals in toyshops, toy-specific conventions, and online, to collectively celebrate, discuss, and validate one another's passion. YouTube Channels like *Toy Galaxy*, *Pixel Dan*, and *RetroBlasting* are part of a "digital rebirth of children's media is a growing adult fan culture centered on the remembering and recollecting of childhood where memory forms the basis for active online communities that engage in the trading and

(re)purchasing of new and old toys and games from their youth" (Geraghty, 2014. P. 9).

Vintage toy fans also need one another instrumentally to complete their collections, through

buying, selling, trading, and gifting.

Members of toy fan communities come together to identify recent finds and curate

cherished pieces of their past. Display of one's collection, a key element of toy fandom,

often takes place online on dedicated websites, discussion forums, Facebook Groups,

Discord channels, Instagram, and Reddit. In person toyshops, toy conventions, and social

media platforms clearly also function as *lieux de memoire,* or places of remembering, offering

shared reference points for a community to recognize itself, and to remember its past (Nora,

1989). These digital fan enclaves have "enriched the cultures of collecting by making it

possible to care for the collection as well as share documentation of it simultaneously"

(Heljakka, 2017, p 93). Facebook groups dedicated to vintage toys very operate as "collective

intelligence communities" where fans "leverage the combined expertise of their members"

(Jenkins 2006, p. 27). Within toy fan communities, knowledge of worth, rarity, production

history, and variance of these objects are all highly valued (Heljakka, 2017) and ways of

building cultural capital. Toy communities even have shared terminology. For example,

collectors use acronyms like MIB, meaning "mint" in box, to describe an unopened toy in

pristine condition, or NRFB, denoting something never removed from box, as well as MWT,

to indicate "mint with tags." Toy collector communities, like other fandoms, share icons and

heroes, with toy designers and voice actors of the animated version of their favorite toys

achieving the same celebrity status and reception that actors and directors receive from other

media fans. While some vintage toy enthusiasts do collect in isolation, membership to and

participation within a community is a distinguishing characteristic of the vintage toy fan and

a crucial component in the development their identity as a collector.

Fandom is at its core personal identification with a choice object and a collective identity with other fans. Vintage toy fans construct their identities both around the objects/texts of their fandom and through participation within a fan community. Fans "build an intense identification with their object of fandom" (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 101) where something like a toy becomes more than a piece of media, but a symbol that represents an individual identity and connects them socially to a fan community. Like other fans, vintage toy collectors "make an affective investment into the objects of their taste and they construct, from those tastes, a consistent but necessarily temporary affective identity" (Grossberg, 1992, p. 247). In so doing "the fan gives authority to that which he or she invests in" using those objects to "organize their emotional and narrative lives and identities" (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998, p. 141). In the 21st consumer society, fans utilize toyetic media, as a "symbolic resource in the formation of identity … positioning [themselves] in the modern world … and [integrating] the self into the dominant economic, social, and cultural conditions of industrial modernity (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 165). Vintage toys then become not just commodities in the traditional sense but identity markers. These cherished pieces of plastic are components of "self-identity" (Giddens, 1991) and the preservation of objects from one's childhood "are all part of expressing one's own [fandom]" (Geraghty, 2014, p. 121). Fans use collection to construct reflexive identities, influenced by memory, nostalgia, the object fans choose to engage with. Toy collectors are motivated by a variety of personal and social factors however nostalgia seems to be the primary driver of this trend.

Nostalgia at Play

The English word "nostalgia" comes from the Greek "nostos" meaning to "return home or to one's native land" and "algos" referring to "pain, suffering, or grief" (Holak &

Havlena 1992; Sedikides, Wildschut, & Baden, 2004). References to the phenomena date back to the 7th or 8th centuries, when Homer's described a similar malady experienced by Odysseus in the *Odyssey,* however Swiss physician Johannes Hofer is credited with coining the term in the late 17th century to describe the extreme homesickness that Swiss soldiers experienced while fighting abroad (Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Routledge, 2008). According to Hofer, the psychological and physiological features of nostalgia were persistent thoughts of home, melancholy, insomnia, anorexia, weakness, anxiety, lack of breath, and palpitations of the heart (McCann, 1940). Fast forward to 1863, Dr. De Witt C. Peters defined nostalgia as "a species of melancholy, or a mild type of insanity, caused by disappointment and a continuous longing for home" (Wilson, 2005, p. 21). Nostalgia was recognized in both individuals whose departure from home was forced (e.g., soldiers, slaves) and voluntary (e.g., students, explorers). This primarily negative pathological perception of nostalgia would persist until the latter half of the 20th century.

Nostalgia is currently studied from a variety of perspectives and disciplines including psychology, politics, history, architecture, tourism, semiotics, and creative industries (Gineikienė, 2013). Fred Davis (1979) was one of the first to approach nostalgia from a sociological perspective, highlighting many positive psychological and prosocial aspects of the phenomena. Since then, nostalgia has become increasingly associated with more positive effects like social bonding, increased self-esteem, and productive coping strategies (Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt, & Routledge, 2006). Contemporary researchers have also attempted to explore nostalgia as a more nuanced phenomenon. To properly understand this complex concept scholars have offered varied, albeit similar, classifications of nostalgia.

For example, Davis (1979) categorized nostalgia as *simple*, *reflective* and *interpreted*. Stern (1992) classified nostalgia as *personal* and *historical*. Baker and Kennedy (1994) identified three

types of nostalgia: *real, simulated,* and *collective.* In a well-cited work, *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), Nancy Boym categorized nostalgia into two types: *restorative* and *reflective.* Restorative nostalgia manifests as a strong desire to return home (*nostos*) or reconstruct something lost, generally a bygone societal era like the 1950s, as well as rebuilding fragmented memory about what has been lost. Reflective nostalgia is merely the feeling of personal and cultural longing for something of the past. A commonality between many of these classifications is the distinction between first-hand or 'real' nostalgia and second-hand nostalgia via the recollections and reminiscences of other individuals (Stern 1992; Baker and Kennedy 1994; Goulding 2002).

While most of these conceptions of nostalgia informed my study and to some extent could help explain vintage toy collection a recent wave of scholarship focusing on nostalgia's influence on consumption and identity are perhaps more relevant. Of note is Holak, Matveev, and Havlena (2008) four-way classification of nostalgia (i.e., *personal, cultural, interpersonal,* and *virtual*) developed from the intersection of two basic dimensions of experience: *individual* (or personal) versus *collective* and *direct* experience versus *indirect.* *Individual* experience unsurprisingly is "based on memories that are specific to the individual and differ significantly across people," whereas *collective* experience is "grounded in cultural events or phenomena that members of a group share" (Holak, Matveev, & Havlena, 2008, p. 173). *Direct* experience is derived from "events in the individual's own life," while *indirect* experience "results from stories told by friends or family members or from information in books, movies, or other media" (p. 173).

Personal nostalgia is the unique emotional experience grounded in personal memory and based on direct experience. This idiosyncratic effect is primarily what has been analyzed in the psychological and sociological disciplines. Davis (1979) referred to this as "true

nostalgia" while Baker and Kennedy (1994) called it "real nostalgia." Personal nostalgia might be evoked from finding my first *Star Wars* toy in the attic which brings back my memories about watching the original film for the first time and playing with the toys that my parents gave me.

Cultural Nostalgia reflects those common memories of direct experience, collectively shared by members of certain groups (family, community, generation, etc.…). Many individuals, particularly men from Generation X, who were children in the late 70s and early 80s, the original *Star Wars* toys were a major part of their childhood, that now evoke cultural nostalgia for the films and that period of time, among members of that age cohort.

As the name suggests, *Interpersonal Nostalgia* manifests from communication between individuals where the communicated memories of one individual's experiences become intertwined with the other person to the extent that they feel nostalgic for something they may or may not have direct experience with. It is a form of indirect nostalgia, once removed from the individual with personal experience with an object or event. This often seen in intergeneration contexts. One illustration might be a Generation X father who has frequently discussed his love of the *Star Wars* with his child and one day this child encounters some vintage *Star Wars* toys at a yard sale that evoke an interpersonal nostalgic experience.

The final category of nostalgia theorized by Holak et al., (2008) is *Virtual Nostalgia* which is an indirect collective experience that individuals may have gained through media (p. 173). This type of nostalgia is perhaps the broadest reaching as it does not stem from any kind of direct lived or tactile experience. Much of the nostalgia for the original *Star Wars* films, particularly for those who saw them films as adults and did have or play with the toys, is a less intense affective connection to a shared cultural memory. In fact, *Star Wars* has become such a cultural phenomenon in the United States that there are individuals who feel

nostalgic for the original films who did not see them in theaters during their original theatrical runs (1977-1983).

It should be noted that these nostalgic categories are not mutually exclusive, and each would likely result in a variety of responses. Personal and cultural nostalgia, based on direct experience, when evoked are likely to be felt more intensely than interpersonal or virtual nostalgic, which are derived indirectly. However, cultural and virtual nostalgia would more broadly resonate across members of a larger group than personal or interpersonal forms of nostalgia would. (Gineikienė, 2013). Holak et al. (2008) originally constructed their categorization system for directing marketing strategy implementation however it, as has been briefly illustrated, is also a useful framework for exploring nostalgia's role in toyetic media fandom as it is a special forms of consumption.

Also relevant to this current exploration of toyetic media fandom is Sierra and McQuitty's (2007) work explaining recent nostalgic consumer trends using Social Identity Theory (SIT). Sierra and McQuitty argue that the desire to reconnect with past social identities drives nostalgic consumption and that both emotional and cognitive responses to the past are based on group membership from formative periods in a consumer's life. They further forwarded a dual-process model of nostalgic decision-making where both cognitive (e.g., attitudes to the past) and emotional (e.g., yearning for the past) simultaneously affect consumer behavior. Additionally, nostalgia can be evoked by tangible like toys or intangible stimuli like toyetic media, and both are capable of influencing consumer behavior like the purchase of nostalgic products (Sierra & McQuitty, 2007).

Nostalgic Consumption

While nostalgia is considered by some a universal human experience (Davis, 1979), nostalgically driven consumption is a relatively recent phenomenon in human history

(Baxter, 2016). Scholars exploring consumer behavior have shown that individuals have stronger relationships to and positive attitudes for brands deemed nostalgic than those that are not (Baxter, 2016). Research has also illustrated that first experiences consumers have with brands heavily influence their current and future consumption, predictably, throughout their lives (Braun et al., 2007). These initial experiences with consumption prepare them to participate as citizens in their respective consumer societies while also planting the seeds for future nostalgia. As humans age there is a tendency to look backward to these experiences, so it is no wonder that nostalgic marketing has become a prominent fixture in contemporary marketplaces (Braun, La Tour, & Zinkhan, 2007; Sierra & McQuitty, 2007; Baxter, 2016). Goods producers leverage the power of nostalgia by stimulating a consumer's memory to invoke similar emotions to those experienced originally (Braun-LaTour and LaTour, 2005). This is particularly prevalent in the realm of popular culture, and more specifically in toys dually marketed to children and their nostalgic parents.

Although a child's desire for toys may seem intrinsic or even natural, it is in fact extrinsically cultivated through parental steering, peer socialization, and marketing influences (Baxter, 2016). Accordingly, marketers intentionally target children to foster a desire for their products and deploy them as product emissaries to their parents (Buckingham & Tingstad, 2010; Cook, 2004; Cross, 1997; Seiter, 1993; Baxter, 2016). Thus, despite their lack of independence and direct purchasing power, young children are active consumers of material goods within a consumer society like the United States. Nostalgia for the objects encountered in childhood explains why certain toys and playthings in perpetuate in the contemporary marketplace (Best, 1998; Sutton-Smith, 1986; Baxter (2016). Thus, children's material culture today is heavily influenced by the nostalgic desires of adults to recreate their own childhoods, or some idealized version of their childhood (Cross, 2015; Baxter, 2016).

The popularity of nostalgically collecting objects from the past might also indicate something significant about the present.

Material things from childhood are optimistically and often inaccurately remembered as existing in a time of carefree innocence free from the stresses, responsibilities, and compromises of adult life. Objects like toys then can serve as obtainable souvenirs of experiences no longer accessible and aide in the search for a core identity that existed only during childhood (Brookfield, 2012; Stewart, 1993). Engagement with vintage or toys designed to elicit nostalgia can help create a concrete sense of the past for adults (Belk, 2000). These material goods can become meaningful symbols of childhood or memorabilia of an 'authentic' self (Stewart, 1993; Wilson, 2005) during a phase in life when they might feel a lack of control. Although ultimately elusive, nostalgia then can be viewed as a way to find "continuity in a fragmented world" (Boym, 2001, p. xiv) and a force to bring about "coherence, consistency, and [a] sense of identity" (Wilson, 2005, p. 8). Marketers capitalize on this desire for an idealized past and stable self, using nostalgia as a highly effective brand strategy (Baxter, 2016). Sometimes nostalgic goods are marketed directly to adults as "collectibles." For example, Hasbro released a new-old or "retro" toyline called the *Star Wars Retro Collection* in 2019 specifically to appeal to nostalgic adults (Figure 4 below).
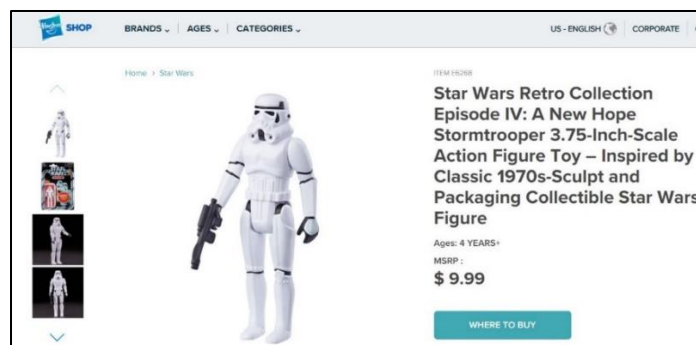
Figure 4. *New Retro Star Wars Action Figure*

The figures were designed using the same design molds, color palette, scale, and packaging aesthetic as the original toys produce by Kenner, which Hasbro acquired by Hasbro in 1991 and formally closed in 2000. The description of the toyline on Hasbro's websites clearly articulates the intent of this toyline:

> *Inspired by Star Wars 70s-style action figures, the Star Wars Retro Collection 3.75-inch-scale figures feature original Kenner figure design and detailing and make a great addition to any nostalgic fan's Star Wars collection. Imagine the excitement of the 70s when the Star Wars original trilogy had just begun, and Kenner began releasing classic Star Wars figures for avid fans of the space saga. With figures inspired by the original sculpt and design of the 70s, the Star Wars Retro Collection lets fans and collectors continue their collection from a galaxy far, far away!*

Often however adults are targeted more indirectly by designing toys for their children.

Nostalgic parents are keen to purchase those toys not just for themselves but also for their kids to play with. Material culture then becomes a vehicle for narrative and intergenerational communication where adults reinforce a sense of identity through childhood objects and children create their own memories that will later be used to develop their sense of self (Baxter, 2016). Thus, a specific relationship is forged, through nostalgia, where adults exercise power and control through children, and children receive affirming messages about the value of a particular object (Baxter, 2016). Ultimately, an adult's sense of control can be restored through this shaping of their child's experiences with a beloved toy by providing the object for them and influencing, to an extent, the narrative and context of play (Belk, 2000). Today, nostalgia seems to be quite strong for toyetic media evident in its seemingly never-ending remediation and reinvention.

Nostalgic Media

One cannot speak of the influence of nostalgia in the context of vintage toy collectors without addressing the influence of media. In the case of toyetic properties, as already established, the toys were key nodes in the transmedia systems that spawned them into existence. Accordingly, both the toys themselves and their associated transmedia

narratives can stimulate nostalgia today (Pickering & Keightley, 2006). The toyetic

transmedia systems that inspired the nostalgic desire to collect aging pieces of plastic usually

consisted of cartoons, comic books, and a film along with a variety of other ancillary

mediums like storybooks, records/audio cassettes, trading cards, and eventually video games.

Like old objects, old media can generate feelings in adults similar to those experienced as

children (Spigel, 1995). In fact, the "recycling" of previous media content is frequently

utilized to evoke nostalgia in certain groups like members of Generation X who are now a

targeted audience for advertisers (Baker & Kennedy, 1994; Havlena & Holak, 1991; Grainge,

2002; Mantonakis, Whittlesea, & Yoon, 2008). One poignant example is the 2017 GEICO

insurance "He-Man vs. Skeletor" television commercial, part of their 'Great Answers'

campaign showing characters getting out of precarious situations by bringing up how

switching to GEICO can save the other characters money on car insurance. The fully

animated tv spot (Figure 5 below) was developed and produced by The Martin Agency, who

took great care to recreate the aesthetic, sounds, voice acting, and animation style of the

original Filmation cartoon *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* (1983-1985). According to

the Neel Williams and Justin Harris, the VPs/creative directors behind the advertisement,

dually hoped that the spot would stimulate nostalgia in adults and introduce a new

generation to the toyetic franchise that both individuals are fans of (Champagne, 2017).

Figure 5. *Scenes from Geico's Nostalgic Masters of the Universe Commercial*

Individuals like Ryan Lizardi (2014) contend that "today's media are increasingly dominated by a nostalgic logic that focuses the gaze of the viewer perpetually on the past" (p. 5). From a political economic angle commercial ventures in the marketplace tend to repeat successful formulas to minimize risk and better secure profits.

Today's film, television, and streaming services feature a seemingly never-ending glut of sequels, prequels, reboots, and adaptations which already have established audiences. One illustration relevant to this project is Netlix's *Masters of the Universe: Revelation* (2021) series, a direct sequel to the before mentioned *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* cartoon, which picked up where many of the popular characters' journeys left off focus and addressed unresolved storylines. Mattel paved the way for *Revelation* with the launch of their "Masters of the Universe Origins" action figures, vehicles, and playsets designed after the original Masters of the Universe toys. This line also marked the 20th anniversary of original toys which debuted in 1981 (Figure 6 below).

Figure 6. *Vintage Mattel He-Man versus New Retro He-Man*

Mattel released their "Masterverse" toyline a little later in 2021 to coincided with the Netflix series, with figures and vehicles based on *Revelations'* modern interpretation of these classic characters.

Sometimes nostalgic logic lends itself to highly creative storytelling like the widely popular Netflix series *Stranger Things* (2016-), a nostalgic sci-fi thriller, set in 1983, Hawkins, Indiana, featuring a group of geeky kids encountering supernatural forces and secret government projects, as they come of age. The series created by brothers Matt and Ross Duffer, contains a non-stop barrage of visual and auditory cues that reminds the viewer that characters are living in the 80s. These included standard setting elements like hair styles, fashion, vehicles, buildings, music, in-world movie and tv references. *Stranger Things'* nostalgia is also highly focused around tangible consumer objects like a *Dungeons & Dragons* tabletop roleplaying game, springy land-line telephone cords, ham radios, walkie-talkies, Kellog's Eggo Waffles, and perhaps the epitome of consumerism in the 1980s, a multi-level shopping mall complete with escalators, neon signage, and an Orange Julius. *Stranger Things*

was able to leverage consumer artifacts from the 1980s to nostalgically recall and mediate the past for viewers revealing "how American consumerism shapes individual identities and collective memory" (McCarthy, 2019, pp. 2-3). The series evoked a specific type of nostalgia tied to consumer goods; what Gary Cross called "consumed nostalgia."

In his seminal work by the same name, Cross argued that a specific type of nostalgia emerged in the United States as a result of fast capitalism, "a particularly intensive form of commodity culture, entailing the increasingly rapid pace of production and purchase, creating profit through the fast turnaround of investment" (Cross, 2016, p. 1). Accordingly, "people found identity and meaning in specific goods, but, as a result, felt that their selfhoods were threatened when those things disappeared" (Cross, 2015, p. 11). A particularly strong sense of nostalgia developed for those goods consumers came across during the formative years of their lives. Today, nostalgia serves as a respite from the stresses of an increasingly individualized, fragmented, and unstable society brought into being by fast capitalism. Vintage toy fans are a special type of consumer that utilize nostalgia in the creation of their individual and social identities.

A Nostalgic Identity

In *The System of Objects*, French sociologist Jean Baudrillard, stated that material collections are deeply personal and "what you really collect is always yourself" (2005, p. 97). Similarly, Belk (2000) argued that material objects we consume are in fact extensions of the self (Belk, 2000). Along these same lines Miller (2008) contended that the goods we consume become resources for identity construction and play a role in the creation of a sense of self while communicating aspects of individual identity to others. Therefore, "if we are what we buy, then we choose to buy objects that project our identity in ways that please us" (Stevens, 2010, p. 209). So, vintage toy fans see something representative in objects they collect, and

their fandom becomes "in every sense, a mirror of consumption" (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 165). Collections assuredly have economic value but their real worth to the collectors rest in their ability to "represent personal histories [and] tell a story about the fan collector and how they interacted with a particular media text" (Geraghty, 2014, p. 57). Adult toy collectors use "the past as an arena for self-identification and recall moments from childhood through the collection and preservation of physical objects" (p. 6). A longing for past pleasure undeniably fuels the adult collector's desire to acquire, however "nostalgia is not always about the past; it can be retrospective but also prospective" (Boym, 2001, xvi). In the collection of vintage toys, we see how "nostalgia and memory are bound up in the creation of a contemporary fan identity rather than a recreation of past by substituting bits of history with myth or things that never existed" (Geraghty, 2014, p. 3). For children, toys are material connections to an imaginary world often indirectly experienced on a screen or page. To the adult those same toys are connections to the past, "emblems of self, markers of identity and symbolic of the cultural capital that fans accumulate in their life-long engagement with a media text (p. 4). Although highly personal, toy collector identities are inherently social and linked to a community organized around a shared object.

At toy shops, conventions, and online, collectors develop relationships and use their favorite material objects as the cornerstones for community-building. Also, within these communities the collector's social identity as a vintage toy fan comes into being through group membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Adult toy collection as fandom is an interesting phenomenon of study on its own. However, the increasing popularity of collector groups focused on vintage toys from iconic toyetic media franchises specifically, by similarly aged individuals, also suggests that there a significant generational component to this activity.

Rethinking Generations

The word *generation* is used to reference a variety of observable social formations. A generation can refer to kinship between people of common ancestry or discrete units of successive family lineage. Generation may also denote the production of something, like energy or money, or specific stage of technological development of a product like an iPhone. More and more, generation is also used to reference the nongenealogical bond among contemporaries, created through shared experience within the same sociohistorical context Biggs, 2007; Joshi et al., 2011; Kertzer, 1983). Thus, for the purpose of this study generation will be employed to describe a subgroup of similarly aged individuals, united by joint placement along the objective timeline of history, and similarly experienced moments in life that connect them in some way.

In popular vernacular and academic discourse, *age* is perhaps the most popular demographic element used to demarcate distinct generations and account for similarities and differences in generational attributes. Age, as an objective biological fact, clearly indicates when someone was born, easily enabling their placement within a cohort, or "group of people who have shared some critical experience during the same interval of time" (Alwin & McCammon, 2003, p. 23). Examples in the university setting include the description of each new student as an "entering cohort" and the outgoing graduates the "graduating cohort." Some sociologists prefer the term *birth cohort* instead of *generation* (Ryder, 1965) while others use them interchangeably. While there is clearly a relationship between age, birth cohort, and generation, they represent distinct social formations, and their theoretical conflation can be problematic for understanding postmodern generations.

For example, the at times law-like generalizations forwarded regarding age-based cohorts have proved difficult to prove empirically as within any imagined generation there

would be great diversity which would complicate any assumed uniformity. While it is seemingly logical to assume that members of a cohort will "share some defining characteristics" in personality and consumer behavior (Bolin, 2017, p. 30) individual experience would at the very least vary based on respective demographics and socioeconomic status. The widely accepted, age-centric generational labels referred to above, are also inherently problematic at face value because of the wide age ranges that encompasses each social formation. For instance, Baby Boomers, said to be born from 1946 to 1964, would presumably differ depending on when specifically, they were born within the 18-year range and the drastically different societal changes one might experience. Another related method for generational segmentation is to separate generations by decades which more narrowly sets the boundaries but also presents similar challenges.

Ascribing a character to the respective decades and the individuals born within those 10-year time frames is a popular way to view generations. While this decade approach (i.e., the '60s generation) more narrowly demarcates generational cohorts, it is still tricky as supposed generational members would exhibit variance in those who had formative years at beginning or at end of a particular 10-year period. Furthermore, this conceptualization is somewhat ambiguous as the '60s generation could either mean people born between 1960 and 1969 or "people who were active in student protests, movements or taking part in the 1960s popular music scene more generally" (Ibid, p. 30). Similar to the decades approach is the contemporary concept of microgenerations.

Within every generation, there is a group of individuals born within five to seven years of the previous or next generation (Dries et al., 2008; Kupperschmidt, 2000a; Smola and Sutton, 2002; Taylor, 2018). Perhaps the most recognized microgeneration currently are the Xennials, generally thought to be born between 1977 and 1985 (Taylor, 2018). Xennials

have one foot in Generation X and the other in the Millennial generation. Like other members of microgenerations, Xennials often see themselves as generational misfits, never fully identifying with either label (Stankorb & Oelbaum, 2014). Xennials identify with some of the self-sufficiency and cynicism of Gen X but are more cautiously comfortable with the pace of technological change, particularly related to the internet. They clearly remember and often long for an analog world but also lived through the evolution of home computing and high-speed internet. Theoretically, the traditional approaches to generations are more demographic while the decades and microngeneration conceptualizations are more in line with a sociocultural conception of this phenomena that is more applicable to contemporary generational formation.

The foundational articulation of generations as social constructs came from Karl Mannheim (1952), who detailed how generations form and how they operate as forces for social change. Mannheim's seminal treatise, *The Problem of Generations*, is credited with encouraging a new wave of scholarship exploring the sociology of generations that recognizes generation as a process more than a demographic categorization. Mannheim advanced the idea that shared chronological *location* in history was no guarantee of generational *actuality* but a kind of potential or 'structure of opportunity' from which individuals can form themselves into 'generational units' (Mannheim, 1952; Aroldi, 2011). For Mannheim, shared sociohistorical moments experienced by individuals in their formative years were just as significant to the actualization of generations than common location in the historical process (Mannheim, 1952; Bolin, 2017). People born within similar time intervals share opportunities afforded to them by history as they age together (Ryder, 1965; Edmunds & Turner, 2002) and that members of a birth cohort will experience similar, and similarly experience, significant events during their formative years. These moments in

turn affect cohort members in ways that persist throughout their lives and manifest in observable attributes that then become part of the both the external and internal characterization of that "generation". Traditionally such significant "generational" moments were historical-political transformations like the Great Depression, the World Wars, Civil Rights Movement, the Berlin Wall coming down or nationally witnessed tragedies like the Challenger Disaster or 9/11 (Strauss & Howe, 1991). However, as culture has become more mediatized so to have significant moments become more media-centric, particularly for the more recent generations. Subsequently, there is a contemporary trend toward more nuanced and subjective generational theory that addresses the significant role media plays in the generational experience.

Generations as Media Audiences

The study of generational formation began nearly 100 years ago however "the role of the media in this process has only been acknowledged as an important feature during the last couple of decades" (Bolin, 2017, p. i). Although the concept of generations as media audiences is somewhat novel, media has been a component of both the external categorization and internal constitution of generational identity. Sometime in the mid-20th century, popular labels and academic conceptions of generations started being associated with media, seen in such discussions of the "Net Generation," referencing individuals born between 1982 and 1991 who grew up in an increasingly immersive environment of networked computing. Furthermore, our understanding of the social phenomena of generations is itself highly mediated. Consider how perceptions of the Silent or Greatest Generation by younger individuals are influenced by a variety media including books, films, and documentaries chronicling this fading age cohort. Similarly, the 60's Generation is tied to the iconography, news footage, and popular music of that decade. More poignant to this

study is the popular labeling of Millennials as the Facebook Generation or the newly recognized micro-generation between Gen X and Millennials referred to as the *Star Wars*, Nintendo, or Oregon Trail Generation, denoting a significant tie to the media of their formative years.

Accordingly, scholars have come to acknowledge that in the 21ˢᵗ century, media is an "increasingly important feature in the experience of generations […] and media – as technologies, content structures and communication modes […] the formative components in some generations" (ibid, p. 4). Similarly aged individuals come of age at distinct periods in the mediatized historical process and develop distinct media habits, often related to socially significant moments of media consumption. The experiences, the historical conditions, the environment and the media experienced during formative years and early socialization are all crucial because they constitute a kind of perspective from which individuals observe other events and occurrences. Shared media diets contribute to development of a "generational semantic" (Corsten, 1999; Aroldi 2011; Colombo 2011) that contributes to shaping and creating of common characteristics in each age group (Aroldi 2011, Bolin & Westlund 2009). This collective semantic is "a collection of themes, interpretative models, evaluation principles and linguistic devices through which shared experience is transformed in discourse within the forms of daily interaction" (Aroldi, 2011, p. 3). For children and young adults, media facilitates a common language through which they use to relate to one another and develop and common identity.

Generational identity is fostered through the "shared memories of historical events and social conditions of a cohort's formative years … [that] … provide a lens through which social and cultural changes are interpreted by the individual" (Lyons & Schweitzer, 2017, p. 210; referencing Schuman & Scott, 1989). Collective memory often becomes the focal point

of stories commonly told and retold generational members to the extent that they become

folklore (Weisner & Bernheimer, 1998). Traditionally these memories reflected critical

historical events however contemporary generations are increasingly forming collective

memories around shared media experiences. Thus "media generations are constructed as

collectively produced, shared and processed responses to the availability or pervasiveness of

a particular technology, which then becomes an element of generational identity" (Vittadini

et al., 2013, p. 3). This identity is socially constructed and therefore can be conceptualized as

a *social identity*.

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), or SIT, is a social psychological

concept positing that individuals self-categorize themselves as belonging to various social

groups and that individual identity is significantly constituted in and from this social group

membership. Tajfel and Turner (2004) defined a social group as a collective of individuals

that perceive themselves as part of the same social category, share an emotional

involvement, and agree about the evaluation of the group they belong. Furthermore, identity

is dependent on the value and emotional attachment placed on group membership

(Tajfel,1981). A key aspect of SIT is that intergroup psychology influences behavior where

ingroups, the social groups that individuals belong to, are significantly differentiated from

outgroups, those social formations that a person is not part of. The importance of group

membership is dependent on the extent to which the individual self-categorizes and

perceives themselves to be part of the group, or the level of "we" sense felt. Thus,

generational identity is an individual's knowledge that they belong to a specific generational

group and that membership in this group holds some significance to them.

The media generations perspective represents a more holistic cultural studies view

of identity and acknowledges that "the media play different roles at different moments of

this social construction of a shared identity, and that these roles are strongly affected by a lot

of variables, both socio-cultural and technological" (Arnoldi, 2011, p. 1). Viewing generation

as a primary source of identity construction may better explain the variance in individual

identification with collective memories, values, and norms (Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Lyons &

Schweitzer, 2017). This identity-based view better reflects the theoretical underpinnings of

the sociological generational construct most notably articulated by Mannheim (1952). As

Mannheim's work suggests, "Generationing" is a process (Siibak & Vittadini, 2012), not an

attribute, which has its inception during the formative years, but which is constantly enriched

during the successive stages of life. So, collection of vintage toys by adults may be a

manifestation of this ongoing generational formation and continual identity construction.

Identity is often regarded as some intrinsic dimension of self that begins to develop in the

formative years of life and reaches some level of stability in adulthood. However, more

contemporary understandings of identity view it as a more fluid aspect of self that is

continually constructed over time. In studying generational toy collectors, this study explored

how media supplies the material resources identity projects of audience members,

demonstrating the significance of material forms of media in the 21st century.

Toys as Material Mediums

What constitutes a media text has evolved over time to include a variety of

communicative artifacts: the spoken or written word, analog or digital print, film, television,

advertisements, websites, music, and bodily performance. Within media and communication

studies, research tends to either focus on the more symbolic aspects of medium content or,

in a McLuhanian sense, address the mediums as messages themselves. While the latter often

acknowledges the communicative potential of the technological, the significance of the

materiality of the medium as text itself is less explored. Although analysis of physical

mediums is quite common in the arts, i.e., the aesthetic deconstruction a painting or

sculpture, it is less so in communication, media, or fan studies, respectively. However,

material objects like character toys can also be studied as media texts and their materiality

plays an important role in their reception and interpretation. This project adds to the

blossoming body of research in this area by exploring the significance of material media in

adult toy fandom and the generational experience.

In *Shows Sold Separately* (2010), Jonathan Gray refers to toys and other forms of

licensing as "paratexts" that do not simply reflect the original meanings of a parent media,

but also communicate new meanings within the transmedia system to which they belong. In

this treatise of "off-screen studies," Gray extends Gerard Genette's (1997) concept of

literary paratextuality, referring to textual elements that occupy the liminal space beside of,

adjacent to, beyond, or distinct from a *primary* source like a book. For Gennette, paratexts

include titles, forewords, epigraphs, and even the publishers' jacket copy, all of which

contribute to the complex mediation between book, author, publisher, and reader. However,

as Gray notes, from a broader media perspective, many paratexts "take a tangible form, as

with posters, videogames, podcasts, reviews, or merchandise" (2010, p. 6). Gray also

challenges the traditional view of paratexts as peripheral, arguing that they "often play a

constitutive role in the production, development, and expansion of the text (2010, p. 175).

For many fans, paratexts like toys, are the first entry point into transmedia franchise. This

embryonic fandom is framed by an affective relationship with a personal, tangible object and

that connection informs future memory of the parent text (Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 2006;

Harvey, 2015). Toys as paratexts are uniquely affective in that they can extend the narrative,

"taking it away from the cinema screen and bringing it into the home," (Geraghty, 2014, p.

123). Overtime some paratexts, as is the case with *Star Wars* toys, can even "become the text,

as the audience's members take their cues regarding what a text means from the paratext's images, signs, symbols, and words" (p. 46). This certainly holds true for many of the toyetic properties explored already.

Paratexts are more than secondary contributors to a primary text. In *Fantastic Transmedia* (2015), Colin Harvey contends that paratextual materials both "shape our understandings of a primary text" and engage "in dynamic conversation with a far wider array of texts, imbued with more intense emotional and economic investment by fans, and their relative importance to the franchise will be more clearly demarcated by industry" (p. 139). Some paratexts like toys can also operate reflexively, as is the case with where new toylines can act as spoilers for an unreleased film or "prophetic objects that … paratextually reveal the relative significance of characters, settings, and scenarios of the forthcoming film" (Scott, 2017, p. 138). Toys and other paratexts like trailers, soundtracks, magazine articles, and leaked set photography enable speculative play, a key component of media fandom, "as they can appear in the public sphere much earlier than the media from which they derived" (Harvey, 2015, p. 153). Paratexts can also communicate significant messages regarding intended or hopeful audiences, as well as authorial intent. Toys, "not unlike the strictly gendered aisles they are commonly housed in, are also the paratextual category that most consistently and starkly reflects a franchise's presumed demographics" (Scott, 2017, p. 141). Despite their recent recognition by scholars like Gray, Havey, and Scott, "toys and action figures remain perilously under-theorized as paratextual agents, especially considering the high degree of storytelling agency they afford and their centrality to franchising logics" (Scott, 2017, p. 139). Paratexts can become so popular that they form their own dedicated audiences, as is the case with vintage toy fandom. The communicative potential of toys is undertheorized but not completely unrecognized.

Steinberg's (2012) case study of the Meiji's Atomu sticker boon in 1960s Japan that illustrated how commodities can function as communicative media or what Lash and Lury (2007) call "the [simultaneous] mediation of things and the thingification of media" (p. 25). According to Steinberg Yamakawa Hiroji, an employee of the Japanese advertising firm Dentsū, first coined the term *mono kami*, or "thing communication," to describe the communicational dimension of the Atomu stickers and badges that became popular objects of exchange among children of that era (Steinberg, 2012, p. 87). Atomu stickers are an early example of toys developing in "tandem with the transformation of commodity and media relations that we find with the rise of character merchandising" or toyetic media, as explored above (p. 89). Steinberg's work also highlights two common ways of viewing material objects like toys as media.

The first is to conceive of media likes toys as mediums for human interaction or "social lubricants facilitating communication between one child and another" (*ibid*, p. 90). In this way toys are media in the sense that can "speak to us and through us" via their uses, values and meanings (Magalhaes & Goldstein, 2017, 12). During play toys can facilitate interpersonal communication between players by supplementing non-verbal action or vocalization and at times substituting verbal communication altogether (Sutton-Smith,1986). This type of play, according to Sutton-Smith (ibid) constitutes a complex form of mediated communication dependent on the intersubjectivity of transmedia worlds and the player's knowledge of it. In a consumer society like the United States, "people communicate to others through the things they own and use" and for children this modality of thing communication is especially vital because goods assist in peer integration and identification (Kline, 1995). Seiter's *Sold Separately* (1995) similarly argued that "as mass culture, toys and television give children a medium of communication" or 'lingua franca' enabling a common

or bridge language (p. 50). This common language can also persist into adulthood as will be shown in the findings for this research project. As is the case with interpretation of any mediated messages, toy texts cannot entirely be understood independent of their social context as children "assign, negotiate, and maintain symbolic pretended meanings for objects consistent with the imagined setting" through their play and related discourse (Wohlwend, 2009, p. 61). The second way Steinberg conceived of toys as media is through their role as nodes in transmedia networks of inter-object interaction.

Inter-object communication occurs between the televised character image and the materialized character toy that constitutes the infrastructure or "the mediatic surface on which interpersonal communication is inscribed" (p. 91). Each medium adds something unique to the narrative. In the case of toy's their contribution is primarily related to its playability and material affordances. Toys are interactive texts as they can be read semiotically as well as performed through scripted play with "meanings suggested by [both the toy's] materials and its history of attached story lines and practices" (p. 60). In the synergistic transmedia age, most character toys have established stories, either seen in film, on television, read in books or even on the toys packing. If the player is familiar with the toy's place within the intertextual web, scripted or emulative play is likely. In *Power Play: Toys as Popular Culture* (1996), Dan Fleming suggests however that as semiotic signs character toys lack stability and predictability in that children can to use them to emulate their onscreen counterparts but there is no guarantee of that. Both "manufacture designs and a priori story lines are concretized texts embedded in toys that affect the ways players enact characters and plots" (Wohlwend, 2009, p. 60). Toys then can also operate as open texts.

According to Harvey (2015) the "specific material and energetic conditions of [a] medium play a central role in determining the nature of the possible configurations available

to the audience member in question, whether we frame them as 'viewer,' 'listener,' 'player,' 'reader' or more loosely as 'participant' (p. 137). Toys as mediums are perhaps more noticeably tied to their material affordances as a primary means by which they communicate, as they must offer "the potential for narrative-based play that's consistent with the storyworld in question, but also [offer] the possibility of multiple other kinds of playful configuration (Gibson, 1977, pp. 67-82). Unlike a game that has clearly defined and limiting rules for play, to truly function as a toy, it must be "malleable enough to allow players to invent new meanings" (Wohlend, 2009, p. 60). In the case of toys related to other transmedia narratives, the success of a toy is dependent on its fidelity to the primary text from whence it came and on the material differences that make more creative play possible. This suggests that "toys communicate through the physical properties of their materials and associated histories of use" (p. 60). Most toys are specifically designed to enable children to easily recognize the ways it can be used in play (Brougère, 2006). For instance, the "huggable" iconicity of a soft plush animal toy suggests a specific type of tactile play, inviting close contact and physical affection. A doll baby, both in its size and age may suggest holding or caregiving. Fashion dolls like *Barbie* with limited articulation but a multitude of clothing options points imply modeling and accessorizing. An action figure in both name and articulation communicates, well action. If the toy is associated with a popular media narrative, children are more likely to play and replay familiar scripts and character roles.

The significance of toys in the material culture of childhood is well established, as is the capacity of toys to carry messages. Furthermore, a variety of studies have critically examined how toys can socialize children into gender roles and ethnic identities (Benton, 2013; Francis, 2010; Baxter, 2016). For instance, research consistently underlies a close relationship between manifest gendered toy characteristics and latent gendered messages of

value (Thompson et al, 1995; Kite, 2001; Lippa, 2005; Fischer, 2010). Blakemore and Centers (2005) found that girls' toys were associated with physical attractiveness, nurturance, and domestic skill, whereas boys' toys were rated as violent, competitive, exciting, and somewhat dangerous. Educational toys intended to develop children's physical, cognitive, artistic, and other skills were typically rated as neutral or moderately masculine. Similarly, research by Martínez et. al. (2013) revealed that values associated with vehicles and action figures were competition, individualism, ability, physical development, creativity, power and strength while the values associated with dolls and accessories are beauty and motherhood. However, the idea that toys are material texts that can be read, interpreted, appropriated, and adapted, by adults as well as children, needs to be examined further. Little to no research has been done on how toys function communicatively for adults, which is another reason why this project is important.

To properly study this mediacentric identity communicated through toyetic media fandom I utilized a mixed-methodological approach including participant observation, survey, and semi-structured interviews.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Mixing Up the Methods – Methodological Background

A mixed-methods design (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003) is a procedure for collecting, analyzing and "mixing" both quantitative and qualitative data at some stage of the research process within a single study, to understand a research problem more completely (Creswell, 2003). Scholars like DeCoster and Lichtenstein (2010) suggest that this approach can "enrich the analytical strengths of both methods as a model for cross-paradigmatic work in communication research" (p. 228). While they are often perceived, sometimes dogmatically, as mutually exclusive, when used collaboratively quantitative and qualitative methods can complement one another, allowing for more comprehensive analysis (Green, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998; Ivankova et al., 2006). The mixed-methods approach can be done several different ways and a scholar may "start with quantitative data and supplement them with qualitative data in order to 'flesh out' in a more detailed manner some of the quantitative finds they have uncovered" as this research intends to do (pp. 65-66). This study is best classified as quant-QUAL (Morgan, referenced in Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006). Hence it was primarily a qualitative study with a quantitative component. In this study, *priority* was granted to the qualitative or interpretive methods of participant observation, interviewing, and the subsequent data analysis through grounded theory.

However, this study also used a more quantitatively designed survey to gather descriptive information that provided guidance for the development of qualitative interview questions. The more open-ended survey questions also helped provide a general picture of the population of study and research problem by identifying several internal and external factors that contribute to vintage toy collection (Creswell, 2003; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). For instance, quantitative questions were used to capture demographic information

and other descriptive statistics that identified interesting and unforeseen variables that relate to adult toy fandom. See Appendix A. This data was then analyzed to determine statistically significant relationships between factors like age/generation and measured levels of toy fandom.

In total there were 806 respondents who finished the survey which lent greater predictive value and generalizability of results, even though these were not the express aims of this project. While quantitative methods can elucidate general trends, infer statistical significance of relationships, and generalizability, such techniques were not as salient for understanding toy fandom and identity than other techniques that brought me authentically closer to the perspectives of participants. Statistical significance and personal significance are not the same thing and were not measured in the same way.

Qualitative methods were more appropriate for studying aspects that were not easily quantifiable or a smaller heterogeneous population like vintage toy fans that may not achieve statistical significance through inferential statistics. Furthermore, since both the collector-fan and generational identity are socially constructions, an interpretive-dominant approach was ideal. The more nuanced information that qualitative methods produced, helped me move past mere description toward significance and understanding. Ultimately, the interviews lead to rich, deep, or "thick description" (Geertz, 1973). The result of qualitative research was the generation of idiographic theories of understanding with transcendent meaning and not monothetic generalizable law.

Regarding *implementation*, this study deployed a nested or sequential explanatory mixed methods design, consisting of two primary phases of data gathering (Creswell, 2003; Creswell et al., 2003), quantitative survey followed by participant observation and qualitative interviews. The *integration* of methodologies primarily occurred through its nested design,

specifically in how the quantitative survey data was used to direct elements of the qualitative interviews and narrow my focus during participant observation.

Methodological Overview

As a toyetic media fan, longtime collector, and amateur seller, this project was informed by over 20 years of personal experience. Intentional, exploratory research for this project began in 2015 both in-person through numerous potential site visits to vintage toys shops and online through participation in a variety of vintage toy enthusiast Facebook groups. This initial research provided a prospective orientation to the adult toy collector world, a better understanding of the common conceptual arena, and prerequisite knowledge to establish credibility within these sometimes-closed groups. The aim of this phase was to establish a more holistic understanding of the adult toy fandom, from a scholarly perspective opposed to my a priori emic standpoint, and to specify research areas before moving on to the primary study.

Data Collection and Procedures

The methods of data collection included some general participant observation online recorded in field notes, online survey, and semi-structured interviews. Data from these sources was continually triangulated and constantly compared. In addition to observational field notation, collection of various documents, like Facebook group page rules, vintage toy collector guides, member posts, and discussion board forum guidelines offered salient information espousing purpose, rules, functions, history, and processes.

Participant Observation

Preliminary observation of toy collectors on Facebook, YouTube, and other online hubs began in the Summer of 2019 however as a longtime collector and amateur toy seller myself I have been engaged in this world for nearly 20 years. I had planned on making

participant observation a more prominent and systematic component of this study however due the Covid-19 pandemic that did not happen. Originally, I even intended to conduct in-person participant observation in 3-5 retro or vintage specific toy stores to observe and engage with collectors as well as the owners who could have provided a unique perspective as they are often avid collectors with a significant financial investment. In theory these sites would have been valuable "natural" environments in which many collectors operate. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic however, this in-person observation was not possible.

Subsequently, participant observation occurred virtually on YouTube channels like *Toy Galaxy*, *Pixel Dan*, *RetroBlasting*, *Toy Polloi* and a plethora of Facebook Groups dedicated to the celebration, curation, collection, trade, and sale of toyetic media. Social media like Facebook has become both a popular research tool and a source of data (Baker 2013; Baltar & Brunet 2012; Brickman Bhutta 2012; Taylor et al. 2014; Wilson et al. 2012; Lo Iacono, Symonds, & Brown, 2016). Observational material in this context included discussion board posts, comments and replies, impromptu Messenger interaction with Facebook group members, private messages, official communication from group moderators, and member profiles. Participant interactions included communication with Facebook Group administrators to request permission to solicit survey participation and posting my survey recruitment information. I also occasional engaged in communication with group members through replies to my recruitment posts and via direct messages asking about my research project, suggestions for survey improvement, offers to share my recruitment post with other collectors.

Online Survey Recruitment

After approval from the Drexel University's Institution Review Board, the first phase of study began in March 2020, with a systematic 2-week period of participant observation

and recruitment of survey participants from 125 Facebook Groups and several YouTube channels dedicated to vintage toys and toyetic media (Appendix C), using a variety of nonprobability sampling methods. There are thousands of toy collector groups and pages on Facebook dedicated to the collection, commerce, and buying, and celebration of "vintage" toyetic media properties. These groups operate as "collective intelligence communities" where fans "leverage the combined expertise of their members" (Jenkins 2006, p. 27). Within these communities, knowledge of worth, rarity, production history, and variance of these objects are all highly valued (Heljakka, 2017) and they are sites for generation of cultural capital among collectors. Pages are publicly accessible forums where individuals and organizations can connect with others. They can be liked or followed by Facebook users but only the page's administrator can post content. Groups are structurally similar to Pages however they facilitate member-to-member communication and allow users to create virtual communities around shared interests or identities (Petronzio, 2013). These platforms can be open, meaning anyone can locate the group, view posted content, a member list, the group's description, and join simply by clicking a button. A closed group can be searched by non-member Facebook users but requires prospective members to request access through the approval process. Group content and posts are protected but anyone can request membership. Secret groups are unsearchable and require a current member invitation for a non-member to view the group at all or request membership. The approval process to join a closed or secret group generally entails agreeing to the group's rules and/or answering a series of screener questions.

I intentionally targeted *groups*, instead of pages, as I thought the membership component, indicated to some degree an active level of fandom, and it would grant me the ability to post content. Each group sets their own rules and policies for posting content.

Most public groups had loose guidelines discouraging political or hate speech. Some groups forbade non-toy-related solicitation of any kind. After reading the rules of a group, if it was public, I contacted the group's admin(s) to alert them of my intent and posted a semi-tailored recruitment pitch. For closed groups I contacted the group admin(s) first and asked permission before making posts. Most admins and members seemed receptive to my posts. Some of the groups focused solely on commerce either denied my requests or deleted my posts. I also recruited from "Private" groups and had to make official requests to join before being granted access to view or post content. Many of the of private groups had a vetting process consisting of a series of questions testing toyline specific knowledge and/or agreement with group rules. Of primary concern was casting a wide net to better understand exactly who is collecting and why they are collecting these toys.

Online Survey Structure & Implementation

Phase II of this research involved deployment of the online survey administered through Qualtrics. Said survey was made live in mid-March and consisted of 45 questions split into 4 sections. The first set of questions captured demographic data including age cohort, gender, race, relationship status, and education. The second section queried respondents about which specific toylines they collected, what, if any, media influenced their desire to collect, and at what age they started collecting. The third section contained various measures of respondents' relationship with their toys, toy collection, and other toy collectors. Specifically, participants were asked to indicate their respective agreement or disagreement with a series of 11 statements regarding elements of their individual and social identification with toy collection, measured along a Likert Scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Survey takers also answered 10 questions in this section about the frequency to which they engaged in a variety of fan behaviors similarly measured through a scale from

1 (Very Often) to 5 (Never). The fourth and final section included 12 statements about toy collector motivation which were also gauged along a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The survey was live for 4 weeks and results were periodically checked for quality control purposes as they were recorded. The goals of the survey were to gather demography data, identify potential predictive power of factors related to generation identification and toyetic media fandom, and to create a pool of prospective interviewees for the semi-structured interviews.

Toy Fandom Scale Development

Earlier in this work, I presented an argument that toy collecting is both an expression of and unique form of media fandom. To help provide support for this, 21 survey items, adapted from previous studies, representing various facets of psychological, emotional, and behavioral components of fan's personal identification with fandom objects (toys) and practices (toy collection), social identification with other collectors, and level of engagement in fan-related activities. The survey items in question were initially inspired by Groene and Hettinger's (2016) fanhood measure and Reysen's (2013) fanship scale. The resulting Toy Fandom Scale was an amalgamation of these in addition to several other existing fan identification measures (Obst et al., 2002; Reysen & Branscombe, 2010; Rudski et al., 2009; Tsay-Vogel & Sanders, 2017; Vinney, et al., 2019) and several unique questions specific to toy collectors. The goal of these items was to capture data that could be combined during analysis to develop a similar instrument for measuring the relative level of toy fandom for each respondent. This scale was utilized during post-survey analysis as a dependent variable.

Motivation Scale Development

Collector motivation was also of interest and accordingly, I developed 12 survey items to gauge motivational factors. Each item represented a unique motivational dimension:

diversion/adventure, economic interests, a completist mentality, sociality, and nostalgia

(Table 1 below).

Table 1. *Collector Motivation Questions*

Survey Item	Motivational Dimension	Mean Score
If I want or need a toy for my collection the cost does not matter	Economic interest	2.51
I prefer to keep my toys in their unopened original packaging to retain their economic value	Economic interest	3.29
Toy collection is primarily a profession for me in that my main interest in toys is to resell them for profit	Economic interest	4.50
The most enjoyable aspect of toy collecting is hunting/searching for toys	Diversion/adventure	3.75
I feel compelled to collect any and all toys related to my favorite toyline	Completist mentality	2.79
My goal is to collect specific toys to complete a toyline	Completist mentality	3.33
I rely on other collectors for their expertise	Sociality	3.53
To me, collecting is about friendship and community	Sociality	3.42
Collecting is primarily a private activity for me*	Sociality	2.59
Sometimes my toys/toy collecting makes me wish I were a kid again	Nostalgia	3.60
Collecting toys as an adult brings reminds me of playing with childhood friends or family	Nostalgia	4.03
I mostly collect toys I played with or wanted as a kid	Nostalgia	4.04

* Item was reverse coded.

While there are assuredly a multitude of factors influencing the desire to collect these

dimensions were selected based on my personal experience with this phenomena and several

established measures of motivation. Of special note is Wann's (1995) Sport Fandom

Motivation Scale (SFMS), an oft cited and adapted metric in this academic area of interest.

The SFMS includes the eight motivational factors discussed earlier (eustress, self-esteem

benefit, diversion from everyday life, entertainment value, economic value, aesthetic value,

need for affiliation, and family needs). My survey item choices were also informed by Al-Thibiti's (2004) Fan Motivation Scale (FMS), adapted from the SFMS and developed to examine six components of fan motivation (social, entertainment, escape, aesthetic, psychological, and amotivation). Lastly, Barbopoulos and Johansson's (2017) multi-dimensional and context-sensitive Consumer Motivation Scale (CMS) was helpful in the development of motivational focused survey items.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Phase III of this research project consisted of 26 semi-structured interviews that provided more in-depth explanations of the more generalized statistical results generated from the surveys. As one of many qualitative data collection methods, interviewing provides the most direct, research focused interaction between researcher and participant (Kvale 1996; Stroh 2000; Rubin & Rubin 2005; Kazmer & Xie 2008). All interviews were conducted in June 2020. In total I logged nearly 30 hours with (N=29.38) my interviewees and the average interview length was 1 hour 18 minutes. Twenty-two of the interviews were conducted via Zoom and 4 participants preferred to speak over the telephone. The interviewees were all self-identified vintage toy fans who completed the online survey participants and indicated their willingness to be interviewed.

Interviewee Recruitment

Over 500 survey takers expressed interest in being interviewed. Several collectors were so eager to share their thoughts they contacted me directly through email or on Facebook. I wanted to capture a somewhat representative sample of the survey population, proportionate with the demography and toyline choices, while still allowing for underrepresented and non-stereotypical collector voices to be heard. I estimated that 25 interviews would be sufficient to provide a nuanced account of this phenomena. Working

backwards from that target number I developed a multistep process to create manageable pools of possible interviewees that I could then select from using a random name (email) selector tool online.

This process involved a complex screening of the 514 willing interviewees using toys collected, gender identification, race, and generational membership. My initial screening criterion were the top collected toylines according to survey respondents: Star Wars, Transformers, and My Little Pony. I wanted to talk to a semi-representative sample of individuals that collected each of these toy types in proportional percentages to their presence in the survey. Thus, I created three initial email address pools for collectors of those respective toylines. A certain number of interview spots within each of three candidate pools were drawn randomly using the free name selector on https://miniwebtool.com. I then constructed sub lists according to gender, race, and generation for more purposeful sampling.

Given the heavy skew of white male, Gen X and Millennial survey participants in total and within specific collector communities like Star Wars, it was necessary to be more intentionally selective from the non-white and Baby Boomer women subsets to ensure their inclusion. For example, I chose to use for purposeful sampling of non-white, Millennial, male candidates for prospective *My Little Pony* interviewees, as they were almost entirely white Gen X women. Whenever numbers were sufficient within these smaller subsets, I randomly selected candidates using the miniwebtool. This was not always possible however as in the case of female *Star Wars* collectors. Only two survey takers indicated ranked *Star Wars* as their top collectible and identified as female or gender-other respectively. Neither of these individuals wanted to be interviewed. There were several female or gender-other survey respondent who ranked Star Wars as their second favorite toyline to collect but only

one agreed to be interviewed. Finally, I reserved several interviewee opportunities for individuals who collected some of the less represented toyetic properties among survey respondents like *G.I. Joe* and several of the write-in options like *Jem and The Holograms*. See Appendix D. After securing these lists I send an email message to prospective interviewees, inviting them to select a date and time frame using the online scheduling platform Calendy.com, which integrates seamlessly with Zoom and Microsoft Outlook. Of the initial 25 prospects, only 12 responded. After 1 week, I sent out a second email blast to an alternative list of candidates. More individuals signed up, but it took a third recruitment blast, 1 week later, to secure all 25 interviews.

Conducting Interviews on Zoom

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic I hoped to conduct some interviews in person however out of concern for my health and the health of my subjects this was abandoned. However, as it turned out, I believe the mass adoption of Zoom for business, school, and personal communication in the spring of 2020 made virtual interviewing more normalized than it would have been. As a Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) virtual conferencing platform, Zoom enables users to communicate synchronously via voice and video across the internet. Face-to-face interviewing is ideal for many qualitative interview projects however for this project Zoom worked better for several reasons.

First, Zoom's basic platform is a free to anyone and intuitive to download and use. Fortunately, I was provided with a pro account through Drexel University which granted me even more functionality, like unlimited time for sessions. Second, Zoom allowed me to transcend geographic boundaries and expand my prospective participant pool beyond those individuals able to meet in-person (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013). Accordingly, Zoom eliminated most logistical challenges related to travel and privacy which likely lead to a

greater willingness to participate. Third and one of the most significant advantages of interviewing via Zoom is its capability simultaneously capturing both audio and video without the use of additional equipment (Cater, 2011; Hanna, 2012; Lo Iacono, V., Symonds, P., & Brown, D. H. K., 2016). This multimodality was ideal for my qualitative goals enabling the analysis of both verbal data, from conversational text, and nonverbal communication from facial expressions, body language, paralinguistic cues, and depending on the camera angle, other kinesthetic information. This nonverbal feedback helped me determine whether certain questions were unclear, salient, or whether topics warranted further exploration. As Hesse-Biber and Griffin (2012) contend, even "tone of voice, and gestures [provide] a certain richness to qualitative data" (p. 56). Affect was not a primary analytical focus for this research project, however given the semi-structured nature of my interviews, emotional indicator helped guide conversation in unintended and potentially valuable directions. Fourth, Zoom's environment adequately approximates the multimodality of in-person interviewing which facilitated faster rapport building (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013) and the back-and-forth conversation that helped participants feel more engaged. Fifth, Zoom enabled me to conduct object centered interviews where I could see how my subjects live with their collections, many of which with dedicated rooms, in addition to asking them questions about their toys while they were interacting with them. I was also able to share my collectibles with them which further aided in building rapport. Sixth, for research into communities like vintage toy fans, who primarily socialize online, computer-mediated interviews on Zoom may have been ideal (Young, Persichitte, & Tharp, 1998) as the VoIP platform might have preserved more "contextual naturalness," (Mann & Stewart, 2002, p. 604; Shuy, 2002, p. 541) for participants. Sixth and lastly, Zoom's auto-transcription function expedited analysis tremendously.

Semi-Structured Interviewing Framework

I approached the interviews as semi-structured conversations (Spradley, 1979) with preformulated questions intended to guide participant discussion toward specific topic areas (Lindlof, 1995), while leaving adequate room for participants to discuss unanticipated elements of their collecting and generational experiences. See Appendix B. The semi-structured nature of this approach combined the flexibility of unstructured, open-ended interviewing "with a level of directionality and agenda of the survey instrument to produce focused, qualitative, textual data at the factor level" (Schensul, Shensul, & LeCompte, 1999, p.149). My questions were designed to elicit narrative and rich descriptive data that highlighted connections to larger social processes and practices (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). The results of the online survey helped me better focus and adapt these questions in particularly salient areas of toy fandom like nostalgia. Interview questions were intentionally created to address the collector experience and perspective (Lindlof & Taylor, 2004). My goal was to elicit personal, open-ended answers that told the story of their toy collection and its significance to their generational experience. Probing questions were employed when I wanted participants "to think more deeply, clearly, or broadly about an issue" (Schensul, Shensul, & LeCompte, 1999, p.126) and when I felt that a teasing out of a particular area might yield something lucrative. During the interviews I made handwritten field notes highlighting frequently used words and phrasing, points of commonality between individuals, affective emphasis, ties to theory. This data was later contextualized with a more systematic deconstruction using NVivo qualitative analysis software.

Data Analysis Framework

There were two primary types of data analysis performed in this project. First, the quantitative data from the survey was tested for significant relationships within and between

variables like age, gender, race, generational cohort, and strength of fandom, using basic

inferential statistics like Pearson Correlation, Chi-Square, T-Tests, and Anova. Only basic

measures of face validity and reliability were employed as the goal of this project was not to

determine causation or generalizable theory. The aim of the survey was to capture general

information about this population to inform and guide the qualitative interviewing process.

Thus, the second form of data analysis in this research project adopted a Grounded Theory

approach to analyze the qualitative data collected.

   According to Bernard and Ryan (1998), Grounded Theory or the constant-

comparative method, is a methodological approach that "(1) brings the researcher close to

informants' experiences; (2) provides a rigorous and detailed method for identifying

categories and concepts that emerge from text; and (3) helps the researcher link the concepts

into substantive and formal theories" (pp. 607-608). In practice this involved the systematic

review of the open-ended survey responses, interview transcripts, and field notes to highlight

any salient content in terms of frequency or intensity, which led to identification of broad

themes or categories, and the subsequent linking of said themes to develop an interpretive

structure (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). More of

a method, Grounded Theory, inductively points the researcher toward meaning, opposed to

the scholar deductively imposing meaning in the form of preexisting codes, theories, or

hypotheses upon the data. Qualitative analysis is generally assumed to be more inductive

however a grounded theoretical approach involves moving between induction and deduction

(Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The process is inherently interpretive as researchers are essentially

"deducing what is going on based on data, our assumptions about the nature of life, the

literature we carry in our heads, and the discussions that we have with colleagues" (pp. 136-

137). As such my analysis was more *abductive* (Peirce, 1955: 150-6), in the sense that while I

tried to let the data (i.e., participant responses) speak for itself, my interpretations were unavoidably influenced by my personal experience as a vintage toy collector and my theoretical assumptions coming into the project.

Qualitative Analysis Framework

Interviews conducted on Zoom were recorded using the built-in recording feature and those done over the phone were recorded using Camtasia's software. Zoom's cloud recording service automatically provided a full video recording, an audio-only recording, and transcript of the meeting. While the Zoom produced transcripts were surprisingly serviceable, I opted to upload all the audio files to Trint, an online professional transcription service for a stronger level of accuracy and speaker recognition. Trint's artificial intelligence utilizes automated speech recognition (ASR) and natural language processing (NLP) to accurately decipher human speech, match those sounds to word in its dictionary, and produce a time-coded transcript. This service also allows for sophisticated audio playback with real-time text highlighting, text editing capability, and easy note taking. Once the transcriptions were completed, I used Trint to carefully and critically listen to each interview, pausing to make simple notations and a rough coding concepts, and to correct any transcription errors. I then compared these notes to those I made during the initial interviews and the open-ended survey responses to gain a holistic sense of the data and develop a loose analytical framework. At this point several patterns emerged around frequently used words and phraseology. Repetition of keywords and phrases is a standard indicator of significance in qualitative data analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Ryan & Bernard, 2003) but intensity can also indicate meaning, so I also critically listened for affective emphasis as well.

After this analytical review of the interview texts was completed, I uploaded the transcripts into NVivo 12 Plus, a robust computer assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) software package. NVivo facilitates analysis by making coding, classification, indexing, or retrieval of data during analysis much easier. The software's data management capabilities also allow for quick and easy text retrieval, data visualization, as well as some basic relationship testing. I utilized NVivo to systematically identify and isolate each participant's responses for analysis and classification based on generational membership, gender identity, race, education, and toyline collected. This enabled me to see connections and relationships more efficiently between interviewee responses and these categories. More importantly, these initial procedures allowed for auto coding using the "Identify Themes" tool, which analyzed the transcripts for word count, similar sentence structure, significant noun phrases, and sentiment analysis. NVivo automatically organized similarly themed passages of text into groups called Parent Nodes (or codes) representing each broad idea, with Child Nodes under them. The results were presented in a matrix with tallied counts of Cases (or participants) to which a code was assigned and data segments where the code was present, which greatly assisted in the development of categories and broader themes, and theories. I compared my manual coding framework to NVivo's matrix and used the software's user interface to easily combine, refine, and sublate the code until I had roughly 50 themes, 5 of which appeared to be the most significant to the aims of my study. NVivo was also utilized to analyze the qualitative data generated from the open-ended survey questions, the finding of which were also compared with the interview results. The next section will present the finding derived from the quantitative measurements described above.

QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

Over 800 toy collectors (N = 806) completed the online survey administered

through Qualtrics. To discover which toys were most popular among survey takers

participants were prompted to select or enter up to 3 of their favorite toylines, then rank

them accordingly. A list of 11 toylines were provided as default choices developed from my

experience as a toy collector, exploratory participant observations, the toylines covered in the

popular documentaries like *The Toys That Made Us* (2017-), and the most popular toys that

appeared in several online rankings. Most of the toys were toyetic properties from 70s, 80s,

and 90s, however there were several evergreen brands like *Hot Wheels* and *Barbie* added as

well along with the option to select "Other" and subsequently write-in an alternative toyline.

Table 2. *Top toylines collected*

Toy Name	Frequency	% of Respondents
Beanie Babies*	4	0.5
Hot Wheels*	7	0.9
Care Bears	14	1.7
Power Rangers	16	2
Masters of the Universe (He-Man)	30	3.7
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles	32	4
Barbie*	37	4.6
G.I. Joe	65	8.1
My Little Pony	88	10.9
Transformers	113	14
Star Wars	177	22
Other	214	26.6
System Missing	9	1.1
Total	806	100

Note: Toylines not supported by traditional toyetic media systems.

As Table 2 above shows, "Other" was actually the top vote getter (N = 214) however none of the toylines written in by respondents totaled numbers sufficiently greater than the next top three reported toylines: Star Wars (N = 177), Transformers (N = 113), and My Little Pony (N = 88). Toyetic brands, those which primarily emerged in the 70s and 80, were the most popular choices. Interestingly, the majority of write-in "Other" selections were also toyetic properties like *Thundercats* (1985-1989) and *Jem and the Holograms* (1985-1988). Discounting "Other," because no one toyline within that group eclipsed the default choices, *Star Wars* was the most popular first choice selection (22%) for survey respondents as well as the most frequently selected second, and third choice, representing 43% of the total top selections by collectors. This would indicate that *Star Wars* holds a significant place among collectors, writ large, which will be discussed more in the Qualitative Findings. The top three choices selected by survey participants were used as an initial filter for recruiting a proportional number of participants for semi-structured interviews.

Gender

Unsurprisingly, considering popular assumptions about the adult toy collector and the general demography of other media fandoms, 70% of respondents were male, 28% were female, and the roughly 2% remaining identified as transgender, nonconforming, or "Other." (Table 3).

Table 3. *Survey Participants' Gender Identification*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Female	228	28.3	28.3	28.3
Male	564	70.0	70.0	98.3
Other	14	1.7	1.7	100.0
Total	806	100.0	100.0	

Crosstabulation suggested that gender was a significant indicator of which toys collectors collect. As displayed in Table 4 below, Self-identified men gravitated toward action figure toylines like *Transformers* and *G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero* while women largely collected toyetic properties that were heavily marketed toward young girls in 1980s like *My Little Pony*, *Care Bears*, and the evergreen brand, *Barbie*.

Table 4. *Crosstabulation of Participant Gender and Toyline Collected*

Toy Collected	Gender of Participants			
	Female	Male	Other	Total
Star Wars	1	175	1	177
He-Man	2	28	0	30
GI Joe	1	64	0	65
Ninja Turtles	2	29	1	32
Transformers	3	110	0	113
Barbie	30	6	1	37
My Little Pony	80	4	4	88
Care Bears	11	1	2	14
Beanie Babies	4	0	0	4
Power Rangers	0	15	1	16
Hot Wheels	1	6	0	7
Other	89	121	4	214
Total	224	559	14	797

This gendered segmentation of toys collected was expected and supports the idea that toyetic media systems were tremendously effective at the creation of specific audiences.

Race

The majority of survey respondents, 85%, identified as White or Caucasian. Hispanic/Latinx participants were the second largest racial category represented with 6%, and Black or African America, Asian, and Other made up the remaining 9%. See Table 5 below.

Table 5. *Survey Participants' Racial Identification*

Race Identified	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
American Indian or Alaska Native	7	.9	.9
Black or African American	8	1.0	1.9
Asian	23	2.9	4.7
Hispanic/Latin(x)	50	6.2	10.9
Other (please specify)*	18	2.2	13.2
Prefer not to answer	10	1.2	14.4
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	2	.2	14.6
Unknown	1	.1	14.8
White or Caucasian	687	85.2	100.0
Total	806	100.0	--

The heavy skew of White participants was also not a surprise considering that when most people in the United States think of media fans, they think of white men (Stanfill, 2011). While race was not an explicit focus of this study, like gender, I made sure to recruit enough diverse voices for the interviews that might provide some insight into this underrepresentation. Race was also used as independent variable during survey analysis, however no statistically significant relationships were found between the identified race of

survey participants and various other variables like their favorite toyline, relative strength of
fandom, or generational membership.

Relationship Status

Despite the 'lonely loser' toy collector stereotype, a statistically significant number of
collectors (77%) surveyed were married or in a committed relationship (Table 6 below).
Stereotypes aside, it is reasonable for one to assume that individuals in committed
relationships may not have the time, supportive of their partner, or discretionary funds free
to enough collect toys.

Table 6. *Relationship Status of Survey Participants*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Single	181	22.5	22.6	22.6
Married/Committed Relationship	619	76.8	77.4	100.0
System Missing	6	.7		
Total	806	100.0		

On the other hand, from a socioeconomic perspective a dual income household might better
enable a collector to purchase the precious pieces of plastics more precipitously.

Educational Attainment

Among, the toy collectors surveyed 58% completed a post-secondary degree. See
Table 7 below.

Table 7. *Highest Education Level of Survey Participants*

Level of Education	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Some high school, no diploma	12	1.5	1.5	1.5
High school graduate, diploma or equivalent	81	10.0	10.0	11.5
Some college	167	20.7	20.7	32.3
Trade, technical, or vocational	62	7.7	7.7	40.0
Associate degree	77	9.6	9.6	49.5
Bachelor's degree	247	30.6	30.6	80.1
Master's degree	105	13.0	13.0	93.2
Professional degree	21	2.6	2.6	95.8
Doctorate degree	21	2.6	2.6	98.4
Prefer not to answer	13	1.6	1.6	100.0
Total	806	100.0	100.0	

Educational attainment was not of interest to the original aims of this project, although this demographic category was used as an independent variable for several statistical procedures during analysis. After analysis, it did not appear to influence toy collector behavior in any meaningful way.

Generations

All participants affirmed to be at least 18 years old though the exact age of each respondent was not requested. In hindsight this was an unfortunate limitation as it would have allowed for more refined testing of relationships between variables. Given this study's interest in generational identity, participants were also asked to identify the predefined range of years in which they were born. Each age cohort represented a specific and recognized

American generation (Table 8 below), although this information was not noted for participants.

Table 8. *Respondent Breakdown by Generation and Age Cohort*

Generation of Participant	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Silent Generation - 1928-1945	3	.4	.4	.4
Baby Boomer - 1946-1964	28	3.5	3.5	3.8
Generation X - 1965-1980	462	57.3	57.3	61.2
Millennials - 1981-1996	286	35.5	35.5	96.7
Gen Z - After 1997	27	3.3	3.3	100.0
Total	806	100.0	100.0	

Members of Generation X or "Gen Xers," born between 1965 and 1980, were the largest age cohort represented in the survey, accounting for over 57% of total respondents. This was not a surprise given the intentional recruitment focus on collectors of toylines which arose in the late 70s and proliferated during the 1980s when these individuals were the prime age for consumption. Only 3 members of the Silent Generation, those born before 1928, completed the survey. As theorized, toy preference largely fell along generation lines. See Table 9 below.

Table 9. *Toy Selection Breakdown by Generation*

Toyline Collected	Silent	Baby Boomer	Gen X	Millennials	Gen Z	Total
Star Wars	0	4	138	32	3	177
HeMan	0	0	18	11	1	30
G.I. Joe	0	4	56	5	0	65
Ninja Turtles	0	0	7	25	0	32
Transformers	0	0	80	29	4	113
Barbie	1	3	10	19	4	37
My Little Pony	0	0	29	54	5	88
Care Bears	0	1	5	8	0	14
Beanie Babies	1	0	1	2	0	4
Power Rangers	0	0	5	11	0	16
Hot Wheels	0	0	6	0	1	7
Other	1	15	101	88	9	214
System Missing	-	-	-	-	-	9
Total	3	27	456	284	27	806

Gen Xers favorite toys to collect were *Star Wars*, *Transformers*, *G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero*, and *My Little Pony*, all brands that emerged in the late 70s and early 80s, when many of respondents were the perfect age to respond to toyetic media marketing.

Millennials, born between 1981 and 1996, were the second largest generation represented in the survey, which may also illustrate the effectiveness of the toyetic media approach, as they were part of the target demographic for the toyetic brands of the 1980s and 1990s. The top toylines for Millennials were *My Little Pony*, *Star Wars*, *Transformers*, and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*.

Members of the Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, and Gen Z, those born after 1997 also collected toyetic media toylines but were less represented in the survey compared to their Gen-Xer and Millennial counterparts. As mentioned previously, only 3 members of the Silent Generation, those born before 1928, completed the survey which was not a sufficient sample to make any statistical inferences.

Microgenerations

Another ancillary goal of this study was to provide some evidence of so-called micro or cusp generations and explore the significance of toyetic media to them. Roughly half (49%) of survey respondents were born within this cusp generation and there was a significant positive relationship between their birthdate within this shorter time span and the toyline they selected as their favorite to collect. See Table 10 below.

Table 10. *Participants Born Between 1977-1985*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
No	383	47.5	51.2	51.2
Yes	365	45.3	48.8	100.0
Total	748	92.8	100.0	
Missing	58	7.2		
Total	806	100.0		

I tentatively hypothesized that there would be a significant association between individuals who were born between 1977-1985 and the toys they collected. Statistical modeling in the form of crosstabulation was conducted to determine if this was indeed the case.

Table 11. *Crosstabulation between Xennial membership and toyline collected*

			Xennial, born between 1977-1985?		
			No	Yes	Total
FirstChoice	Star Wars	Count	123	47	170
		% within Xennials	32.6%	12.9%	23.0%
	HeMan	Count	12	17	29
		% within Xennials	3.2%	4.7%	3.9%
	GI Joe	Count	34	27	61
		% within Xennials	9.0%	7.4%	8.2%
	Ninja Turtles	Count	10	22	32
		% within Xennials	2.7%	6.1%	4.3%
	Transformers	Count	44	65	109
		% within Xennials	11.7%	17.9%	14.7%
	Barbie	Count	17	12	29
		% within Xennials	4.5%	3.3%	3.9%
	My Little Pony	Count	30	53	83
		% within Xennials	8.0%	14.6%	11.2%
	Care Bears	Count	6	7	13
		% within Xennials	1.6%	1.9%	1.8%
	Beanie Babies	Count	2	1	3
		% within Xennials	0.5%	0.3%	0.4%
	Power Rangers	Count	9	7	16
		% within Xennials	2.4%	1.9%	2.2%
	Hot Wheels	Count	4	2	6
		% within Xennials	1.1%	0.6%	0.8%
	Other	Count	86	103	189
		% within Xennials	22.8%	28.4%	25.5%
Total		Count	377	363	740
		% within Xennials	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

As you can see from the crosstabs contingency table above (Table 11), the greatest

differences in the expected count, or the predicted frequency of the Xennial respondents'

toy selections, and the observed count of toylines selected by survey takers were seen in Xennials that collected *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1988), *Transformers* (1984), and *My Little Pony* (1982), all toyetic properties that emerged between 1981 and 1988. A chi-square test of independence was also performed to examine the relationship between Xennial membership among survey takers and the specific toylines they collected. The association between these variables was significant, X^2 (11, $N = 740$) = 54.03, $p = <.001$, at an alpha level of .05. We can then reject the null hypothesis that there is no association between the variables and that the differences are not a matter of chance. Therefore, we can assume that Xennials within this study were more likely than non-Xennial participants to collect those toylines. Interestingly, Xennial participants appeared less likely to collect *Star Wars* toys. The original *Star Wars* films debuted in 1977, 1980, and 1983 and Kenner's original toyline was produced from 1977 to 1985. Given this overlap in years and *Star Wars* overall popularity one might guess these toys would have resonated more with this group.

Age Started Collecting

In addition to identifying their generation, respondents were asked to estimate the specific age at which they started collecting toys. Six individuals reported a year, presumably that they started collecting, and these cases were converted to missing data as without an exact birth year it was impossible to calculate a precise age that could be meaningfully incorporated into the dataset. The mean age reported by participants was about 16 years old. See Table 12 below.

Table 12. *Age at Which Participants Started Collecting*

Mean	15.64
Median	13.0
Mode	5.00
Std. Deviation	10.77
Skewness	.936
Std. Error of Skewness	.087

The age at which participants started did appear to be influenced by generational membership however, as Table above 13 illustrates, the average age at which individuals started collecting toys decreased with each new generation

Table 13. *Age Started Collecting by Generation*

Generation	N	Mean
Silent	3	37.66
Baby Boomer	28	20.10
Generation X	446	16.09
Millennials	279	14.72
Gen Z	26	10.57
Total	782	15.64

Put another way, the most recent generations started collecting toys at a younger age than their generational predecessors. It should be noted that there were several minimum and maximum ages moderately skewing the data downward (younger). This may have been a result of a misinterpretation of the question or inauthentic/lazy answering. For example, 158 respondents reported that they started collecting between the ages of 1 and 5. These

individuals may have entered the age at which they remember first playing with toys instead of intentionally collecting which requires a certain amount of cognitive self-awareness and functional independence. The oldest reported starting age was 70 which was a statistical outlier but presumably accurate. Regardless of the potential skewness, both the mean and median ages were supported by several interviewee accounts, which will be discussed more in the Qualitative Findings.

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

There were several goals of the survey. First, I sought to gather demographic data sufficient to establish a tentative typology of adult toy collectors. Second, I hoped to discover which toys are most popular among adult collectors and what if any influence toyetic media might have had in their desire to collect. Third, I wanted to capture data to support or oppose my assertions that adult toy collection is form of fandom. Included in this was the desire to see which specific practices toy collectors share in aggregate that communicate their fandom and what, if any salience, toy fandom has to their individual and social identities. Fourth, I wished to identify specific motivations for collecting. With these goals in mind, I conducted a series of exploratory inferential procedures to test relationships between the various demographic categories, the toylines collected by participants, and several indexes related to fandom and collector motivation.

Generational Toy Collection

The first and perhaps most salient of these analytical exercises was a Pearson Correlation test between a survey taker's generation, as indicated by their self-selected birth age cohort, and their preferred collectible toyline. A crosstabulation presented in Table 9 above, already suggested that choice of toy selected by survey takers was influenced to some extent by the generation they belong to. The crosstab results in Table 14 below suggest several associations between an individual survey taker's generational cohort and the toyline they indicated was their favorite or most collected. Most notably, we can see differences between the toylines collected by members of Gen X and Millennials. For example, among survey participants in this study, Gen Xers were more likely to collect *Star Wars, G.I. Joe,* and *Transformers* toys than their Millennial counterparts.

Table 14. *Crosstabulation between respondent's generation and toyline collected*

FirstChoice * NewGen Crosstabulation

			Generation of Participants					
			Silent	Baby Boomers	Gen X	Millennials	Gen Z	Total
Toyline Collected	Star Wars	Count	0	4	**138**	**32**	3	177
		% within Generation	0.0%	14.8%	**30.3%**	**11.3%**	11.1%	22.2%
	HeMan	Count	0	0	18	11	1	30
		% within Generation	0.0%	0.0%	3.9%	3.9%	3.7%	3.8%
	G.I. Joe	Count	0	4	**56**	**5**	0	65
		% within Generation	0.0%	14.8%	**12.3%**	**1.8%**	0.0%	8.2%
	Ninja Turtles	Count	0	0	**7**	**25**	0	32
		% within Generation	0.0%	0.0%	**1.5%**	**8.8%**	0.0%	4.0%
	Transformers	Count	0	0	**80**	**29**	4	113
		% within Generation	0.0%	0.0%	**17.5%**	**10.2%**	14.8%	14.2%
	Barbie	Count	1	3	10	19	4	37
		% within Generation	33.3%	11.1%	2.2%	6.7%	14.8%	4.6%
	My Little Pony	Count	0	0	**29**	**54**	5	88
		% within Generation	0.0%	0.0%	**6.4%**	**19.0%**	18.5%	11.0%
	Care Bears	Count	0	1	5	8	0	14
		% within Generation	0.0%	3.7%	1.1%	2.8%	0.0%	1.8%
	Beanie Babies	Count	1	0	1	2	0	4
		% within Generation	33.3%	0.0%	0.2%	0.7%	0.0%	0.5%
	Power Rangers	Count	0	0	5	11	0	16
		% within Generation	0.0%	0.0%	1.1%	3.9%	0.0%	2.0%
	Hot Wheels	Count	0	0	6	0	1	7
		% within Generation	0.0%	0.0%	1.3%	0.0%	3.7%	0.9%
	Other	Count	1	15	101	88	9	214
		% within Generation	33.3%	55.6%	22.1%	31.0%	33.3%	26.9%
Total		Count	3	27	456	284	27	797
		% within Generation	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Millennials on the other hand were more likely to collect *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and *My Little Pony* toys than Gen Xers. The chi-square test of independence showed that the association between these variables was significant, X^2 (44, N = 797) = 247.35, p = <.001, at

an alpha level of .05 so we reject the null hypothesis that there is no association between a participant's generation and the toylines they collect.

Gendered Toy Preferences

As displayed in Table 4 above, male collectors heavily collected action figure toylines like Hasbro's *Transformers* and *G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero* while female collectors gravitated more toward plush and doll properties like Hasrbo's *My Little Pony*, Kenner's *Care Bears*, and Mattel's *Barbie*. A crosstabulation of participant gender and the toyline collected clearly shows a somewhat anticipated gendered division in the collectible preferences of survey respondents. (Table 15 below). The self-identified males tended to choose action figure toylines like *Star Wars* while self-identified females largely selected fashion doll and plush toys like My *Little Pony*, and *Care Bears*. The chi-square test of independence showed that this association was significant, X^2 (22, $N = 797$) = 455.46, $p = $ <.001, at an alpha level of .05 so we can accept the alternative hypothesis that is statistically significant association between a participant's gender and the toylines they collect.

Table 15. *Relationship between participant's gender and the toys they collect*

			Gender of Survey Participants			
			Female	Male	Other	Total
Toyline Collected	Star Wars	Count	1	175	1	177
		% within Gender	0.4%	31.3%	7.1%	22.2%
	HeMan	Count	2	28	0	30
		% within Gender	0.9%	5.0%	0.0%	3.8%
	G.I. Joe	Count	1	64	0	65
		% within Gender	0.4%	11.4%	0.0%	8.2%
	Ninja Turtles	Count	2	29	1	32
		% within Gender	0.9%	5.2%	7.1%	4.0%
	Transformers	Count	3	110	0	113
		% within Gender	1.3%	19.7%	0.0%	14.2%
	Barbie	Count	30	6	1	37
		% within Gender	13.4%	1.1%	7.1%	4.6%
	My Little Pony	Count	80	4	4	88
		% within Gender	35.7%	0.7%	28.6%	11.0%
	Care Bears	Count	11	1	2	14
		% within Gender	4.9%	0.2%	14.3%	1.8%
	Beanie Babies	Count	4	0	0	4
		% within Gender	1.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.5%
	Power Rangers	Count	0	15	1	16
		% within Gender	0.0%	2.7%	7.1%	2.0%
	Hot Wheels	Count	1	6	0	7
		% within Gender	0.4%	1.1%	0.0%	0.9%
	Other	Count	89	121	4	214
		% within Gender	39.7%	21.6%	28.6%	26.9%
Total		Count	224	559	14	797
		% within Gender	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Measuring Toy Fandom

A composite index variable was created by combining the scores of 18 survey questions: ToyFandomScale. Eleven of these items captured participants' respective agreement or disagreement with statements regarding their emotional connection, identification with their collectibles, and the toy collection process, measured from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). See Table 16 below.

Table 16. *Fandom Identity Dimensions*

5-item Likert Scale Agreement Statements	Mean Score
Toy collecting is my favorite form of entertainment.	3.83
I have spent a considerable amount of time and money on toys/toy collecting.	4.33
Toys/toy collecting play(s) a part in my everyday life.	3.94
I enjoy being known as a toy collector.	3.94
I often describe myself by mentioning toys/toy collecting.	3.45
Being a toy collector defines me.	2.89
Within my social group, I am the go-to person for toy related knowledge.	3.76
I feel emotionally connected to my toys/toy collecting.	4.35
I feel a bond with other toy collectors.	3.96
The toys I collect say something about who I am.	3.97
Toy collecting is just a hobby for me. *	2.46

*Note: Item was reverse coded for analysis.

Respondents agreed most strongly with the statements "*I have spent a considerable amount of time and money on toys/toy collecting*" (M=4.33) and "*I feel emotionally connected to my toys/toy collecting*" (M=4.35). Survey takers most strongly disagreed with the statements "*Toy collecting is just a hobby for me* (M=2.46) and "*Being a toy collector defines me*" (M=2.89). It should be noted that the

last statement about toy collecting as a mere hobby was a consistently check and therefore was reverse coded for analysis when creating the Toy Fandom Scale. Participants were also asked to score 7 items measuring the frequency of various fan behaviors similarly measured through a scale from 1 (Very Often) to 5 (Never). According to the results, survey takers' most frequent fannish proclivities were thinking about their toys/toy collecting (N=4.03), actively participating in toy related communities online (N = 3.93) and communicating with others about toys/toy collecting online or in-person (N = 3.82). The fandom activity least engaged in was attending toy-related conventions (N = 2.78). See Table 17 below.

Table 16. *Frequency of Toy Fandom Activities*

5-item Likert Scale Frequency Statements	Mean Score
Communicate with others about toys/toy collecting online or in-person.	3.82
Actively participate as a member of a toy related community online.	3.93
Studying toys through media (books, magazines, documentaries, social media)	3.87
Think about my toys/toy collecting.	4.03
Visit physical toy stores.	3.34
Attend toy-related conventions.	2.78
Engage with my toys.	3.75
Average Toy Fandom Activity Score	3.65

These 7 items were combined the 11 others using the COMPUTE new variable function in SPSS. The resulting composite index was a score intended to measure the relative strength of survey respondents' toy fandom, with a score of 1 indicating very weak fandom and a score of 5 indicating very strong fandom. As Table 18 below shows, the mean score for survey takers was 3.68, indicating an above average level of fandom strength.

Table 17. *Overall Strength of Participants' Toy Fandom*

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
ToyFandomScale	806	1.48	4.94	3.68	.60154

This score was used as a dependent variable in a series of exploratory and associative analyses with the demographic categories, generation, the age respondents started collecting, preferred toyline collected, as well as several other composite scales measuring fandom activity level and motivations.

Toy Collector Motivations

I was also interested in the reasons why adults collect toys; thus 12 survey statements were included regarding motivations for collecting toys and respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement using a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). While collectors are motivated by many things, the 4 primary areas of motivational interest selected for the survey were economic, completionism, social, and nostalgia (Table 19 below). Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with 11 statements, using a 5-point Likert scale. Each question represented one of the four motivational categories.

Table 18. *Collector Motivation Scores*

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Economic	806	1.00	5.00	3.43	.71302
Completist	806	1.00	5.00	3.05	1.09673
Social	806	1.00	5.00	3.18	.84015
Nostalgia	806	1.00	5.00	3.89	.91323

For survey respondents, nostalgia was the strongest motivating factor. For a population that primarily collects toys from their childhood, this is by no means a surprise. Neither was the second highest scored motivation, economic interest, given the prevalence of Facebook Groups, YouTube channels, discussion board forums, websites, and collector books, dedicated to properly cataloging and pricing these old pieces of plastic. I was however a bit surprised to see that the social component of toy collection was not stronger. Traditionally with media fandom, community is highlighted as one of the strongest constitutive forces. All four motivational scores were used as dependent variables, tested against the generational membership, gender, and race however no statistically significant relationships emerged.

Table 19. *Mean Nostalgia Score by Generation*

Generation	N	Mean
Silent	3	2.22
Baby Boomer	28	3.32
Generation X	462	3.94
Millennials	286	3.89
Gen Z	27	3.72
Average Nostalgia Score	806	3.89

The results (Table 20 above) showed that among those surveyed, Gen Xers and Millennials were the most nostalgically driven to collect toy and members of the Silent and Baby Boomer generations were least nostalgic. Men were slightly more nostalgic than women and respondents who self-identified as Black or African American were by far more nostalgically driven than any other racial category. There was virtually no difference in nostalgia scores between single respondents and those in relationships. Although the relationship between nostalgic motivation and the various demographic categories were not statistically significant,

nostalgia was incredibly meaningful overall to adult toy collectors, as will be discussed in the interview findings.

The Right Age For Collecting

As shown already the average age at which point survey respondents began collecting toys as a purposeful activity, opposed to merely acquiring toys to play with during childhood, was roughly 16 years old. Analysis indicated that there was a significant connection between that age at which individuals started consciously collecting toys the generation to which they belong. See Table 21 below.

Table 20. *Relationship between generational membership and the age collectors start*

		Age at which started collecting	Respondent's Generation
Age at which started collecting	Pearson Correlation	1	-.147**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	782	782
Respondent's Generation	Pearson Correlation	-.147**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	782	806

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

For quantitative analysis, generations were scored 1-5 with the Silent Generation #1 and Gen Z #5. The Pearson Correlation coefficient showed am inverse relationship between the age respondents started collecting toys and their generation with members of each new generation starting to collect toys at a younger age than the previous generation.

Quantitative Findings Summary

In summary, the toy collectors surveyed were predominantly white males, born between 1965 and 1995, making them Gen Xers and Millennials. Most participants were in committed relationships with some post-secondary education or degree held. The most frequently collected toylines were *Star Wars*, *Transformers*, and *My Little Pony*. The average age respondents started collecting toys was about 16 years old and results showed that members of each successive generation started collecting toys at an earlier age than their predecessors. The further data indicated that a toy collector's gender and generation, respectively, significantly influence which specific toylines they collect. Nostalgia was the strongest motivating factor for those surveyed with Gen Xers and Millennials being the most nostalgic. Responses indicated an above average score on the Toy Fandom Scale, indicating that adult toy collectors exhibit traits of other established media fandoms like a strong emotional attachment to their fandom object, in this case toys and toy collecting. These findings were used to guide the semi-structured interviews, which will be explored in the next section.

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

I conducted 26 semi-structured interviews of a broadly representative sample of willing survey respondents, to gain a more in-depth understanding of adult toy collectors (Appendix B). As already discussed in the Recruitment section, I purposefully and proportionally sampled individuals based on the top 3 toylines collected by survey takers along, their respective generational membership, gender, and race. Relationship status and educational attainment were not factors in interviewee recruitment. Specifically, 19 interviewees were male, 6 were female, and 1 identified as "Other" or gender nonconforming. Over half (N=14) of participants were members of Gen X, 6 were Millennials, 3 were Baby Boomers, and 3 were Gen Z. Most collectors had bachelors, post-graduate, or professional degrees (N=18) and were in committed relationships (N=23). Most (N=19) interviewees were White or Caucasian, 3 were Asian, 3 were Hispanic or LatinX, and 1 identified as Black or African American. This similarity does not confirm the survey findings as I intentionally sampled the interviewees based on the toy they collected, their generational membership, gender, and race. I did not consider relationship status or education into account when recruiting interview participants.

The interview protocol was developed before research commenced but in accordance with the nested design of the project, several question areas were adapted to reflect survey findings. For example, one survey item used to create the Toy Fandom Scale pertained to an individual dimension of identity, the frequency of thought about their fandom object, toys. According to the results, survey takers think about their toys often (*M*=4.03) as measured along a Likert-scale of 1-Never to 5-Very often. This high score warranted further exploration and thus it was addressed during the interviews, as a possible indicator of personal significance and identity.

There were many interesting findings from my conversations with collectors. The following will focus primarily on the qualitative data that supports results from the survey and the most prominent themes that directly tie to the original aims of the study. At times, data from the survey will also be highlighted to help contextualize the emergent information from the interviews. First, I will address to what extent toy collector view their practices as fandom. Second, I will describe the primary types of toy collectors I encountered and what motivates collectors. Third, I will share the results relate to the influence of toyetic media systems. Lastly, I will tackle the relationship between vintage toy collection and generations

Views of Toy Collecting

Early on in my discussions with collectors I sought to discover how they viewed their own toy collection practices. Among those interviewed, participants conceptualized their collecting behaviors in a variety of ways. For example, 11 participants used a hunting analogy to describe various aspects of collectible acquisition:

> *You know, Wal-Mart and Target, I mean, they have toys. You know, it was the joy of the hunt, right. You go to Toys R US and see if figure was there. From there, you jump over to a Target from the jump over to a Wal-Mart. And, you know, so was it was it was a hunt. It was it was adventure. It was, you know, all those things combined in one.*

(Clark, Male, White, Baby Boomer, Star Wars collector)

> *Most everything I've gotten was either at conventions or like yard sales and flea markets or antique stores. And it's not that I like one more than the other. But the hunt's easy if I just log on to eBay and say "Lobot" and then like, there's every Lobot (specific character he collects) that I want. And then bought em. Like, that's kind of if I want to get everything, I could do it. And I would from time to time. But that's more few and far between. I like to hunt.*

(Jason, Male, White, Generation X, Star Wars collector)

Participants like Katherine, a Millennial, *My Little Pony* collector referred several times to the "thrill of the hunt" and stated she preferred finding toys "out in the wild," in flea markets, antique stores, yard sales, thrift shops, opposed to vintage toy stores, eBay, or other online

collector hubs. In addition to this hunting analogy, 16 interviewees likened collecting toys to an addiction, vice, or obsession:

> *Yeah. That's my vice right there, you know. So, it's like that's my version of cocaine.*
>
> (Clark, Male, White, Baby Boomer, Star Wars collector)
>
> *Transformers always scratched an itch.*
>
> (Mitchell, Male, White, Gen X, Transformers collector)
>
> *You know, I don't do drugs, so it's as close as I'm going to get. […] But it. Yeah, it is a high. […] You know, we in the in the community (Transformers collectors), […] we often call it plastic crack. So, you know, it's. It's you know, and it's definitely an obsession and it is a little bit like an addiction because, you know, every once in a while you'll see a collector post online: 'I'm getting rid of my collection. I'm getting out.' Six months later, they're back at it, just like, you know, quitting alcohol. Yeah. I mean, you can never you can never quit if you're you know, if it's in you.*
>
> (Rich, Male, Asian Gen X, Transformers collector)

This use of compulsory language to describe their collecting behaviors was quite interesting as it was so prominent and given the common conflation of collecting with hoardings, addressed more below. While fascinating, a deeper exploration of collection as an addiction or vice is better left for a more psychologically focused study. For several participants, both the hunting mentality and the compulsive nature seemed to be an underlying motivation for continued collecting. Participants were additionally asked what they do with their toys once they have collected them and how regularly they interact with their collectibles. I was curious to what extent these adults still play with toys and conceive of their activities as play.

Most participants interacted with their collection on a semi-regular basis. Some of the things they did resemble museum preservation and while they derived a certain amount of nostalgic enjoyment from this interaction, they didn't really view it as play:

> *Yeah, I've not yet been able to… and that's my job this summer. That is to photograph all of it and catalog it. I've not been able to do that yet. I've never had the time or the space to do it. And now I have a bit of time and space that I will go through that process and catalog it and just really appreciate it. And actually, that's a pleasure for me… will be displaying it, taking a photograph of*

it, logging it, cataloging it, perhaps even potentially repairing it or cleaning it, it's probably been the joy for me in terms of that. Take me back to 1977.

(Percy, Generation X, Star Wars collector)

I unbox them and display them. So, when I display them. I kind of keep them in a [static] museum pose. But sometimes I'll interact with them just to, just to change it up. […] I didn't make a diorama per say, but sometimes you sort of pose them in different, you know, semi-action poses. Just to kind of change it up. […] Sometimes I change them [his Transformers] all to alt mode [from their vehicle mode to robotic form]. […] I guess I don't call them toys though because. In one view they are toys. But really, I refer to my figures is as figures. I refer to my collection as figures.

(Brent, Male, Black, Gen X, Transformers)

This rhetorical reframing of toys as figures is evidence that some adults have difficulty viewing their collectibles as ludic objects and presumably conceptualizing their interaction with them as play (Heljakka, 2018). The recategorization of toys as something else is a strategy to disassociate themselves with the traditionally ludic realm of childhood as is the discursive detour away from playing toward "hobbying" and "collecting" (Heljakka, 2018). Although Brent and several others were initially hesitant to describe their collector practices as play initially, they realized mid-conversation that perhaps what they were doing might constitute play:

I call it, interacting. I feel like I feel the need to interact with my toys in some sort of way. […] But, you know, I will say that there is some level of play in the traditional sense that I have with some of my figures, because I do have two young boys, 10 and 8. So, they will want to play with figures. And, you know, I'm not letting them play with the most expensive. But I have some other ones that that I'll show you later on that we play with. And, you know, sometimes we get a little rough, but, you know, we fly around the house and like, we're flying, Iron Man through the air. So, you know, there's traditional play in that sense that I still have with some of them.

(Brent, Male, Black, Gen X, Transformers)

Brent's response here also shows how some collectors have introduced their children to their beloved toys and how that is a way they can still play with their toys as intended. Tori a Gen X, *My Little Pony* fan, similarly discussed how her play now often involves her daughter, who enthusiastically chimed in during this part of the interview:

I don't know that I play with them? (asked daughter) I guess we play [Tori and her daughter]. We had… they were racing… We had the 'big race.' The boys [male ponies] had a big race against the girls [female ponies] They had like their own Kentucky Derby. […] Every once in a while, I'd say every few months we take them out. I don't play like myself anymore. It's more of like there in the sink. They're getting washed. They're getting combed and styled. I guess that's my adult play now. I rearrange them on the shelf, like things like that. Well, we actually have, you know, we had the stable out and we had all the fences, and we made a big, I guess like racecourse. Oh, and we had the castle, too. Remember when we had the castle? Cause Majesty [a specific pony]. She's the queen. And she went to the race. Yes. And she had her big entourage. It was very, very fun. I know she did have all the ponies were her entourage. It was wonderful.

Many of the collectors I interviewed had children of their own and tried to include their children in the toy collecting. During our conversation Tori realized that she still does play with her toys, but only when their kids are involved, as if that they gave them permission of sorts to freely interact ludically with the toys. This hesitancy to conceptualize their collector practices as play was a fascinating dynamic and one worth further study. Collectors like Rich however freely acknowledged their activities were play:

I play with them like crazy for a little while. Then I put them up and that there's a lot in storage. Probably a lot of collectors have that. And I also have an Instagram just for my Transformers. I post almost everything I buy in there. I'm interested in photography. I'm a visual artist as well. So, I try to do some Photoshop stuff.

(Rich, Male, Asian Gen X, Transformers collector)

The latter part of Rich's response describes the toy collector practice called photoplay which several collectors also discussed. Photoplay is not exclusive to toy fandom and is a common fan practice involving the creative staging, placement, photography, and sharing of significant material artifacts. Photoplay, as the name suggests, can and should be understand as a form of adult play (Rogan 1998; Heljakka, 2018). Furthermore, the prevalence of this time-consuming and often meticulously creative activity suggests that toy collecting is more than a casual hobby.

Toy Collecting as Fandom

A major assumption of this project was that vintage toy collection is a specialized form of consumption and media centric identity, commonly referred to as fandom. Like

other media fans, toyetic fandom is expressed through intensive research, vast knowledge of production history, re-watching associated transmedia, and actively participating in communities, primarily online, to celebrate, curate, evaluate, speculate, and debate toys.

Table 21. *Toy Fandom Practices*

Practice Name/Code	# of Interviewees that Practice	# of Coded References
Social Practices	23	92
- Conventions-Shows-Meetups	20	38
- Participation in online communities	17	34
- Prefer working with community over eBay	4	4
- Connection with other collectors	3	4
- Legitimacy	1	1
- Commerce	3	3
- Window shopping	0	0
- Lurking vs active participant	3	3
- Education or advice	1	1
- Theory and speculation	1	1
- Photography-Photo Play	12	18
- Cosplay-Costuming	2	2
Individual Practices	23	68
- Thrift Stores, Flea Markets, Yard Sales	14	18
- Cataloging or Check-listing	9	14
- Local toy-big box stores	10	14
- Restoration	9	11
- Traveling with a toy	6	8
- Viewing or Admiring Toys	3	3
- Displaying-Diorama	22	52
- Posing Figures-Reenacting Scenes	6	6
Customs-Modification or "Modding"	13	20
3D Printing	5	5
Blogging	1	1
Fandom Behavior	1	1
Totals	25	240

Table 22 above shows the most prominent and more distinctive practices derived from my interviews, divided into social, individual, and possibly both. Some activities like attending conventions and cosplaying are common among media fans however others like cataloging, diorama building, and photoplay are more unique to material-centric fandom like, toy collection. Furthermore, many of the key constitutive practices of toy fans are individual, which deviates from previous scholarly findings, and will be addressed in more detail, below.

Many media fans signal their passion through material consumption, whether that be purchasing movie-tickets, apparel, posters, signed memorabilia, or even toys. The non-mutually exclusive distinction between fans who collect toys to communicate their fandom and toy fandom lies in the centrality of the toy to the individual's fan experience. This difference was articulated in an open-ended survey response:

> *I have great memories of the Filmation cartoon series, and I love most [Masters of the Universe] media but […] I've always felt like the toys were at the center of the property for me, unlike something like Star Wars where I collect because I love the films.*

(Survey Participant # 305, Male, White, Millennial, *Masters of the Universe* collector)

We see here that individuals can collect toys to represent their love of a media property but for fans of toyetic properties, intentionally brought into existence to sell toys, the media and the material are one in the same. Although definitions vary, scholars mostly agree that fandom broadly is a "regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text" (Sandvoss 2005, p. 22) and that a fan is a consumer who builds "an intense identification with their object of fandom" (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 101). Let's start with identification.

Identification and Significance

Self-labeling is not a definitive marker of identification, but it is perhaps an initial indicator of identity. To that end 26 survey respondents referred to themselves specifically as

"fans" of the toylines they collect, their related toyetic media, or both. Similarly, over 50% of those interviewed referenced being a fan or explicitly labeled their activities as fandom. Lyle is a Millennial who collects *Star Wars*, among other things. He initially got into collecting through his love of Disney's *Gargoyles* animated television series (1994-1997) and its corresponding toyline produced by Kenner (1995-1996):

> *I think specifically with Gargoyles, like it was like an all-encompassing fandom. Like in second grade I dressed up… I had like a Gargoyles Halloween costume with, like big inflatable wings and stuff.*

In addition to illustrating how some toy collectors label their activities as fandom, Lyle's response also highlights how by the mid-90s toyetic media systems had been perfected and offered never-ending entry points into a franchise.

No singular definition of fandom is sufficient to adequately capture the totality of subjective positions experienced by those who identify as fans. Fandom is at its core an identity constructed around a cultural object. Contemporary identities are fragmented, challenging to measure, and must be done along multiple dimensions, some unknown or inarticulable to the individuals being studied. This project attempted to gauge to how toyetic media and collection of said media contributed to the collectors sense of self in several different ways. For example, as discussed earlier in this chapter, survey respondents indicated thinking about their toys often (Table 23 below).

Table 22. *Frequency of Fandom Activities*

5-Item Likert scale Frequency Statement	Mean Score
Think about my toys/toy collecting.	4.03

As this seemed significant to survey takers, interviewees were also asked "how often they

thought about their toys" and if they "thought about their toys when they weren't around

them." For several individuals this was an easy question to answer:

> *Yeah, I do. I do. They're a very prominent part of my personality. It's what I'm known for.*
>
> (Betty, Female, White, Gen Z, My Little Pony collector).
>
> *Yeah, yeah, a lot. If I'm not thinking about my* [Transformers], *I am I'm actively thinking about what figure I want to get out my shelf next.*
>
> (Jade, Male, White, Gen Z, Transformers collector).

Time spent thinking about one's passion suggests a certain level of importance as does their

willingness to describe themselves as collectors:

> *I do describe myself to other people as a toy collector, but I don't know …sort of wear on my lapel. Yeah. And, you know, everything is sort of situation appropriate. You know, you're at a speed networking event, you know. Hello, my name is [Brent]. I'm in higher education. And I'm a toy collector. Might not work.*

When asked more directly about the importance of collecting to their sense of self a few

collectors interviewed viewed their passion more like a hobby:

> *But everybody has something. And it's the collection, but everybody has a hobby. You know, I don't look at my hobby as any less relevant going to be also some people really love to cook. And it's what they are into.*
>
> (Jason, Male, White, Generation X, Star Wars collector)

Other collectors acknowledged the importance of toy collecting in their lives, but tended to

downplay it or express a level of embarrassment:

> *Yeah, I'm ashamed to say, yeah, like when it comes down to it. I know they're not that important, you know, and I prioritize my life when other things come first. You know? It's important to me because I invest a lot of money and time and thinking into it. So, yeah, yeah. I mean, I'm realistic with it, but of course it's important.*
>
> (Robby, Male, Asian, Gen X, G.I. Joe collector)

Some were more accepting of its role but perceived it somewhat negatively:

> *It's pretty big (level of importance). I sometimes wish I wasn't. That's because it's, you know, it's you know, it is an obsession. […] it's I just when I when I get something new, you know, I get lost*

in it for hours and hours, researching, even before that, researching, wanting to buy it or whatever, or seeing it for the first time in a store. So, you know. Yeah, it's pretty important. Pretty important.

(Rich, Male, Asian Gen X, Transformers collector)

Only a few interviewees explicitly articulated that collecting was central to their sense of self:

I collect more than just toys. I collect dragon figurines. I collect pennies. I collect a little, enamel pins, anywhere I go, if […] I like [it]. *I collect it. I'm also the same way with rocks. I've always liked rocks. I collect it. If I'm somewhere. And there's like a special memory attached to it. I'll pick up a rock and take it with me. So being a collector in general is definitely a part of who I am.*

(Amy, Female, White, Gen Z, Rainbow Brite)

For me, actually it is [personally significant]. Love me, love my Transformers. We're a package deal pretty much. So, I won't necessarily say it defines me, but it definitely is a significant portion of my life and my interests and hobbies.

(Sharon, Female, White, Gen X, Transformers)

I'm also lucky to have a very supportive wife here and never gave me shit about it. You know that. You know, it's it's part of me. You know, when she met me, when she first saw my apartment and saw action figures in the kitchen, for God's sake. You know, it's like, 'Okay. This is the guy I'm with'. So. Yeah.

(Rich, Male, Asian Gen X, Transformers collector)

The centrality of being a collector to one's life can change over time, but the affective attachment to their toys themselves appears to be a constant:

It's probably not as important as it used to be anymore. […] I think collecting for me was and is an opportunity to have those experiences that I missed as a kid. I tell my wife the story. You know, every, every single, you know, Transformer that I have that has significant meaning to me. I still remember, like, when my parents purchased them for me. And so. There's that there's that emotional connection to it.

(Mark, Hispanic/Latinx, Gen X, Transformers)

This affective component distinguishes fans from more passive consumers and is key to the longevity of the specialized form of consumption.

Emotional Attachment

The totality of data in this study suggested a strong affective component to vintage toy collection. This was unsurprising considering the population of study is adults who, for the most part, collect toys they played with or wanted to play with as children. Nearly 90%

of survey respondents (*N*=723) affirmed feeling an emotional connection to their toys and/or toy collecting. The survey item (Table 24 below) addressing this, was one of the 18 items combined to create the Toy Fandom Scale and was the most direct indicator of the affective dimension of fandom among participants.

Table 23. *Emotional Connection Survey Item*

Likert scale Agreement Statement	Mean Score
I feel emotionally connected to my toys/toy collecting.	4.35

Emotional attachment was also tacitly present in the open-ended survey question responses addressing the influence of toyetic media. Survey takers used the word "love," or a derivative thereof, 116 times to describe the attachment survey respondents felt toward the toyetic media they collect.

Affective connection also emerged during interviews although some participants were reticent to explicitly articulate an emotional connection to their toys when asked directly. However, indirect questioning prompted participants to speak to the significance of their toy fandom. For example, I asked interviewees what their long-term plans were for their collections. Some individuals expressed wishes to be buried with their toys:

> *And it's it was the first Masterpiece, Optimus Prime, that was that was issued because it was it was really my first Masterpiece piece. And I told my wife, I said, you know, everything else. You know, the day I die everything else. You can get rid of it, you know, bury me with that one.*

(Mark, Male, Gen X, Hispanic/Latinx, Transformers collector)

> *So, my fiancée, you know, asked me one time, he was like, what are you gonna do with your collection when you're gone or ready to pass on? And I'm just like, well, I've got my list of the few toys that I want buried with me and the rest of it. I want to be sold to a collectible museum.*

(Tom, Male, White, Millennial, My Little Pony collector)

Wanting to be buried with ones toys indicates a more than a passive relationship with these media objects. It suggests a certain level of personal significance and a strong affective attachment to material objects. A similar question prompted participants to identify which single collectible they would rescue if there was a fire in their home. Understandably, around half said they would save their most financially valuable, hardest sought, or rarest collectible however more than expected purported that they would risk burning flames to recover the toys that mean the most to them emotionally:

> *Out of all my original toys [he played with as a child] I only I have very few. And one of them is my original Optimus Prime. […] I probably would get that.* (Rich, Male, Asian Gen X, Transformers collector)

Although collectors were keenly aware of the monetary worth of their toys, for many the true value was more sentimental:

> *I mean, especially because of my Web site, I get asked a lot for [financial] values on the older dolls, so I'm pretty aware of the values on them. But to me, the more important ones are the ones that have some sort of sentimental connection.*

(Bailey, Female, White, Millenial, Blythe Dolls & Star Wars collector)

> *I'm really a sentimental person. So, the dolls that have sentimental importance are definitely more precious to me than the ones that don't.*

(Amy, Female, White, Gen Z, Rainbow Brite collector)

This emotional attachment was frequently linked to special memories many of which were common among collectors like receiving gifts:

> *And the one main thing that I have that is really sentimental to me is a Tollbooth [action figure] and the Bridge Layer [tank vehicle] […] in 1984, I was dating, even collecting toys I found a girl, and we were pretty serious. And that Christmas, Christmas of 1984, she bought me the Bridge Layer with Toll Booth. And we got married the next year. […] I'm not saying that was the reason, but you know. It didn't hurt.*

(Timothy, Male, White, Baby Boomer, G.I. Joe collector)

More specifically, there was a strong connection between receiving the toys as either Christmas or Birthday gifts from their parents, friends, or significant people in their lives.

Interestingly around 42% of interviewees cited their family as a main factor in their love of toys. Participants cited having relatives who were collectors of other things or receiving their first toys as hand-me-downs from siblings.

Emotional attachment is generally considered a prerequisite characteristic of fandom which toy collectors seem to be in ample supply of. In addition to affective attachment many scholars contend that fandom has both an individual and social dimension (Stevens, 2010). The participatory nature of fandom in particular is often the focus of many studies. The survey data regarding the social nature of toy fandom was decently consistent with information however my interviewees indicated that collecting was less communally driven than expected.

Role of Community in Toy Collecting

According to the toy collectors surveyed, there was moderate social element to their vintage toy collection. Table 25 below reveals the means scores for several survey items which captured the frequency of social activities, as measured along a Likert-scale. The mean scores reveal an above average level of activity through communication with others about toys, participation in online communities, and visiting physical toy stores, which could be either social or private.

Table 24. *Toy Collector Social Activity Survey Items*

Likert scale Frequency Statements	Mean Score
Communicate with others about toys/toy collecting online or in-person.	3.82
Actively participate as a member of a toy related community online.	3.93
Visit physical toy stores.	3.34
Attend toy-related conventions.	2.78
Total	3.47

The lowest scored activity for toy fans was attending conventions however this low score may not be a definitive indicator of social or antisocial tendencies. For one the survey was administered during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic and responses might have been reflective of that. Additionally, although the purpose of conventions is to bring people together, people frequently attend them without socializing. Regardless, the other mean scores indicate some level of sociality. These were not the only measures of the communal nature of toy collection. Table 26 below displays the results of 3 Likert-scale survey items that were meant to measure the social dimension of collector motivation. As shown, respondents moderately agreed that they rely on other collectors for knowledge and that collecting is a social experience.

Table 25. *Social Motivation Survey Items*

Likert scale Agreement Statements	Mean Score
I rely on other collectors for their expertise	3.53
To me, collecting is about friendship and community	3.42
Collecting is primarily a private activity for me*	2.59
Total Mean Score	3.18

*Note: Item reverse coded

The total mean score for this social motivation dimension was moderately above average but not as strong a motivator for collectors as nostalgia or economic investment (See Table 19). Furthermore, 56% (N=452) of survey participants reported that toy collecting was primarily a private endeavor.

Considering the number of toy-specific conventions, YouTube channels, websites, discussion board forums, and Facebook Groups dedicated to toyetic media, one might assume a strong communal component. According to those interviewed however, much of

the work of toy fandom, including research, price valuation, thrift store hunting, and

displaying is more solitary:

> *For me personally, it's* [collecting] *more a private thing* […] *I'm kind of an introvert, so I go to the shows and it's not it's not a huge deal for me.*

> (Timothy, Baby Boomer, G.I. Joe)

> *I'm a little more private with my collecting for some reason, just, you know, my own personal thing. And I've met up with some of the people who do collecting and they're nice people, but I just haven't, you know…connected on a one-on-one basis, so for me, it's just it's a private thing.*

> (Mark, Hispanic/Latinx, Gen X, Transformers)

To be sure, these activities are aided greatly by participation, albeit often superficial, within

specific online communities although the significance of engagement with other collectors

varied greatly among interviewees.

Most interviewees reported being only loosely connected to other collectors, perhaps

merely lurking within the Facebook Groups to which they belong, periodically liking or

disliking posts, making the occasional comment, or posting pics of recent toy finds to

receive feedback:

> *I'd say my relationship to other collectors really goes as far as communicating with them through like a Facebook group or. And or just seeing what's happening on YouTube.*

> (Brent, Male, Black, Gen X, Transformers)

In many cases, relationships with other collectors seemed more transactional in nature:

> *I have before (participated in Facebook Group community), especially if people are looking for stuff or people are asking, well, what it's you know, what's something that I can do with this figure? What is this look like or whatever? Yeah, I'll share some stuff and but generally not a whole lot.*

> (Mark, Male, Hispanic/LatinX, Gen X, Transformers)

Membership within a community is beneficial as collectors prefer engaging in commerce

with other collectors opposed trying to acquire toys through eBay or Flippers:

> *I'm connected to a lot of Facebook groups. Go-Bot groups and Transformers groups like dozens of them, and it's all you know, almost always is the best prices are through other collectors because*

there's lots of us who just buy stuff and buy stuff and buy stuff and eventually get bored with it and you sell it. It's always the best prices to those guys. […] So, you know, going through eBay, you know, there's always going to be a bit of gouging. But when you're in a group where it's all collectors and you just want your toy to go to another collector, it's usually they usually give you a good price for it. So, it's you know, it's good to be hooked into that community here.

(Rich, Male, Asian Gen X, Transformers collector)

Connecting with other collectors, even if casual, can legitimize behaviors that to some extent

are still stigmatized by society:

It validates what I do. I think it makes it fun. If it was just me, like, I, I don't know. I think I'd be doing it now. But, you know, the fact that I can talk to friends about it, maybe go to the movies with them, I, you know, discuss, you know, plot points and what's going on. But certainly, a big, big part of it.

(Justice, Male, Asian, Gen X, Star Wars)

For some interviewees though, collecting was actually more about connection than

collection:

Jem brought me into […] the Jem Con [annual convention for Jem enthusiasts] *world where I've met […] a lot of really good quality people. And I mean, I have friends all over the world. I have friends in the Netherlands and Australia, in Scotland and all because of Jem. And if I if I wasn't a Jem fan and into this like I am, probably would have never met those people. So that's it's bringing people together. I think it's the most important aspect of the collection.*

(Bill, Male, White, Gen X, Jem and the Holograms)

So, it's not so much like, oh, my God, it's so great to have so many dolls else. I mean, that's fun. I like to dress them. I think it's fun to photograph them. And it's cool way to connect with my mom. And even when my grandma was alive, she had tons of dolls, so she thought it was pretty cool, even though that's [Blythe dolls] not what she had. To me, it's just kind of a weirdly cool connection with people.

(Bailey, Female, White, Millennial, Blythe dolls)

Toy collecting has facilitated meaningful relationships that otherwise would not have been:

[Collecting is] *kind of important just because that's literally how I've made friends. I had Covid a couple of months ago and I was super sick. […] But my* [collector] *friends sent me like a surprise gift from Australia. Oh, like I got a box in the mail from Australia. It's this beautiful headpiece that she made. That's all flowers and like, it's gorgeous. And without* [collecting]*, like, I wouldn't have ever met her. I wouldn't know the friends that I do.*

(Bailey, Female, White, Millennial, Blythe dolls)

And I found this store that was all about Transformers and that was all they basically did. And so […] I started picking up a few things. And then I found a few people in the community there that have actually become some of my best friends in the world.

(Sharon, Female, White, Gen X, Transformers)

Several interviewees even met their significant others because of toy their fandom:

She [his wife] *had a lot of, like, modern* [Star Wars] *stuff herself. But we started talking and we both found out that we both had a Star Wars tattoos and it kind of like ended up being like, not what drew us together, but like that commonality of like, oh, you like Star Wars? And she's like 'yeah', we kind of bonded over, like, one of the first things.*

(Jason, Male, White, Generation X, Star Wars collector)

For obvious reasons, participants mostly engaged with other collectors in online collector communities however toy fans also come together offline. Most of the toylines my participants collected have yearly conventions that bring fans together for celebration and commerce. These conventions resemble other more established "cons" like the world-famous San Diego Comic Con, offering attendees to meet actors, producers, artists, and other experts that helped bring their favored media the screen or in the case of collectors, shelves.

Overall, vintage toy fandom appears to be far less social than other media fandoms but the importance of connecting with others remains and important component.

A Typology of Toy Collectors

The interviewees represented a diverse array of collector approaches and motivations. As discussed previously, it is not uncommon in consumer cultures like the United States for individuals to collect material objects from time to time. This periodic, often unfocused although perhaps thematic collection might be best categorized as *casual*. Though, none of the interviewees could be considered *casual*, this type of collecting was recognized by participants:

> *There's obviously like the casual person, you know, that's, you know, [someone] who has, [...] three or four Funko Pops [pop culture themed bobble-heads] because they're cute or, you know, I like this Darth Vader action figure. So that's, you know, like [...] it doesn't take up their life. Then there's like obviously, like there's the hardcore dude, like people who are like me. It's like I like everything that's from Marvel Legends and part of this whole thing. And I'm like in it for the entire line.*

(Lyle, Male, White, Gen X, Star Wars collector)

It stands to reason that interviewees would be more than *casual* consumers of toys, given their intentional recruitment from collector focused Facebook Groups. During the interviews four types of toy collectors were identified, supported through the survey results: *Hardcore, Completists, Flippers,* and *Investors.*

Hardcore collectors. One of the advantages of conducting interviews over Zoom was being able to see toy collectors in their homes where most have dedicated an impressive amount of space to their precious plastic. For some collectors, this meant several Ikea shelves in an office space, or a single curio cabinet proudly displayed in the living room. Others however, dedicated entire rooms or basements to the storage and display of their collectibles. Several of these spaces resembled mini museums with multiple retail sized display cases, storage fixtures, cabinets, and special lighting. A few individuals also carefully stored toys in multiple plastic totes, often rotating their collectibles in and out of display. While the average outside observer might label all these individuals as "hardcore," among the collectors interviewed there was a clear distinction between what type of collector they were, and other more extreme collectors:

> *I'm running out of room right now. I could build shelves as it sits, because all of my figures take up a lot of shelf space and I have a decent collection. I mean, [but] compared to some of these guys that I've seen in these [Facebook] groups, I mean, they're really hardcore.*

(Trisha, Millennial, Masters of the Universe collector)

Despite the size of their collections most interviewees were quick to point out that there was someone much more "hardcore" than them:

My other friend, Danny, he's the one. If mine is a disease, this is his collecting is a pandemic. He's got three storage lockers, full of stock. He doesn't even know what he has. That's just he'll just buy it and throw it in the storage locker.

(Clark, Male, White, Baby Boomer, Star Wars collector)

In fact, only a few of the collectors interviewed explicitly self-identified as *Hardcore* themselves:

I would categorize myself as hardcore. So, you saw the G2's (second generation My Little Pony toys). Unfortunately, you're not seeing the G1 because they're at my other residence. There's over like 400 of those. And in fact, my fiancé. He's the mathematician. He's a smart one. I told him he asked me one time […] "how many do you have?" I'm like over 300. And he was actually looking at the totes upon totes of ponies that I have. And he was just like, I think you have closer to 600.

(Tom, Male, White, Millennial, My Little Pony collector)

Several specific characteristics that collectors employed to distinguish *Hardcore* collectors from others, included money and time dedicated to collection as well as intensity of affective investment. The most prominent demarcation though, according to those interviewed, was quantity of collectibles, as illustrated in Tom's response. Another related distinction arose during these discussions between collecting, hardcore or otherwise presumably, and hoarding:

I have seen photos of people that have these massive warehouses of things. I don't want to do that. I don't want to get into that hoarding. The essentially, you know, it's like hoarding.

(Jefferson, Male, White, Generation X, G.I. Joe collector)

Several participants referenced a specific behavior to distinguish collectors from hoarders:

I guess there's no denying the OCD factor that I see on some people is that I think it comes down to there's very little in the delineation between collecting and hoarding. Collectors display. Hoarders, just, you know, buy it just to have it.

(Mitchell, Male, White, Gen X, Transformers collector)

This comedian. I think the guy's name is John Hodgman. And he said the difference between or the line between a hoarder and a collector is a display case. So that's so I really like that. That's stuck with me.

(Robby, Male, Asian, Gen X, G.I. Joe collector).

This practice of showcasing their collectibles was one of the more uniform collector practices among those interviewed (N=22) and a significant behavior that will be discussed more below. See Table 22. Both Hoarders and Hardcore collectors were described as relatively indiscriminate with their approach and much less emotionally attached to specific pieces. My participants further reported that Hoarders often buy duplicates of the same figure, vehicle, creature, etc… and are sometimes unaware of how many they have or care that someone else could be enjoying them.

As discussed already, the collectors interviewed see themselves as more purposeful with their acquisitions than some hardcore collectors, and especially hoarders who indiscriminately accumulate objects. Perhaps the most common type of collector among toyetic media fans encountered prior to official study and during these interview was the *Completist*.

Completists. Completionism can be both a specific approach to collecting, and a mentality illustrated by goal-oriented collectors who seek out a predetermined and a finite set of collectibles that can be obtained:

> *Just in terms of like my personality. I've always been a little bit of a completist. And this goes into, like, doing my work, you know, sort of like a mathematician. You've got to get every step down. So, there's a certain level of completeness that you have to do. […] I can get this from 1982 down to 1986. Complete everything. And all I have to do is just five little things and then suddenly it's a set you.*

(Jefferson, Male, White, Generation X, G.I. Joe collector)

Collectors like Jefferson, and Amy openly embrace this *Completist* persona:

> *I've always had an affinity for collecting things. So, when I was a little kid, if I if there was a group of toys that came out and they came with a check list, I would want to fill out that checklist item. I would be really big into the little pet shops as a kid. I don't like I have very many of them anymore, but I had so many as a child and I loved that they came with little lists and I just I could check off all the boxes.*

(Amy, Female, White, Gen Z, Rainbow Brite collector)

Clark, a Baby Boomer *Star Wars* collector suggested that Completists are a more serious type

of collector that may start out as more casual collectors:

> *I think the serious collector is a Completist. You know? They got to have, you know, every, every piece. I don't I don't think I've met a casual collector that says, well, you know, I like these two or three pieces and I'm just going to get 'cause I think they're cool. I think most of the collectors that […] I've run into are serious collectors … [but] … I think it's a progression because I know for me, you know, I bought a couple figures again. I mean, you first you flip the back of the card [action figure packaging card back] ... Ah, they got that, and that... Great marketing.*

Amy and Clark's responses also highlight the practice of check-listing or using predefined

checklists to track completion progress and mark the end point of a collection. Check-listing

is a technique vintage toy collectors learned as children from toy producer catalogs,

Christmas wish-books from department stores like Sears, and the back of toy packaging that

featured convenient lists of other available toys. Collectors also create their own lists, some

of which are intricate html web pages or Microsoft Excel sheets. Fans like Jason, a Gen X

Star Wars collector who primarily only collects toys of one obscure character use these lists

when toy hunting:

> *I run into a lot of people that are very similar to me that just say, I'm looking for these specific figures, like I go to those conventions with a list, like these are the things I need for the Falcon are these are the things that I need. I need to get the training ball, you know. But I do the same with comics. When I go to comic conventions, like I have a list of things I'm looking for.*

Today, there are also a variety of highly detailed collector guides with production histories,

identification tips, pricing estimates, and reference photos for most of the popular toylines.

The authors of these works, like Mark Bellomo who has created multi-editioned guides for

Star Wars, *G.I. Joe*, and *Transformers*, have achieved celebrity status within certain toy collector

communities. Completionism also appears to be a spectrum to some extent with varying

degrees:

> *The lady who runs the Rainbow Brite Museum collects everything, Rainbow Brite, so she's got Rainbow Bright bedsheets and all the toys that came out. And like Tupperware and lunchboxes and all kinds of stuff that came out. I personally don't feel the need to collect that much. I just want*

the dolls. So, I'm like, I'm a complete collector to a point…I do not need every single different sticker sheet that came out.

(Amy, Female, White, Gen Z, Rainbow Brite collector)

Peter, a Gen X, Kenner *M.A.S.K.* collector from the U.K., described the emotional appeal of completing a collection:

But then also the fun of finally receiving it. And then opening it. And sort of kind of slotting it in the space, you saved for it when they're all lined up. You know, that's it's a really nice feeling. There is a feeling sort of completion you know, and I suppose that that feeling of completion you know I suppose the feeling of completion […] is something I've kind of enjoyed because M.A.S.K. is pretty much full for me.

The *Completist* or "completist" is a well-established collector type and a seemingly intuitive goal of collection. There seemed to be an almost natural compulsion for some collectors to want every toy to complete a set. Some collectors may also pursue completion because complete collections are financially worth more than incomplete collections. Although, both Hardcore and Completist collectors were discussed with respect, and perhaps a bit of envy, there was a clear disdain for Hoarders. Like Hoarders, *Flippers*, were another unpopular collector type that my interviewees recognized as part of the collector ecosystem.

Flippers. Monetary worth was frequently discussed during interviews but downplayed as a primary motivator for the toy collectors that participated in this study. However, there was one specific financially motivated collector type that almost all participants were keenly aware of. *Flippers*, or resellers, are individuals who collect and participate within the toy collector community to make money. The flipper seems to be present in all collector communities and seen as a necessary evil to obtain harder to find collectibles or if something is needed quickly. Thus, their presence is accepted but often criticized:

Flipper's, which are people who will buy two of everything. And then maybe even three and sell most of them. And, you know, they keep the occasional thing that they like themselves, but they see it as a means to an end. And there are way easier ways to make a whole lot more money.

(Lyle, Male, White, Gen X, Star Wars collector)

Some people are… and not an insignificant number of people that are trying to basically flip things for money, which God bless you, if you can turn a profit on this. But I would not want to bank my livelihood or my family's home on trying to flip plastic.

(Jefferson, Male, White, Generation X, G.I. Joe collector)

Some interviewees, especially those who feel connected to their collector communities

regarded *Flippers* or flipping somewhat negatively:

I've met ones that do it strictly for financial buy and flip buy and flip buy and flip. […] There always seems to be a little bit of oh, here comes so and so once again, you know, he obviously he/she/it/they have obviously went and bought cleaned out Toys R Us again and left the rest of us nothing. So, there is usually a little bit of that and there's occasionally some bitter and hard feelings, but it's usually pretty good and it's usually a case of the usual suspects.

(Sharon, Female, White, Gen X, Transformers)

Some communities tolerate or accept flipping more positively than others:

Like, you can't just be, I'm just here to sell stuff because you'll kind of get shunned by the [My Little Pony] community… [But]… if you're the He-Man community and you're just selling, you're perfectly okay. But in the Pony community. If you're just selling it, you're not going to make a lot of friends and you're not going to sell a lot of stuff.

(Tom, Male, White, Millennial, My Little Pony collector)

A few interviewees admitted to flipping themselves but were quick to qualify their actions:

I have [flipped before…]. I don't like everything [and] anything I've bought specifically for me, like I would say, you know, what's the intention to keep it forever? But as you, as you shop at like, you know these like toy fairs and all this other stuff, like every now and then I've seen something where I know that it's hugely valuable and like this guy has it way underpriced and yeah, I bought it and then put it on eBay and, you know, turned it for a small profit and probably have done that like less than ten times.

(Justice, Male, Asian, Gen X, Star Wars collector)

Most of my selling is to […] I don't really do it a lot. But I, if I, I'll, either sell it, if I'm gonna sell it, I sell it to friends, most friends. [or] Just give it to them. I have no problem. Just like oh you're my good friend. You'll enjoy this more. So, I just give them.

(Rich, Male, Asian Gen X, Transformers collector)

One subject, Mark, a Gen-Xer fan of the original *Transformers* property, and current collector of *The Transformers: Masterpiece* toys, a high-end G1-based collector-focused toyline with advanced engineering, reported being somewhat of reformed, albeit nostalgic, *Flipper*:

> *Initially when I went in, it was [more about profit]. Let me recapture something that was kind of nostalgic in my youth. It turned into, hey, other people want to do this. Maybe I can buy an extra one or two and, you know, sell it to them and put it on eBay and things like that. And then after a while, I just got really tired. That's the thing. It became very consuming. And I just got very tired of the search and the purchase and the spending. And so, it's a kind of came back full circle to let me just get the pieces that really bring me joy.*

Mark's response illustrates that at least some, and probably a significant portion of *Flippers*, are also fans to some extent of the toys and toyetic media they buy and resell. It's also probable, as Justice noted prior, that many collectors use their *Flipping* to subsidize their fandom.

To summarize, according to the interviewees, *Flippers*, are seen as a begrudgingly and occasionally necessary part of the toy collector ecosystem. Another financially motivated collector type encountered during my interviews was the *Investor*.

Investors. Although most collectors interviewed professed to being more sentimentally motivated, they were all keenly aware and proud of the economic value of their toys. In particular over half of interviewees (N=15) told similar stories about acquiring a prized collectible for less than it was worth, indicating that they value a good deal. It should be noted that this net gain can only be realized if they sell their collectibles, which many of them seemed unwilling to entertain. However, participants recognized that many toy collectors view their collecting as a financial investment:

> *And they [vintage toys] hold their value. So, say if I get to a point where I am financially in dire straits when I'm like 70, these dolls will sell for a lot. They'll be 40 years old in 2023. […] and they already sell for a lot right now. So, imagine 50 years from now… how much these dolls are gonna be worth. So […] you're able to make the excuse, say this is this is something that's worth something.*

> (Amy, Female, White, Gen Z, Rainbow Brite collector)

I think there are people like me that genuinely have them because they love them. But there are also people that are looking at, I mean, they probably love them too, but they are looking at it from a financial perspective and thinking the prices are going up. 'I'm going to buy up what I can and I'm going to hope, I'm going to sit on for 20 years. And then in 20 years, I'm going to I'm going to sell them on my money'.

As with most things, the monetary worth of vintage toys depends on several factors including scarcity, desirability, and condition. The latter criterion is at the heart of a key marker for a subtype of collector that came up during interviews:

You know, I think that there are a couple of different groups [of collectors] I would point to. So, I mean, there's definitely like me. I would say loose collector, you know, I don't want the box and everything and happy to put my hands on it you know move the joints around a few times before I put it on display and then, of course, you know all we're talking about, the mint-in-box collectors.

(Justice, Male, Asian, Gen X, Star Wars collector)

Mint-in-Box (MIB) is a term commonly used to describe both the condition of a collectible for sale and the preference of some collectors for toys that are still factory sealed, primarily to retain maximum monetary worth. As vintage toys are long out of production, there is a finite amount of them in existence, still in "new" condition, thus they are worth the most in the collector market.

Investors' motives might not be entirely financially driven however, despite that being a central facet of their collecting experience:

So, it's almost like a secret investment in something that you have love and enjoyment out of rather than investing in something you potentially can't see.

(Percy, Male, White, Generation X Star Wars collector, U.K.)

Conversation further revealed that Mint-in-Box collectors may also be concerned with slowing the degradation of the plastic they so cherish and preserving a significant moment in time. While boxed toys cannot be played with, they can be displayed in a manner replicating the toy aisles fans nostalgically recall:

I remember you go to like, you know, stores like, you know, your Wal-Mart's are up here. We [Canadians] have like Zeller's and whatever. And there are like aisles and aisles. There are just

one whole aisles, Transformers and on the other side … GI Joe. And the next one was He-Man. And then that just doesn't exist anymore.

(Mitchell, Male, White, Gen X, Transformers collector)

Although it's not impossible that a savvy entrepreneur would be capitalizing off this trend in vintage toy popularity, it's more likely that *Flippers* also feel some connection to these toyetic properties:

I think there are people like me that genuinely have them because they love them. But there are also people that are looking at a I mean, they probably love them, too, but they are looking at it from a financial perspective and thinking the prices are going up. I'm going to buy up what I can and I'm going to hope I'm going to settle in for 20 years. And then in 20 years, I'm going to I'm going to sell them on my money. Now, if my M.A.S.K. collection ends up being my daughter's college fund, then great. But I have no intention of ever selling them.

(Percy, Generation X, Star Wars collector)

There is certainly money to be made from investing in vintage toys, however collectors like Matthias, a Gen X, *Jem and the Holograms* doll collector are realistic about this type of investment:

It's only going to increase so much in value. It's not an investment like a retirement fund or anything like that, even though [they] can help add to that. Like, when I finally die, you can probably sell my [collection] for, you know, a good chunk of change. And that'll help with that. Not better than having a savings account to pay for the funeral [though]. And I think that a lot of collectors sometimes forget that it's what it's worth to you, not what you think it be worth to somebody else.

Investors are a well-known collector type and generally those individuals who prefer keeping their toys in their original boxes are doing so to maximize their monetary value. However, the majority of interview participants considered themselves, primarily Out-of-Box collectors.

As you might have guessed, Out-of-Box or "Loose" refers to toys that have been removed from their original packaging worth less money but can touched and displayed more easily. Loose collectors are still concerned with condition and go to great lengths to find pristine or "minty" specimens. As one interviewee put it, *"I'm not interested in collecting*

boxes" (Jefferson, Generation X, G.I. Joe collector). The distinction between in-box and out-of-box is not merely a preference as it signals a specific collector identity and indicates what they value.

Even though mint-in-box toys are unequivocally worth more money, some collectors prefer loose figures more because they desire a material tactile connection with their toys:

> *So, every single one [Transformers figure] that I have is out of the box. I don't have any... A lot of collectors like to 'in the box' and don't touch it. For me, it's always been, you know, I need to be able to touch it, to see it, to see how it moves, to see how it transforms.*

(Mark, Male, Gen X, Hispanic/Latinx, Transformers collector)

> *I don't like buying new and boxed dolls. I want to have a few eventually. But I like to touch the dolls. And if it's new in the box as a collector, I feel absolutely horrible opening. […] I will probably have a few Mint-in-Box items that will stay on a shelf forever. But they will be in addition to my main collection because I like to be able to handle the dolls. […] Now, finding things and damaged boxes is great because Doll is almost brand new. Yeah. And I can still touch it without feeling guilty.*

(Amy, Female, White, Gen Z, Rainbow Brite collector)

The data suggested that *Investors* are not exclusively Mint-in-Box individuals as Out-of-Box toys or "with opened box" collectibles are also worthy money and can be viewed as financial investments. The true value of a collectible toy to a collector is subjective, but most interviewees cherished their toys for affective reasons more so than their economic ones. Each type of collector just explored reflects a different underlying motivation.

Collector Motivation

Collectors utilize a variety of approaches to collect, and these correspond with the different motivations that drive them. Survey takers were asked to indicate agreement with a variety of statements meant to measure which motivating factors were most significant. Table 27 shows the items related to the nostalgic dimension of collecting, which were also incorporated into the semi-structured interviews as questions.

Table 26. *Nostalgic Motivation Survey Items*

Likert scale Agreement Statements	Mean Score
Sometimes my toys/toy collecting makes me wish I were a kid again	3.60
Collecting toys as an adult reminds me of childhood friends or family	4.03
I mostly collect toys I played with or wanted as a kid	4.04

During analysis, these survey items were combined to create 4 distinct Motivation Scale scores.

Table 27. *Survey Respondent Motivational Scale Scores*

Motivational Dimensions Measure	Mean Score
Economic Motivation	3.43
Completist Motivation	3.05
Social Motivation	3.18
Nostalgia Motivation	3.89

As shown in Table 28 above, Nostalgia was the highest motivating factor for the toy collectors surveyed and subsequently became a focus of my interviews.

Nostalgia

Most interviewees (92%) also credited nostalgia as the primary motivator for either their own desire to collect toys they played with as kids or the impetus for other collectors:

I think it's partially the nostalgia factor [reason people collect]. *I mean, you know, it's really fun when you get something from your childhood that you remember having. And just watching it kind of fell apart. Get lost in things like that. And then having it back in your life again.*

(Tom, Male, White, Millennial, My Little Pony)

I think it's just something that's we were familiar with as we were kids and now that we're older, like we want to have, you know, that that that connection with that thing again. And if it's a, you know, a little childish, I think we're still all okay with it. I like that.

(Justice, Male, Asian, Gen X, Star Wars)

A common story, retold by multiple interviewees was having a beloved toy collection as children and at some point, those toys were sold in a yard sale, given away voluntarily or by their parents, lost, stolen, or just forgotten and put away. For most of the collectors interviewed, this was a driving force behind their desire to start collecting as young adults:

> *A lot of kids I know have the story. But at some point, my mom just got rid of all my toys and it really impacted me. Huge. You know, I had a decent collection of all those He-Man G.I. Joe for whatever reason, I never got in the Star Wars but had a couple of toys. […] And I had a decent collection of handheld games [and] one summer, all that stuff just went away, and I just like, you know, that kind of shit just leaves a hole in your head. And I'm well aware that I've been spending my whole life like filling that hole.*

(Rich, Male, Asian Gen X, Transformers collector)

An interesting sidenote to this narrative was the common age at which participants started collecting intentionally, opposed to merely acquiring toys for the purpose of play. Previously reported data from the survey showed that among 806 participants, the average age they started collecting was about 16 years old. See Table 12. Similarly, most interviewees said that after a period of time away from their toys, they got into collecting toys in their mid-teens.

> *And you know, by that time I'm, I'm no longer playing with these things* [action figure]. [...] *I had actually, as a teenager, you know, switched from being a person who was collecting toys to play with, and I actually recognized them as objects of interest to collect. So, I was curating and actually doing things. […] Like fourteen. Fifteen. [years old] I mean so. Yeah, I know because I was doing other things. I had sports to do, I had other things, but it was still you know, this is interesting. This is something I'm willing to spend my grass cutting money on there.*

(Timothy, Male, White, Baby Boomer, G.I. Joe collector)

There were several dimensions to collector nostalgia that emerged (Table 29 below).

Table 28. *Nostalgic Motivation Coding Results*

Nostalgia Code/Them	Interviewees Referenced	Individual References
General Nostalgia Reference	23	38
Recollecting Toys From Childhood	16	33
Feeling like a kid again	4	5
Holding Onto Childhood	4	4
Recapturing Childhood Experiences	2	3
Totals	49	83

Most collectors desired the toys they had or wanted as children. Only a few participants

collected toys they never played with as children. These individuals were older Baby

Boomers who were in their teens or early adulthood when the toylines they collect were first

produced and marketed through toyetic media. They had clear memories of them but were a

bit too old to "play" with them.

> *I think it is much more nostalgia driven for* [younger collectors] *because they played with them* [toys]. *They were out there taking boxes full* [of toys] *to their friends house and playing with them. They may have grown up with the toys and played with and played hard and destroyed some of them. Now they're going back to capture that nostalgia. And now that they're older and they have a little bit more disposable income to go back and recapture that.*

> (Timothy, Male, White, Baby Boomer, G.I. Joe collector)

For most interviewees, the toys they collect are the same type they played with or desired as

kids.

> *Well, I know why I'm collecting it's, because it just brings back that little piece of childhood like something, I really liked that I lost for a while, that I didn't even realize I could get back. And now I have it back. Like, I just want more.*

> (Tori, Female, White, Gen X, My Little Pony)

> *There's just desire, desire to get it* [toys] *and maybe just sort of I don't know reliving my childhood experience* […] *I think we all kind of want to capture something that we had back then for interest, like, you know. I don't think most people want to relive it, like, actually go back in time.*

(Brent, Male, Black, Gen X, Transformers)

So, you know, if I find myself in a like a second hand or a thrift store or something like that, and I come across something that either I played with as a kid or something that I had wanted as a kid. Those are the things that I'm collecting. It's not one line [toyline] per say. More than another. So, if I'm at a store and I see a Gen One [first generation] Transformer and I'm like, oh, that's great. You know, they're not selling it for an arm and a leg. That would be something that I would be interested in purchasing. Then a brand-new Transformer, because that was the one, I used to play with.

(Matthias, Gender-Other, White, Gen X, Jem and the Holograms)

Several collectors suggested that the popularity of collecting childhood toys has a deeper meaning and may be a reaction to the stresses and uncertainties of modern adulthood:

Well, it's a scarier world we're growing up in. A lot of us just really wish for the days when we didn't have to worry about mortgage payments and Covid disease […] It's so hard to slow down. And I think that collecting those things for a lot of adults is helping them slow down or remember a slower time period when it wasn't so difficult to just, you know, enjoy things.

(Matthias, Gender-Other, White, Gen X, Jem and the Holograms)

And I think where, you know, you might be in a situation where your life is probably got a little bit crazier than you thought. Or you're less in control than you were any number of reasons you might have a family or know a mortgage or whatever, you know, life situations when you're younger as well. And I think it [collecting vintage toys] allows you to sort of […] hold on to an element of life where you're in complete control of it so that it may or may not help you.

(Peter, Male, White, Gen X, M.A.S.K.)

In addition to their escapist potential, both the possession of and interaction with vintage toys triggers a restorative form of nostalgia for some collectors, allowing them to feel like children again:

[My toys represent] going back to a simpler time when, you know, you didn't have to worry about a lot of adult things and a lot of that, you know, when you're sitting there with a toy, you're 10 again, you know, and you don't think by much, you know, they've [toys] been there on the TV (cartoons or commercial)]. They're on, you know, sometimes I'll be in my living room. I'm just messing with a toy, Star Wars on the tv. You know, I've got a bag of chips and I'm 10 again.

(Rich, Male, Asian Gen X, Transformers collector)

The nostalgic tendencies of consumers are not lost on producers and marketers. At least some of the nostalgic feelings driving vintage toy collectors are externally stimulated. Many

of the toyetic properties like *Star Wars, Transformers*, and *My Little Pony* have never truly gone away as new toys have continually been produced along with corresponding new media narratives. However, in recent years producers like Hasbro have revived several "retro" or "classics" lines that are not only stylistically inspired by their 70s and 80s forebearers, but new toys produced using the original molds and packaging design (Figure 7 below).

Figure 7. *Vintage and Newly Released Retro Figure Comparison*

These new-old toys are used to mark significant anniversaries and trigger nostalgia in adults who played with these toys as kids, but not have the discretionary income and parent-free independence to collect them. Tori, a Gen X, *My Little Pony* (MLP) collector recounts how this strategic commodification of nostalgia got her back into collecting as an adult:

> *You grow up. You go to college, you know, stuff [original toys] sits in the attic and eventually it just ends up somewhere else. So then […] I think it's 2008. My Little Pony had a big twenty fifth anniversary. And I had a couple of kids at the time and I'm at the toy store. And I saw the anniversary stuff* (Figure 8 below) *and the nostalgia just hit me! I'm like, I loved these. But of course, the childhood collection is gone. […] So, I thought, oh, these are pretty moderately priced. Let me buy a couple. And then they're not the same as the originals. So then, you know, you're like, oh, I really wish I had the originals. And you start kind of checking around. And I discovered eBay and it's like, oh my gosh. Like this is all the stuff I had. […].*

Figure 8. *My Little Pony 25th Anniversary Rerelease (2007)*

The internet's role in connecting collectors with one another was cited by most interviewees. Specifically, eBay was credited as place that exposed nostalgic adults to long lost or desired toys and a connected them to collector communities, as Tori continued to explain:

> *This is like pre-2010. Facebook wasn't really as big as it is now and everything. So, the pony community […] They'll talk about the Arena, the Trading Post, the Dream Valley website [online MLP collector hubs]. […] So, they all run these different forums where collectors just talk and share things. […] And it was I was just sucked in. That sucked me in. What started as I want to replace, like, I don't know, a dozen things that I had in childhood then became this whole world of stuff that I didn't even know existed.*

This finding is consistent with other research showing how online environments like eBay can change the nature of collecting as was the case with doll collecting in the United States, circa 1996 (Miller, 2005; Heljakka et al., 2018). Sometime in the late 90s and early 2000s, these collectors migrated from eBay to toy specific forums, and eventually Facebook groups and YouTube Channels. These fannish enclaves provided collectors with spaces to celebrate, commemorate, and communicate their passion for toys and the toyetic media systems that spawned them.

Toyetic Transmedia

As argued previously, a unique form of synergistic transmedia emerged between the late 1970s and early 1980s with the express purpose to sell toys. Data from the open-ended

survey questions and interviewee responses corroborated the significance of these

transmedia systems to collectors, particularly the intertextual webs of cartoons, comic books,

and animated films. Survey respondents were asked what, if any, media influenced or

informed their desire to collect the toys. Roughly 94% of those surveyed (N=754) affirmed

that some form of media played a role in their current love of toys. Over 50%, (N=409)

referenced cartoons or animation, nearly 30% (N=348) noted feature films in theaters or tv

specials, and almost 25% (N=230) cited comic books influential factors in their need to

possess the toys as children and continue collecting them as adults. Additionally, the

collectors interviewed largely, confirmed this as Table 30 below illustrates.

Table 29. *Toyetic Media References During Interviews*

Media Referenced	#of Interviewees that Referenced	Individual References
Animation-Cartoons	22	75
Film	15	30
Comic Books	13	19
Music & Misc. Media	9	13
Storytelling-Narrative	5	8
Advertisements-Commercials	5	7
Books-Novels	3	5
VHS	2	2
Packaging	1	1
Video Games	1	1
Poster	1	1
Total	25	164

All 25 interviewees referenced toyetic media during our conversations and 88% (N = 22)

credited cartoons specifically for their initial interest in toys. Additionally, 9 of these

collectors noted Saturday Morning Cartoons as a significant experience connected to their

favorite toylines. Out of all the media noted by survey takers and those interviewed, cartoons

resonated the strongest across the board.

Toyetic Toons

Animated television programs were the lynch pins of toyetic media in the 1980. They were most significant to Gen Xers and older Millennials, many of whom were the prime age for the toyetic transmedia systems of the 1980s and 1990s. Individuals like as Rich, a member of Generation X, and longtime *Transformers* collector explains:

> *You know, I was the right age. I was nine, 10 when G.I. Joe, Transformers, and all, you know, all those 80s action shows, which, as you know [...] they're all just glorified commercials. But it worked. And again, we didn't see them like that.*

Although designed for a younger audience, cartoons appeal crossed generational lines as well as other demographic categories. Given the far reach over broadcast airwaves in era of three major networks, animated television was often the first point of entry into toyetic transmedia systems for young, would-be collectors as, Jade, a younger Gen Z *Transformers* collector articulated:

> *The cartoon was what originally drew me in. As far as like the actual story and the origin and like besides them just being toys, the cartoon is what really pulled me [in].*

Brent, a 47-year-old male fan of the first-generation or "G1," *Transformers*, similarly described how the cartoons powerful audiovisual storytelling capability inspired his desire to have the toys:

> *What has drawn me into Transformers or any of the things that I like. It really was visual. It was the artwork. It was the animation. Again, because I ... I've always been into the cartoons and [...] it was the awesome animation and the awesome sort of effects that were present. I think that was the number one, like the Transformers commercial had the great animation. The show itself. I like the animation. Thundercats, He-man. It had all the great animation.*

According to collectors the appeal of 80s cartoons lied in the easily understood story structure, compelling characters, and unique animation style, as Trisha, a Millennial *Masters of the Universe* collector stated:

> *But I think the thing that I appreciated the most [...] is how they were animated and how they were drawn. And they don't. I mean, [modern] cartoons are. They're not as lifelike and articulated the*

> *way that they [80s cartoons] were. I mean, where he [main character] transitions from Adam to He-Man and all the little swirlies and stuff like that [special effects]. Or is it just like the way […] they walked; they they ran. I thought was cool. I mean, the cat was the same way, Thundercats is animated brilliantly.*

What Trisha, and others, referenced was the qualitative shift away from hand-drawn frame-by-frame celluloid animation techniques to more computer-based digital animation. The former method had its flaws but was also an aesthetic hallmark of the much beloved toyetic cartoons that inspired collectors' love of toys.

From a marketer's perspective cartoons were effective vehicles for creating story universes that operated as 30-minute commercials for their products. Each episode was an opportunity to introduce new characters, creatures, and vehicles, which just happened to be available in miniaturized plastic form on store shelves. For young consumers, cartoons imbued the toys with essential characterization elements that made the overall toy experience memorable. As Timothy a well-known Baby Boomer *G.I. Joe* collecto*r* put it:

> *I mean, they were they were silly [the cartoons]. They were goofy. But the main thing for me is they gave the characters they [cartoons] gave the toys a voice. […] the cartoons gave them actual voices. So, even now with like a modern version of Duke …I think as I'm thinking, Michael Bell did the voice so I can still in my head, I can still imagine his voice as being the voice of Duke. Lady Jay's voice, Scarlet's voice, for us all those voices, so it's those actors their voices are those characters.*

One could construe 'voice' here figuratively, but what this collector was referring to is how cartoons provided the toys in children's hands with animus through the voice acting on the heard onscreen. These character voices were part of the narrative hook for consumers and would, apparently, echo in the minds of many collectors for years to come. The voice actors who breathed life into both the 2D characters on screen and their plastic approximations have become cultural heroes for vintage toy collectors, featured at fan conventions and in various documentaries like *The Toys that Made Us*. Mitchell, a Gen Xer and G1 *Transformers* collector explained the importance of these individuals:

I've had the opportunity over the years to meet some of the voice actors. And like I've said to them and sometimes, like one of the reasons why these voices in the show are still lodged in our brains because they did such a good job. Infusing these characters with, like, personality. I mean, the guys, they're they …characters that people dearly love [...] And it's because, you know, those voice actors did such a good job bringing these characters to life.

While cartoons were designed for younger children and beholden to content restrictions from the FCC, comic books were an effective medium to explore more mature subject matter, which appealed to older audience.

Toyetic Comic Books

Comic books were significant to the collectors interviewed (N=13), especially Gen Xers who were teens or young adults when toyetic properties like Transformers and *G.I Joe.: A Real American Hero (ARAH)* launched. For example, Timothy was 19 when *G.I. Joe ARAH* launched in 1982 and appreciated the distinctions between the two toyetic transmedia:

I read the comics and watched the cartoons. I liked the comics a lot more than the cartoons. I've always… in my mind… Comic books helped define the characters because Larry Hama did an exceptional job on the comic. […] Larry Hama helped create personalities for the characters.

Larry Hama was a writer and editor for Marvel Comics who has become a cultural hero for Joe collectors. He is best known as the primary author of the G.I. Joe comic book series which originally ran 155 issues between February 1982 and October 1994 and the creator the iconic ARAH file cards which appeared on the back of action figure and vehicle packaging. These file cards contained biographical sketches for each figure like each Joe's real name and military specialization. Hama himself served in the United States army during Vietnam from 1969 to 1971 and used that experience to inform his comic writing:

I was a fan of the cartoon as well as a kid growing up here, for me, the kind of the canon space is definitely the comic book by Larry Hama. So, you know, Hama himself served in the military a little bit, had a little bit of experience, but he took the property, and he wrote it for an upper teen, early 20s type audience. It was understandably realistic. I think that was one of the things that has kind of driven the loyalty for the property is that we've never dumbed down. […] The narrative in … the comic books, which is really what I would say kept us [G.I. Joe fans] going. For many of us. It was written with a longer-term continuity in mind. So, it wasn't just episodic (like the cartoon), there was actual progression going on either for the characters or for the larger universe as a whole.

(Jefferson, Male, White, Generation X, G.I. Joe collector)

This mature treatment in the comics provided a different storytelling appeal than the

cartoons:

> *Larry Hama treated them* [G.I. Joe characters] *…much more realistically for most and for, you know, for nearly all of the comic book run, so they were. You know, they were toys, but they were also soldiers. And a lot of times he hit some pretty hard stuff. Some hard topics in those comics and I think that's what drove the appeal. Not just for me, but for all kids.*
>
> (Timothy, Baby Boomer, G.I. Joe collector)

The creative freedom of comic books, which weren't as regulated by the federal government,

allowed for more serious content, stronger language, and more realistic violence. The serial

storytelling format also facilitated in-depth characterization and world building:

> *So, in the* [Transformers] *comic books, they treated the characters much more like characters.* […] *The comic books were there to provide slightly more adults story … compared to the cartoon. But it was still there to sell toys. That was the main priority of it.*
>
> (Jade, Male, White, Gen Z, Transformers collector).

> *The G.I. Joe and Transformers comic books] actually had that same quality... Is that the writers that were kind of behind the comics really just said 'Okay, I'm not doing a kid's comic. I'm doing a comic that has kids toys.' They were doing their own story. And Transformers, you know, I'm not saying every issue is a winner, but there is, again, that same element of there's a real universe, it's growing, things are happening. There are consequences.*
>
> (Jefferson, Male, White, Generation X, G.I. Joe collector)

The Holy Trinity for most toyetic transmedia systems in the 1980s was cartoons, comic

books, and the toys themselves. According to a handful of participants though, film was also

important.

The Toyetic Spectacle of Film

For most of the toyetic properties of the 1980s cartoons and comics drove toys sales

in addition to traditional advertising and social pressure. Films or animated movies however

was an influential medium for vintage *Star Wars* collectors:

The very first movie that I ever saw in the theater was Star Wars and you know, being a kid, I think I was maybe seven. […] It just really made a huge impact. Love just loved everything about the movie and then of course, I had to have the toys.

(Bill, Male, Gen X, Jem and the Holograms collector)

Cartoons were not as central to the cultivation of the first generation of *Star Wars* toy collectors. This makes sense given that the first two films in the franchise were developed and released prior to the Reagan era of deregulation lifting FCC restrictions on children's advertising on television. There was a Marvel comic book series that, along with the toys, helped keep fans interested in franchise during the three-year gaps between film releases (1977, 1980, 1983). Between *Star Wars* (1977) and *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) there was also the much maligned and once aired *The Star Wars Holiday Special* on CBS. Although it had an animated segment introducing one of the most popular characters in the franchise, it's impact on young collectors desire to buy the toys seemed neutral. *Star Wars* fans finally got cartoons on television in 1985 (*Droids* and *Ewoks*), coinciding with the release of a new toyline and respective comic book series but by that time *Star Wars* fandom had waned somewhat, and collectors had moved on to other properties or aged out of playing with toys.

 Star Wars' transmedia stories would eventually unfold in comics, radio dramas, novels, video games, and animated television however for the vintage collectors interviewed, the original movies were the master narratives that really sold the toys:

I still remember that opening scene of A New Hope (original Star Wars film), you know, where the Storm Troopers blast open that door and its immediate laser fight like right from the very beginning. And then, you know, in the aftermath, Darth Vader strides in and my mind was blowing up. That was the start of it [fandom]. And then when I figured out that I could have miniature versions of these guys and reenact those stories and create my own stories. I think that was you know, just an easy pathway to make it all happen [collecting].

(Justice, Male, Asian, Gen X, Star Wars collector)

Justice's response echoed those of *Star Wars* collectors who described a clear connection between seeing the films for the first time and their desire to own the toys. While more

central to *Star Wars* collectors, movies also held significance for fans of other toyetic

properties.

Toy collectors credited the cartoons and comic books as the most influential

mediums in their desire to play the toys as kids and collect them as adults. However, movies

also served as special and memorable experiences that further stoked the collector fire for

several franchises. Specifically, *Transformers: The Movie* (1986) was a vehicle (pun unintended)

for introducing new characters and stimulating the fan base in a different ways than the

cartoon:

> *When the 1986 movie came out and you got to see Blaster had his tapes for the first time. Yeah, there was just that… mind blown wow factor. And I think that kind of intrigued me a lot, too, because it was…There was always that, you know, you had these static characters [in the cartoon], and they all do the same thing and then […] here's more here's more features. Here's a new character that we're going to introduce to you. And it's so cool. We do it in the movie. You know, it's kind of, you know, something to top, you know, even the TV show.*
>
> (Mark, Gen X, Hispanic/Latinx, Transformers collector)

*Transformer*s*: The Movie* was released in theaters within The United States and the United

Kingdom and promoted as a major event featuring the voices of well-known actors like

Leonard Nimoy, Casey Kasem, and Robert Stack. As a feature film it had higher budget than

the cartoon series which translated to higher production value, something not lost on young

fans:

> *And of course, the TV show had its own soundtrack [but] it was always a constant, like repetitive, you know, high background things. This [the movie] was really kind of the first time you saw Transformers, you know, well done, well drawn. You know, no mistakes, but also with banging soundtrack. And it was just like, wow, you know it all. All those things, the visual, the audio, the emotional, all that stuff was just so much.*
>
> (Mark, Male, Gen X, Hispanic/Latinx, Transformers collector)

Although a box office failure, the movie was memorable for fans because Hasbro attempted

a product refresh by violently killing off major characters including the most popular

protagonist, something that wasn't possible on network television:

I still remember the theater that I went to go see it at. I still remember going with my mother to see it. I still remember the feeling that I had seeing it. You know, you talk about the death of Optimus Prime. I mean, that was I mean, that was, you know, like a first time as a kid, you deal with death of something that you think is, you know, rock solid. […] And all of a sudden, it's taken from you. It was just like, oh, my gosh. I remember sitting in my seat, like, not crying, but really holding back because you're right. And I remember holding back as my mother was there and I was like, I don't want to cry in front of my mother, you know? But I remember that. I remember very distinctly that feeling of…, you know. It being taken, you know, taken it from me.

(Mark, Male, Gen X, Hispanic/Latinx, Transformers collector)

We can see Mark's vivid recollection that the theatrical experience was visceral enough to stick with them 40-plus years later. The negative reaction by fans to the death of Optimus Prime, along with its and the *My Little Pony: The Movie*'s (1986) poor box office performances, caused Hasbro to scrap the 1987 theatrical release of *G.I. Joe: The Movie* in which they had planned to similarly kill off a lead character. That animated film would eventually be shown as a multi-part mini-series on television. Feature-length films were made for other properties like *Masters of the Universe, Rainbow Brite, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles,* and *Care Bears,* with the hopes of attracting new consumers, exciting the fan base, and bolstering toy sales. These films varied in effectiveness of those goals and popular reception but didn't broadly impact the interviewee's interest in the toys.

The cumulative effect of the cartoons, comic books, and films was the world building which facilitated their play as children and their strong connection to the franchises as adults:

Every one of my group, you know, we all played Star Wars and we had gotten through two years passed Empire Strikes Back. By the time G.I. Joe came around, so we were kind of already in this play mode of we had a larger narrative universe to play with. And I think that's one of the things that particularly for many of the toys of the 80s that are still talked about and kind of collected, those are the ones that had narrative universes that the [kids] could play in. Or, you know, narrative alone wasn't always important. So, one of the kind of conversations some people talk about is like the Indiana Jones and Raiders of the Lost Ark toys. They were very nice toys. But did the movie kind of didn't have a universe around it. Star Wars or G.I. Joe. You can do [emulative play] what you saw in, say, the cartoon or in the movie, but then you could take that imagination and run it elsewhere.

(Jefferson, Male, White, Generation X, G.I. Joe collector)

For those interviewed, the most significant node in the toyetic transmedia systems they've dedicated their time, money, and emotional energy was the toys themselves.

Toys as Transmediums

Each medium within a transmedia network adds something meaningful, and ideally unique, to the overall storytelling experience, helping the audience understand the master narrative in a new way. For instance, a video game offers a much more interactive experience than a film or cartoon. Similarly, According to my interviewees, toys primary contributions to the storytelling experience as children was providing a tangible link to their favorite narrative universes and enabling a tactile play experience:

> *I can only speak for myself, but I think that's where a lot of my attachment came from. Being able to actually handle and play and interact with without having to keep it in a box and 'oh, be careful. Oh, it's fragile'.*
>
> (Tori, Female, White, Gen X, My Little Pony)

> *And it [his toy fandom] probably started with my connection to the show (Gargoyles) and wanting that stuff and trying to have like a physical connection to these characters that are intangible. […] I think it was like yeah like look these physical things, we can have those? […] I feel like figures […] I like having that tangible connection to these characters that you'll never be able to meet in real life.*
>
> (Lyle, Male, White, Gen X, Gargoyles/Star Wars collector)

Often an afterthought, the material affordances of each toyline enabled different styles of play ideally consistent with of the narratives and characters young players saw on screen or page. When it came to action figures based on transmedia characters, size, scale, and articulation were key to their collectability and popularity:

> *I would say, […] the [smaller] size [of Star Wars figures] was ingenious because I think some of my other toys were so big at the time. And I think in a way that was cool to some extent, you know, [but it] made it difficult to play with in other ways. [Because of the smaller size of the figures, Kenner was] able to build like ships and other stuff and play playsets. And the playsets I think were just really great where you could, like, reenact, you know, the Han Solo-Greedo scene [famous scene from Star Wars] or whatever. So, I think, you know, the size was easy for us to capture the imagination and allow you know, we had our little superhero, like in front of us now. We were kind of controlling, you know, what was happening. And I think that was a lot of fun.*

(Justice, Male, Asian, Gen X, Star Wars)

As explored already, Kenner designed *Star Wars* action figures significantly smaller than previous action figure toylines meaning the toys could be produced more cheaply, in greater variety, and sold more affordably. The miniaturization also enabled the figures to fit within a variety of spaceships, and playsets sold at a higher price point. Kenner further deviated from industry norms by producing figures, primarily with molded clothing, instead of a single figure, like the original 12" G.I. Joe, with multiple outfits suitable for different applications. Competitors like Hasbro saw the success of this strategy and subsequently made their *G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero* action figures the same size, although with more points of articulation which translated to more intricate play.

> *The size of the figures [influenced the collectability of G.I. Joe]. One hundred percent. One hundred percent. And I can now that I'm older, I get it because it's like, you know, they wanted to make the vehicles, you know, like M.A.S.K. was like, amazing. The figures are smaller, but the vehicles, you know, were, I don't know, more affordable or just there were just cool. […] And the articulation on was so good that, like, it blew Star Wars out of the water. You know, Star Wars was like five points of articulation. Even He-Man was like kind of like five points. This is like I haven't even counted, but it's like so many so much possibility and playability that, like, they were good.*
>
> (Robby, Male, Asian, Gen X, G.I. Joe collector).

> *Well, so you could pose the figures in different ways, and particularly if you were lucky enough to pick up some battle stands, you know, which are these flat plates with a with a foot peg. So, you put the figure down and it would be able to kind of position itself. But even without that, you know, if you took it outside, you had rocks laid out for like a fort or something you could work with. That articulation helped you a lot more than what you could do as a Star Wars. Even though it's in your Star Wars was amazing to have to go through at the time. That was you could tell this was a little bit better. Each of the figures had customized equipment for the most part, as opposed to, say, Star Wars. They were very consistent molds in Star Wars that every figure had either a Han Solo blaster or had kind of Storm Trooper thing. […] [With G.I. Joe] you've got the customization.*
>
> (Jefferson, Male, White, Generation X, G.I. Joe collector)

In addition to specialized design, the glut of toylines in the 1980s necessitated that toy producers like Mattel differentiated themselves by offering a unique play mechanic.

> *They're cool looking action figures, I guess. I mean, I'm looking at them now. It's how genius. […] I mean, the battle damage thing [play gimmick] that was a cool idea. The Thunder Punch He-Man*

that had a little cap gun thing. I mean [...] they were clever. I mean, a cap gun. I mean, who would think of that? I mean, clever ways of making them more interactive.

(Trisha, Millennial, Masters of the Universe collector)

Here, Trisha described two of the more popular play gimmicks created for Mattel's *Masters of the Universe* action figure line. "Battle Armor He-Man" was a figure variant of the titular character featuring special chest plate that spun to indicate 3 different levels of battle scarring. Similarly, "Thunder Punch He-Man" allowed players to insert a classic cap gun blasting cap ring into his backpack, twist the waist back, and release to see the figure spring forward with a loud bang sound.

Mechanical or magical transformation was a prominent theme and handy plot device present in many of the cartoons in the 1980s coinciding with a popular toy concept used in action figure lines. For example, the *Transformers* toyline was premised on a complex puzzle-solving, form changing gimmick that appealed to the young would-be collectors like Mark:

I think the complexity of the [Transformers] toys (appealed to him). I think the fact that they are, I mean, they're character driven and they're characters (sentient and anthropomorphic), but then they're also, you know, an alternate shape and an alternate form (vehicles or weapons). [...] I always liked you know, changing them and transforming them and just, you know, they turned into something else that it was almost like, you know, a little puzzle that you had to [solve]. In order to unlock this new feature, you had to understand it and know how to use it. Whereas some of the other lines, you know, the figures are static figures and sure, they do cool stuff. But I mean, you really had to put a lot of thought and effort into, I'm taking this plane and turning it into a figure. I think that kind of is what fascinated me.

(Mark, Male, Gen X, Hispanic/Latinx, Transformers collector)

But the toys, to me, even at a young age, I had a fascination with the puzzle aspect and the engineering of them and to the point where I would. Design my own Transformers and email them to Hasbro. I'm fascinated with Transforming toys in general. So, I love Go-Bots. I love M.A.S.K.

(Rich, Male, Asian Gen X, Transformers collector)

As adult collectors this love of physically manipulation the toy has endured:

Transformers are really interesting because when I mess with the Transformer it's very like... you feel very in control with a figure even though you're not very in control. It's a puzzle you don't usually, especially first, [when you] pick it up, you have no idea what you do, and you still feel very

in control with it. And I think that draws a lot of collectors in as far as like the play aspect and like wanting to play with the figures.

(Jade, Male, White, Gen Z, Transformers collector).

Several collectors felt strongly about this physical connection as it related to their perception

of the true nature of their collectibles:

> *But for me they're toys and they kind of deserve to be handled and played with because that is the that's the fun part. That's why the toys I have, the Transformers and the M.A.S.K. alike, they do something, they're mentally stimulating, you can handle them and they're robust enough that they've lasted 30 years and counting. […] I really enjoy handling them. […] So, for me. Yeah, they will be out there, will be sitting there on the shelf, lined up nicely, parked up. Or you know, I might say […] 'I think they might want to be transformed' so I'll just transform them, display them in attack mode instead.*

(Peter, Male, White, Gen X, M.A.S.K.)

> *But when, you know, for example, kids come over, they're meant to be played with. Toys are meant to be played with. They're not, you know, in a glass case away from the world and I don't want anybody to touch them. No, they're meant to be played with. Please be gentle. They're not young toys. But you know, as long as they're played with nicely, they're meant to be played with.*

(Matthias, Gender-Other, White, Gen X, Jem and the Holograms)

Properties designed for young girls in 80s also designed special affordances, suggesting

certain types of play however many relied on presumed gendered play preferences by

industry experts. For example, *Rainbow Brite*, *Strawberry Shortcake*, and even *Princess of Power*

(She-Ra), Mattel's attempt at creating an action figure line appealing to girls, were designed

around fashion and grooming play. Accessorizing was also a common element popular with

young female collectors:

> *They come with ribbons. And this little fold-out of how to braid their hair. And it was just wonderful and amazing. So, they just came, the individual pony, a comb, a little pamphlet, a sticker and, you know, a ribbon. That's all very simple but... I just loved them and all the different colors. And then later, I want to say it might've been Christmas or another birthday, I got be stable. Which had the tack. And it had like the jumps and the A-frame for the horses and fences. And it was very like 'now I can actually really play with them.' There was another playset that allowed for dress-up because the ponies also had clothes, because horses wear clothes. So, you know, hats and tack and pony shoes and that sort of thing. So that kind of combined I guess the doll aspect.*

(Tori, Female, White, Gen X, My Little Pony)

Toymakers often deployed the "razor-razor blade model" pricing strategy where the main character toys were reasonably priced, and the accessories or playsets were far more expensive. Accessory play was promoted in toys marketed to both sexes, though more prominently featured in toylines for girls. This is one of many strategies brought up by my interviewees confirming the starkly gendered nature of toyetic media systems, which now influences which toylines are collected.

Gendered Toy Collection

The survey data showed that gender was a significant indicator of which toys collectors collected with self-identified males gravitating more toward "boy toys" like *Transformers* and self-identified females and gender non-conforming respondents mainly selecting "girl toys" like *My Little Pony*. This is further evidence of how highly gendered toyetic media was and likely still is. Although, many retailers that sell toys like Walmart and Target have removed their "Boy Toys" and "Girl Toys" signs, gendered segmentation is still clearly a major operation principle. During interviews I tried to gain a better understanding of the role gender played in toy collecting during the semi-structured interviews, but only a few interviewees provided significant insight.

Vintage or first generation *My Little Pony* toys (1982-1992) are typically collected by Gen X and older Millennial women who played with them as young girls. Letting the data speak for itself, 91% of *My Little Pony* collectors identified as female and 94% were Gen Xers or Millennials. Many remember the toyetic transmedia promoting the ponies like the theatrically releases *My Little Pony: The Movie* (1986) and the syndicated cartoon, *My Little Pony* (1986-1987). While this collector community is numerically dominated by women, men are a recognized part of it.

> *There's the whole guy category, of like the collector ponies. They're their own subset. And it's fascinating because a lot of the G1 male collectors obviously didn't really have them as children. They*

maybe had a sister who had some that they played with. But back in that time, you know, it was not something you bought for your son. Maybe until the boy ponies came out and there's like the football pony, the fire truck pony, like, oh, we'll get those for our son. So, I think their passion with My Little Pony is just something that is completely different from the other sets of collectors.

(Tori, Female, White, Gen X, My Little Pony)

There is also a highly visible and well researched contingent of men known as "Bronies" or the singular "Brony" (Brother+Pony), who celebrate and collect ponies, but according to my experience, basic observations of their Facebook Groups, and my interviewees, they largely collect the toys from the modern toyetic reboot *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (2010-) cartoon and express their fandom differently than traditional collectors.

But I at one point got lumped into [labeled a Brony] just because I was a male My Little Pony collector and I was like, yeah, no, I'm not taking that title. I was here before the Bronies existed. So actually, in the old My Little Pony commercials, they talked about being a My Little Pony Mommy and I was just like, well, there's no reason there can't be My Little Pony dad. So, that's the title I took. So, if anybody asks, like, are you a Brony? And I say, no, I'm a My Little Pony dad. Because I don't do, I don't do the costumes.

(Tom, Male, White, Millennial, My Little Pony collector)

Bronies are typically young adult men between 13 and 35 years of age who engage in fan activities like cosplay (constume + play) and the creation of silly, albeit often insightful memes, related to *Friendship is Magic*, a cartoon intended for young girls that challenged hegemonic masculinity. Both Tori and Tom's responses show that there were male-*My Little Pony* collectors separate from the Brony movement that do not share in some of their visible fan practices. There are also of course female fans of *Friendship is Magic* who have sometimes been unwillingly labeled "Bronies" as well because of the strength of the movement. Bronies are often popularly portrayed as a homogeneous group of young gay men celebrating a toyetic property made for young girls however 72% of Bronies surveyed identified as heterosexual (Miller, 2018). As should be evident, there is lot going on within the *My Little Pony* community related to gender, unfortunately I only interviewed three pony collectors, and none seemed interested in dwelling on the topic of gender for too long.

I purposefully sampled several survey respondents whose identified gender contrasted with the presumed demographic of the toyline they collect, thinking they might provide a unique perspective. Matthias a gender non-conforming Gen Xer who collects *Jem and the Holograms* discussed how the demographics of the *Jem* collector are heterogeneous:

> *I'd say there's a really good mix [of men and women that collect Jem dolls]. I'd say that there are a lot of women out there that grew up with it that really enjoyed it. And it was part of their, you know, their childhood. And then they continue to collect, and they enjoy it […] And I think that there's also a good selection of boys, mostly gay. But there are a few straight guys here that just really enjoyed the line for its playability, and they enjoy that.*

According to some participants, the heterogeneity present within some collector communities may indicate that in the early 80s era of national audiences and appointment viewing, toyetic media awareness also transcended gendered and racial boundaries:

> *I mean, you know […] it's like I am aware of Strawberry Shortcake. I'm aware of Barbie as concepts. Never played with any of them, but I at least have some awareness of it as it is a property. […] We went through an era where even if it wasn't your thing, you were aware of it. Sure, there was at least a common language of experience, even if it wasn't their own identical experience.*

(Jefferson, Male, White, Generation X, G.I. Joe collector)

On top of that there were toyetic properties like *Care Bears* and *Popple*s whose plush anthropomorphism appealed to all younger children, regardless of sex. As explored in the literature review, the toyetic transmedia genre's modus operandi was to sell toys and at the time, gendered market segmentation was dominant, and not unfounded approach. Decades later this has impacted several generations of adults who now collect toys using the same logic.

Vintage toylines like *Star Wars, Transformers*, and *My Little Pony* have a somewhat evergreen, transgenerational appeal due to efforts by parents to impart their passion and the continual remediation of these properties by companies like Hasbro. However, as suspected, most vintage toys are collected by individuals who played with them as children or generally remember them as a significant part of their formative years. Additionally, the pervasiveness

of toyetic media systems have granted some of these toys and their associated transmedia narratives cultural significance among members of specific generations.

Generations as Toyetic Media Audiences

The survey results drew a clear connection between which toys respondents collected and their self-selected generation. As addressed already, the majority of survey participants were Gen Xers and Millennials, which were the two generations that had the most exposure to toyetic media systems during their formative years. While these numbers helped support my initial assertions, they could not explain the personal or generational significance of these toys to the individuals who collect them. Accordingly, I made sure to interview a proportional number of Gen Xers and Millennials as well as members of the other generations, who collect toyetic media objects.

One would assume that adults who collect old toys would collect those they were most familiar with. An individual's birth year would then logically influence which toys they had the most knowledge of, given that it is more common and socially acceptable for children to engage with toys. Put simply, one's generation indicates when they were born and their placement along the historical timeline exposed them to some toys and not others. To what extent these adults collect intentionally to communicate their membership in a particular generation or build cultural capital among its members remained to be seen. Thus, this became a major focus of the interviews. Among my interview participants, generational identification was most prominent for members of Generation X, born between 1965-1980:

> *I'm a Gen X kid, you know, grew up in the 80s. I was a teenager in the 90s. You know, I still listen to Nirvana and Pearl Jam and, you know, the hip hop that I grew up with is that hip hop I listen to today. Like I said, I listen a lot of new music. But also, you know, when I … all my comforts are from the 80s and 90s. Yes, I'd identify with that generation.*
>
> (Rich, Male, Asian Gen X, Transformers collector)

Most participants didn't articulate this identification as clearly as Rich, however the importance of the toys they collect as markers of generational identity was evident, and unsurprisingly connected to their social significance during childhood:

> *Yeah, it was* [important to know about toys and toyetic media]. *I mean, as far as like being a kid, it was like it was everything, you know. I mean […] I still remember […] the kid that had the S.H.A.R.C.* [popular G.I. Joe toy vehicle], *you know, the first time I saw a S.H.A.R.C. And it's like, Wow, it's amazing! Or the kid in the sandbox, he brought a Snowcat* [G.I. Joe toy vehicle] *and just playing it with it in the sandbox and stuff. I mean, it was … was everything, toys were everything. It was like the language we used in our social circles and stuff where you wanted to play with certain kids because they had the Joes or play with these kids because they had the Transformers and you know, you knew they had more than you. So, it's like, oh, let me check out these are your toys and maybe we can trade for a little bigger area, you know? I mean, I think it was it was the biggest part. It was everything.*
>
> (Robby, Male, Asian, Gen X, G.I. Joe collector)

The Gen Xer participants were well aware that their love of childhood toys was being encouraged by companies like Hasbro and Mattel:

> *I think it's* [collecting vintage toys] *popular because, the Gen X population is sort of the population taking over. This is the population in charge. And we drive, the markets to some extent, and we're at the age where we are feeling nostalgic for things that are our childhood. So, you know, companies were smart, and they say give the people what they want.*
>
> (Brent, Male, Black, Gen X, Transformers)

They were also cognizant that contemporary toy producers and marketers continue to capitalize off their nostalgically driven fandom that was cultivated nearly 40 years ago:

> *But it* [transmedia marketing of the 1980s] *definitely created a specific generational magic. That means that those franchises can be rebooted over and over again. And everybody who remembers them will continue* [to support them]. *And everybody is also introducing them to new things. So, we've got a new Care Bears right now. They're talking about rebooting both Rainbow Bright and Strawberry Shortcake again, which it wasn't that long ago that they tried to do, you know, before. So, you know, there are new iterations coming out all the time.*
>
> (Matthias, Gender-Other, White, Gen X, Jem and the Holograms)

Today the success of these nostalgic reboots rests largely on the premise that certain generations are established media audiences inclined to continually buy toyetic products, if properly stimulated. Knowledge of the toys and toyetic media narratives was and continues to be an important common reference point for this generation:

I think a lot of kids I knew did know about them [Transformers] *and liked them and whatever. […] I guess, you know, we're like the Gen Xers, kind of the ones who first grew up with this sort of all these toys and the TV shows and whatever. That I think it is all part of a little big part of our kind of collective consciousness. Well, it's a part of our childhoods. It's something that we almost all share […] and to a point it's sort of important to all of us.*

(Mitchell, Male, White, Gen X, Transformers collector)

Jefferson, a Gen X, *G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero* collector further contrasted what he

collects as a Gen Xer with toylines that members of other generations might collect:

Everyone who is interested in a Real American Hero [1982-1994]*, if we want to be very specific about that line, kind of somewhat by definition, they're going to be my age* [48]*. Plus, or minus three years. Or Four. And… by the same token, people that are interested, in Power Rangers, they are going to be a kid who grew up in the 90s. Ninja Turtles. Somebody* [who] *really kind of had their childhood in the 90s.*

The importance placed on knowledge of specific toylines and their related media may have

differed between genders:

I would say definitely any guy [male] *within that window, they're going to know Transformers. They're going to know G.I. Joe. They're going to know He-Man. They're going to know Smurfs. Even if they didn't collect them. They're going to know these things.*

According to participants, while toys from 80s have a general appeal to all Gen Xers,

collector communities are still largely self-segregated along gendered toy-lines.

While members of Generation X lived through certain historical moments, one of

the most significant things that binds them together appears to be common mediated

experiences, like exposure to toyetic media. One such mediated experience has become a

cultural touchstone: Saturday Morning Cartoons.

Saturday Morning Cartoons as a Cultural Touchstone

The significance of animated television has already been established amongst this

population and the pinnacle of this medium was *Saturday Morning Cartoons.*

I think if it goes back to anything for me, it will go back to Saturday morning cartoons. Saturday morning cartoons were a big part of my coming up, and I would automatically wake up maybe 10 minutes before 8:00 every Saturday morning and find one of the open TVs in the house.
(Brent, Male, Black, Gen X, Transformers)

And even TV was limited because cartoons weren't on, like all day, every day. It was like small windows of after school and Saturday mornings. And that's it. And if you missed it, you missed it. You couldn't DVR it. You couldn't Netflix binge it. Cause you know, that was it.
(Tori, Female, White, Gen X, My Little Pony)

Some participants noted that they still regularly watch their beloved cartoons, with one even nostalgically replicating the Saturday Morning experience from their childhood.

I was really excited when I got the animated series on video [Jem and the Holograms]. […] Because for me, my days off are always Saturday mornings. One of the other things, I collect all these cartoons. […] So, we [Matthias and his husband] end up in the morning and I get a cup of coffee and I sit down, and I'll watch my favorite 80s cartoons, which includes Smurfs and Jem and GI Joe and all those, you know, 80s classics that a lot of us from the late 70s, early 80s grew up with her He-Man and the like.

(Matthias, Gender-Other, White, Gen X, Jem and the Holograms)

Although Saturday mornings had been the bastion of children's programming for several decades, the merger of toy and television reached its zenith in the early 1980s, when most of the individuals were the prime age for toyetic tv. The love of toyetic properties has endured and evolved into fandom, started, for many with the common generational experience of watching cartoons on Saturday mornings.

Qualitative Findings Summary

The semi-structured interviews helped me gain a deeper understanding of the quantitative data gleaned from the online survey. Participants elucidated not only which practices are shared among toy collectors, but which ones are most meaningful to them. Adults collect the toys of their youth for a variety of reasons, but the strongest motivator is nostalgia. Furthermore, while my participants were all keenly aware of the financial worth of their collectibles their true value is much more sentimental. Many of the activities that toy collectors engage in are common to other media fandoms. This in in addition to their clear emotional attachment to their toys and associated transmedia narratives originally used to sell them, provides strong evidence of my assertion that vintage toy collection is fandom.

The most challenging part was trying to get interviewees to discuss the significance of toy collecting to their sense of self. It was challenging to get individuals to articulate their thoughts about identity when solicited directly so I made great efforts to engage them in conversations around those topics. In their responses I was able to see that toy collecting is more than a casual activity for these people, although they sometimes framed it that way. This hesitancy in some to admit it's importance in their lives derived from a societal stigma around adult play or social expectations regarding adulthood. Most did however acknowledge that the toys they had or wanted as children now hold a special place in their lives, evident in the amount of time, money, space, and emotional energy they have dedicated to them. These interviews also provided evidence that toyetic media systems have significantly impacted several generations of adults who were exposed to them during their formative years. Toyetic media is common symbolic experience that links many members of the Gen X and Millennial generations together, further supporting assertions about the cultural construction of contemporary generations as media audiences.

DISCUSSION

There were many interesting findings in this study. The following will focus primarily on the qualitative data that supports results from the survey and the most prominent themes that directly tie to the original aims of the study. At times, data from the survey will also be highlighted to help contextualize the emergent information from the interviews. First, I will address to what extent toy collector view their practices as fandom. Second, I will describe the primary types of toy collectors I encountered and what motivates collectors. Third, I will share the results relate to the influence of toyetic media systems. Lastly, I will tackle the relationship between vintage toy collection and generations as media audiences.

Who would collect old toys?

An inherent question baked into this project, although not explicitly stated as a research question, was who exactly are these individuals collecting vintage toys from their childhood? Media portrayals of pop culture artifact collectors began popping up in the 20th century generally alongside specific fandoms for artists like Elvis Presley, the Beatles, or science fiction franchises like *Star Trek*. These were perceived differently from more socially acceptable types of collectors in society like fine art or antique collectors, which exhibit (pun intended) most of the same idiosyncrasies criticized in those who collect "low art." Adult toy collectors have been somewhat consistently characterized in as lonely single Caucasian men, living in their parents' basements, despite being middle aged. As illustrated in the previous section, the online survey data did support the notion of toy collection as an activity mostly undertaken by white males, discussed in more depth. Although I did not ask my participants where they lived, 77% indicated that they were in some type of committed relationship, contradicting popular media portrayals of collectors as lonely singles. Furthermore, over half of survey respondents reported attainment of some post-secondary degree (58%) which did

not appear to influence their toy collection statistically speaking but could indicate a certain degree of success or income level which likely would influence the ability to pursue their passion. That, however, did not seem to warrant further exploration during interviews. I selected a semi-representative, loosely randomized sample of survey respondents to interview based first on the most popular toylines collected, the most prominent generations, and a mix of other demographic considerations like gender and race. My interviewees were primarily males, between 25 and 56 years of age, in committed relationships, with above average educational attainment. I did intentionally over sample women, gender non-conformers, and non-white individuals to better ensure a diversity of perspectives. Generational identity was a major focus of this research, thus that was the most salient of demographic category to be addressed during interviews, though gender and race also proved interesting, each in their own way, and will be discussed first.

Gendered Toy Aisles to Gendered Collectors

On the surface, the stereotype-confirming overrepresentation of male toy collectors in this research study was likely due to two factors. The first is simply that I intentionally recruited participants from collector groups dedicated to the most popular toys of all time, over half of which were action figure lines marketed specifically to boys in the 70s', 80s', and 90s.' The second possible reason for participants' heavy male skew, discussed previously in the Recruitment section, is that despite my best efforts to solicit participation from groups more likely to appeal to women, membership in groups focused on the so called "girl toys" was dwarfed by the number of members in groups dedicated to "boy toys."

Regarding interview participation which I had control over, self-identified females seemed less willing to be interviewed either opting not to on the survey or not responding to solicitations for participation. I asked my female participants about this, and several said that

collecting toys definitely feels more like a "guy thing" and they often feel a little self-conscious about making their collecting practices known. Not enough to stop doing it but sufficiently uncomfortable to be more private with it. I really wanted to speak to women who were *Star Wars* fans as it has been since its inception been perceived and observed as a male dominated fandom. Only 1 self-identified female selected *Star Wars* as their top collected toyline. A handful more put it down as their second or third most collected thing but out of the whole list only one, Bailey, responded back. Her take was that there are a lot of female *Star Wars* fans, but they are likely more into expressing through other means:

> *I feel like there's a lot more Star Wars collectors, a lot more Star Wars fans that are women than people realize. […] I think, like, a lot of them do more cosplay* (costume + play) *stuff. If you're looking to like the 501ˢᵗ* (specific Star Wars fan community that engages in cosplay) *and different cosplay, I guess options. Tons of them are women that are doing the cosplay and what not. So, I don't know that necessarily they're collecting as many action figures, especially because they may be more interested in, like, the costume and part portion or something. But I think there are tons of female Star Wars collectors. […] But … they're* (girls/women) *not necessarily into the action figures because those are typically kind of more marketed toward boys, even though they are little dolls.*

Bailey's insight here suggests that an underrepresentation of women in certain toyetic fandoms is likely a result of the conventional industry wisdom. Through much of 20ᵗʰ century, and still prevalent today, it was believed that girls were not interested in action figures or the stories that promoted them for any number of reasons, including gendered play patterns, either inherent or socially constructed; a lack of female characters in certain transmedia franchises, and thus fewer female character toys produced; or the absence of targeted marketing. As discussed in the review of literature, there were valid attempts to bring girls into the action figure market, the Mattel's *Princess of Power* (1985) toyline promoted by a *She-Ra: Princess of Power* (1985) cartoon. The line and cartoon were moderately popular and despite the shows problematically feminist potential, failed to persuade young girls to collect action figures.

Despite fewer gender-specific signs in toy aisles today, this gendered wisdom prevails, outside of rare instances like the *Forces of Destiny* line (2017-2018), which is described in advertisements as a set of "adventure figures," marketed as both action figures and fashion dolls. This longstanding debate about girls' interest in action figures quickly turns into a chicken-or-the-egg causality loop. Industry insiders claim toy companies and retailers do not market action figures to girls because they do not buy them, and consumer advocates counter that girls do not buy action figures because they are not marketed to young girls. Regardless, the highly gendered nature of the toyetic media genre likely explains why women are still not as active collectors as men.

The totality of data from the survey and my conversations with collectors showed that gender heavily influenced which toylines toy collectors played with as children, which media they consumed, and which toyetic franchises they are not fans of as adults. This was a significant finding although not surprising considering the multitude of factors explored throughout this work. It remains to be seen whether the stark gendered divisions in toyetic media communities a result of marketing are, socialization, parental steering, or some natural inclination for the types of toys and content of the associated media narratives. Regardless, as expected male collectors mainly collected action figure toylines like *Star Wars*, *Transformers*, *G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero* and female collectors mostly collected plush and doll properties like *My Little Pony*, *Jem and the Holograms*, and *Barbie*. The material affordances of each type of toy suggested certain types of play, supported and contextualized through transmedia narratives, and illustrated in television commercials, print advertisements, and toy packaging. The role of gendered marketing through toyetic media was not lost on the collectors I spoke to. Despite some of their self-aware cynicism regarding it, collectors still exhibit brand loyalty because of the positive memories attached to the toys and their love for

the cartoons and comics that promoted them. The gendered divide in adult toy collectors is not absolute and there are numerous examples of boys who played with girls' toys or wanted to but couldn't and now collect them, and vice versa. As stated already, this was probably the least surprising demographic-related finding. I was more surprised however about the obvious racial skew in toyetic media fandom.

A Lack of Diversity in Vintage Toy Collection

Similar to gender, the racial makeup of survey respondents seemed to support some of the assumptions about media fandom with the majority of participants identifying as White or Caucasian (85%). There are likely a variety of reasons for this underrepresentation but all of them are speculative at this point. The toys and transmedia franchises my population of study collects were seemingly ubiquitous in United States during the 1980s, transcending ethnic boundaries and socioeconomic boundaries. Perhaps this transcendence merely extended to knowledge of the products and enjoyment of the media which were freely broadcast on television. The lack of more racially diverse collectors could be a result of my recruitment methods primarily through Facebook Groups. Maybe collectors of color don't participate in those specific online communities or there is another indication that a technological divide still exists. There certainly could be a socioeconomic component to the perceived lack of racial diversity in collectors as there was a financial barrier to owning the toys as children. Historically within the United States there has been a strong correlation between household income and race/ethnicity. It's reasonable to assume that families who made less money would not buy or buy fewer of these toys, and therefore perhaps, children of those families had less long-term attachment to them. One might also surmise that toys were less popular with minority children, and subsequently less collected by adults of color today, because of a lack of representation in the characters used to promote them.

For example, while the original *Star Wars* saga (1977-1983) and Kenner's plastic approximation of it featured a diverse array of characters, there was a lack of human-racial diversity both on screen and on toy shelves. The only major character of color was Lando Calrissian and as a major protagonist, Kenner produced 3 separate figures of him. There were several other clearly identifiable human characters of color, but they had minor non-speaking roles, seen in the background, or were only screen long enough to blow up in their spaceships. Kenner only made one other minority action figure and perhaps this lack of diversity translated to a fewer visible *Star Wars* fans of color in general and those who actively collect the vintage toys today. Lack of representation might have also been a deterrent for desiring and collecting toys promoted though cartoons although that analysis would be much more complicated.

Cartoons and comic books relying more on realistic humanoid characters, most associated with action figure toylines, did feature characters that were visibly designed to convey race. Many of the clearly identifiable human protagonists in toyetic cartoons like *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe*, *She-Ra: Princess of Power*, and *G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero* were coded as Caucasian/White. There were also distinctly non-white characters present in these stories, but they were of secondary importance. Toyetic properties created to sell more anthropomorphic toylines like *Transformers*, *Thundercats*, *My Little Pony*, *Care Bears* had more subtle racial coding either in inferred from voice acting or mannerisms. Additionally, children of color were featured less frequently than white children in advertisements for these toylines which may have also played a role.

While the role of race in adult toy collection wasn't an initial focus of this research project, after seeing the racial underrepresentation in the survey respondents I had hoped that my interviewees could provide more insight into the lack of diversity among this

population of collectors. I intentionally solicited interviewees that represented diverse

backgrounds. Our conversations were fruitful, but my participants could not contribute any

significant new explanations. Most participants in fact thought that their respective collector

communities were fairly diverse, as observed through online interactions and at conventions.

It also did not seem something important to them and not wanting force the conversation in

any particular direction I didn't push them to expand beyond a certain point. Without talking

to more collectors of color or the creative minds behind the toyetic franchises, we can only

guess as to the underrepresentation of female and minority collectors. What was clear is that

vintage toy collection would be an interesting context for intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989)

research, particularly as way for understanding the complex web of identities that comprises

each collector. Out of all the demographic influences for toy collectors, generational

membership was the most salient to the original goals of this study.

X Marks the Spot for Generational Collecting

As theorized, toy collector preferences were largely divided along generation lines

with most prominent generation being Generation X. Only 3 members of the Silent

Generation, those born before 1928, and none of them collected toys from toyetic brands.

Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, and Gen Z, born after 1997 were also

participate in the study and did collect toyetic media toylines but only accounted for 6% of

those surveyed. One should not infer from this that members of these generation do not

collect toys; they do. In the case of the Silent Generation, there are variety of factors that

may have precluded them from participation in this study, like their advanced age or a

possible aversion to social media where recruitment occurred. In my opinion, the primary

reason though is that collectors from this generation likely gravitate more toward classic toys

that they played with or wanted as children and were thus not captured in my recruitment

efforts. The Silent Generation collectors I know mostly collect antique tin toys, Tonka-style

metal vehicles, Hot Wheels, and the original action figure, Hasbro's 12" G.I., first released in

1964. It could similarly be hypothesized that by the time toyetic media emerged, most Baby

Boomers were too old to play with toys or embrace the transmedia marketing in the same

way that Gen-Xers and Millennials did. This is not to say that members of this generation

did not purchase those toys or watch the cartoons of that era, but that they may not have

had the strong nostalgic connection to those toyetic properties that would lead them to

continue collecting through adulthood. Likewise, members of Gen Z were born after the

"golden era" of toyetic media and were part of a generation of children's entertainment that

shifted away from physical toys toward console video gaming, cable television, and

eventually on-demand streaming service entertainment. It could also be possible that

members of these three underrepresented generations do collect toys but are not as active

within the Facebook groups where recruitment occurred.

Accordingly, nearly 60% of my survey respondents were members of Generation X,

generally considered to have been born between 1965 and 1980. Like the skew in gender,

this finding was not a shock considering that I recruited respondents from within collector

communities dedicated to toyetic media franchises which first emerged in the late 1970s and

exponentially proliferated throughout the 1980s, when Gen Xers were the prime age for

owning and playing with toys. The second largest age cohort represented in the survey was

the Millennial generation, born between 1981 and 1996. Individuals born within the first

decade of this cohort would have similarly experienced their formative years during the

height of toyetic media which lasted well into the mid-1990s. The most popular toylines

collected by Gen Xers in this project were Kenner's *Star Wars* (1977-1985), Hasbro's

Transformers (1984-1993; first generation), *G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero* (1982-1994), and *My*

Little Pony (1982-1992). As just alluded to, you can see some overlap in the toylines most collected by Millennials: *Star Wars* (1977-1985), *My Little Pony* (1982-1992), and *Transformers* (1984-1993; first generation). The only top collected toyline collected primarily by Millennials was Playmates' *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1988-1997) which makes sense because many Gen Xers would have likely aged out of playing with toys by that age.

Obviously, the youngest Gen Xers and oldest Millennials were born within a few years of each other so one would expect their toyetic exposure to be quite similar. According to the collectors I spoke to though, the fact that these two generations collect the same toylines may also have to do with the influence of family on toy collection. Nearly half of my interviewees cited family members as the main initial reason they collect what they do. This included both expected memories about Christmas or birthday gifts purchased by parents but also parents who were themselves collectors of something and introduced them to it. More prescient to my point here though is the role that older siblings, or cousins in some cases, played in steering or dictating what cartoons and other media my interviewees were exposed to at a young age and what toys they played with in their formative years. Several participants even noted that the genesis of their collections were hand-me-downs from brothers or sisters. These findings supported previous research by Bryant, et al., (2014) showing that most adult toy collectors' entrée into collection occurred in their formative years and this initiation is frequently facilitated by parent, sibling, or peer group. Moreover, age is a significant factor in the development of toy fandom and a crucial determinant in whether that fandom will endure. Age is also important in toy fandom as it can define 'generational boundaries' that arise because of the way the toy industry and its ancillary products and markets have evolved.

The significant takeaway here as I see it is not that adults of a certain age are collecting toys from their childhood but that their memories, play experiences, and passion for them today unite members of these generations together in the same that large scale historical events and societal trends are thought to unite older generations. In contemporary Western societies like the United States, traditionally influential institutions that provided the shared resources for community building and identity formation have abdicated much of their power to mass media so much so that media is now the preeminent force that unifies us.

Generational Media Consumption

We have long associated certain generations with specific media. Each generation has a presumed fondness for and common bond through the popular music, films, and books they consumed during their formative years. Baby Boomers for example are notoriously nostalgic for the music of the 1960s and films set during the Vietnam War tend to have similar soundtracks. Numerous studies of younger millennials and Gen Z have illustrated their affinity for social media and the devices they use to access it. In the same vein, toyetic media are especially significant to Gen Xers and Millennials, providing a common mediated experience that contributes to their sense of generational identity and connects them media audiences. This project was an attempt to extend what limited research exists that "analyzes the role of the media in the formation of generational experience, identity, and habitus" (Bolin, 2017, p. i). In so doing I hope to have further illustrated how generations today actualize less in shared sociohistorical experience and more as media audiences, united by collectively experienced media moments, like Saturday Morning Cartoons, and similar media consumption patterns, like celebrating and collecting character toys from their shared childhoods. Whereas established institutions like family, education, and religion were once

central to the formation of identity and community, now *media* provides much of the symbolic and material resources for the construction of both individual and social identity. According to Hamley (2001), "individuals actively and creatively sample available cultural symbols, myths, and rituals as they produce their identities … [and in today's media-saturated world] … the mass media are central to this process" (p.1). Specifically, "generational audiences share repertoires, symbolic material and cultural meanings which affect their generational identity" (Napoli, 2014, p. 183). Members of Gen Xers and older Millennials were the first two generational cohorts to come of age during a time in history when media became increasingly involved in our everyday lives. This started from a young age, whereas children they were exposed to powerfully influential transmedia systems designed specifically to cultivate a desire to own and play with character toys.

From a social identity perspective, we can then say that generational identity is "an individual's awareness of his or her membership in a generational group and the significance of this group to the individual" (Joshi, Dencker, Franz, & Martocchio, 2010; as cited in Urick, 2012, p. 103). A generation's identity is often constructed for them through popular media that highlight specific personality attributes (ex. Gen Xers' cynicism) that seemingly apply to all members of that group. The extent to which individuals identify with these characterizations will inevitably vary and many may reject such an imposed identity. Thus, some scholars prefer to approach generations from a *self-categorization* angle utilizing social identity theories to explain how people classify themselves to help impose order on their social environments (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Note that for generational identification to occur, members need to perceive in-groups and out-groups as being important, meaning that members perceive benefits of identifying with a generation while highlighting differences that exist between other generations. There was an observable generational component to

vintage toy collecting among those interviewed, but a sense of a collective generational identity was less pronounced than I thought. My interviewees were easily able to identify which of the traditional American generations they belong by name but had a harder time describing definitional characteristics of their generation. Several of the Gen Xers did identify similar media that were generational significant like grunge rock, MTV, Napster, as well as key moments in their lifetimes like the dawn of internet, eBay coming online, and the tragic events of 9/11. By far the most commonly referenced media among Gen Xers, Baby Boomers, and Millennials was Saturday Morning Cartoons. This offers some support for the concept of generations as media audiences but perhaps less evidence for a shared identity. The next section will attempt to offer insight into this, while also addressing the toy collector identity.

Playing with Identity

Another underlining goal of this study was to determine how significant is this passion for plastic is to the toy collector's sense of self or their identity. It could have very well been that collectors view this merely as a hobby, but my own experiences within the collector world and preliminary observations suggested that something more was going on. Identity is a difficult concept to measure and vintage toy collection is a complex media consumption practice, so I approached interpretation from a variety of theoretical lenses including the cultural tradition of audience studies, consumer behavior research, material culture, and social psychology.

The online survey provided evidence that adult toy collectors have a strong emotional attachment to their favorite toyetic franchises, spend a considerable amount of time and money on toy collecting, and engage in many practices common to media fandom. They also clearly indicated that toy collecting is more than hobby and although there was

data suggesting identification with being a toy collector and the toys they collect, survey respondents only moderately agreed that it defines them. This latter finding was likely influenced by the wording and direct nature of the question itself, in that participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with the statement: *Being a toy collector defines me*. This is a hard question to address in the abstract and most people would be hesitant to acknowledge that anything singularly defines them, let alone something like collecting children's toys which still has somewhat of a social stigma. It was also challenging for my interview subjects to discuss aspects of their identity when directly prompted.

Toys, toy collecting, and toyetic media were clearly meaningful to my interviewees' sense of self even if they had a hard time articulating it. To start they were all members of Facebook Groups dedicated to various toyetic media franchises, willing to complete a survey about toy collecting and be interviewed, which suggests a more than passing interest. Many of them have devoted years, if not decades, to finding the pieces of their collections regularly scouring yard sales, thrift stores, flea markets, collector conventions, in addition to daily searches on eBay, Shopgoodwill.com, and the various Facebook Groups they belong to that specialize in vintage toy commerce. The temporal investment in the acquisition of their collectibles was seemingly dwarfed by the time it must have taken to acquire their vast knowledge about the toys social and production histories as well as they toyetic media they so admire. In addition to time, some of these individuals have spent a considerable amount of money to hunt down their plastic treasures although they all for the most part prided themselves in their collections being worth far more than they paid. All the toy collectors I interviewed had a dedicated space in their home, apartment, or office to display their toys. The amount of space allotted, or in some cases allowed by their significant others, varied from several Ikea shelves in a bedroom to an entire basement filled with museum style,

backlit sliding glass cases and retail-grade curio cabinets. The prominence of display and location of the collection within the home appeared to be an indicator of the degree of importance of the toys themselves. Displaying them in a living room or other potentially publicly accessible area of the domicile may indicate that the collector is both proud and unconcerned with others knowing that they collect. These were merely the easily observable manifest indicators of importance, but significance alone does not necessarily translate to identification.

My participants' identities, like all contemporary identities, are fragmented and while they identified as toy collectors when pressed, they also saw themselves as parents, professionals, and other things with equal weight. Identity operates at both on conscious and unconscious levels, and individuals may only become aware of an identity when they are engaged in an activity that is a manifestation of that identity or if someone else identified them as such. Thus, as part of the interview process, I requested that my interviewees show me their collection or in some cases a select group of collectibles because their collection was too large to have in one place. Initially in our conversations, some collectors seemed more reticent to self-identify as a toy collector or acknowledge the importance of the toys in their lives. As our conversations progressed however, and they started telling me about their toys, their history of being collector, and showing me their collection, they spoke about it more freely, and in a few cases had an "ah ha" moment of self-awareness. I learned in my first several attempts that directly asking these individuals about their identity was less effective than getting them to talk about the importance of their toys and the toyetic transmedia systems they are fans of. As discussed above, several interviewees shared that they want to be buried with their toys. Others planned to gift their collections to their children in hopes that they would keep them or do some good with them. Some of my

interviewees discussed always having a toy with them or taking them on trips either to engage in phot-play or "just because," perhaps a holdover from childhood when they would take their toys to school or on family vacations. Within the *My Little Pony* collector community, as several of my subjects told me, there was even a name for this: "a travel pony." These things also point to the importance of objects to the individual collectors. I also asked participants if being a toy collector was something they were known for as there is a reflexive component to identity in that we often don't view ourselves one way until someone else does.

The consensus answer from my interviewees was that most people in their lives, particularly those in their immediate family knew that they were toy collectors. Most subjects were in committed relationships and their partners or spouses were understandably aware of their toy collecting. One aside is that the supportive, or at least tolerant, partner was, along with discretionary income and space, seemed to be a significant factor in the continuation of their collector practices; in some cases, they also collected. This logically made sense, but in some ways is counter to stereotypes about the lonely male collection. Several toy collectors reported openly identifying as such to people they don't know, if the context was appropriate, while others were more reticent to publicly disclose their love of toys to people who don't know them. These individuals did not seem ashamed of their fandom per se, but still felt a certain stigma about being an adult that spends time with toys, regardless of whether they conceived of it as play or not. According to toy researcher, Katriina Heljakka there is an inherent challenging studying adult toy fandom as a stigmatization persists around the adult consumption of "children's media, including toys, and the fear of being categorized as an infantile regressed adult" (2017, p. 92). Regardless, the fact that some collectors don't openly embrace or broadcast their toy fandom as an identity does not preclude it as such.

Many people have more private identities and perhaps it merely stood out to me because so many media fans are visible today. Moreover, some of my collectors reported being not as active collectors as they once were either because they consciously decided to step away or because they have largely collected all they wanted to. I think that the toy collector identity, like any other, may be transient in nature and its salience to the individual's sense of self may ebb and flow throughout the course of their life.

Identity has traditionally been regarded as some a priori dimension of self that begins to develop in the formative years of life and reaches some level of stability in adulthood. More contemporary understandings of identity view it more fluidity as an aspect of self that is continually constructed over time, influenced by various elements in one's environment. Family, school, religion, age, gender, ethnicity, and nationality are almost universally acknowledged contributors to the development of self. At least since the 1980s however, scholars have also recognized that "products of media culture provide material out of which we forge our very identities, our sense of selfhood, our notion of what it means to be male or female; our sense of class, of ethnicity and race, of nationality, of sexuality, of 'us' and 'them'" (Kellner, 1995, p. 5). The effects of radio, film, and television have been well studied and recognized as powerful factors in identity formation however the impact of transmedia systems, particularly those with material components like toys, have been less examined. In 2021 there is seemingly little that connects everyone in a socially, politically, and geographically fragmented society of the United States, however since the mid-20th century, capitalist driven media consumption has provided a common experience that can foster community (Fiske, 1987). Consumer culture is often chastised, and rightly so, for fostering alienating competition and class inequality, however, it also "[provides] a vastly expanded material culture that provides symbolic resources for meaningful social life" (Slater &

Tonkiss, 2001, p. 150). Media theorist and interpretive consumer researcher J.B. Thompson (1995) similarly argued that the modern process of self-formation is reflexive, open-ended, and individuals use any available resources including mediated symbolic material to construct a coherent identity. Mass media therefore produces the symbolic building blocks, and in the case of some toy collectors, the physical building blocks for the creation of identities. Thus, identity and media use are inexorably tied together where identity is shaped by both the exposure to certain media and our experiences with it, including fandom (Steele & Brown, 1995). The collection of toys from one's childhood and the continued patronage of media properties encountered during formative years is illustrative of symbolic media consumption.

Symbolic media consumption describes how people "use media products as valuable ingredients for their social identity work" (Förster & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2016, p. 13) and genres like toyetic media act as "symbolic markers" for social belonging and group membership (p. 14). This Bourdieusian inspired interpretive framework, helps explain how media knowledge and media menus are characteristics of *distinction* by which people distinguish themselves from others and generate cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1993; Meyen, 2007). For vintage toy collectors and toyetic media fans this cultural capital is created within their respective collector communities and among similarly aged members of their generations with which they identify. One could say then that both the toy collector and generational identities are *social identities* (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) where part of an individual's self-concept is derived from one's knowledge of membership to a social group and the value and emotional significance attached to that membership (Tajfel, 1978). A key aspect of Social Identity Theory is that intergroup psychology influences behavior where *ingroups*, the social groups that individuals belong to, are significantly differentiated from *outgroups*, those social formations that a person is not part of. Social identity is a common aspect of fan

culture but particularly relevant in sport team fandom where competition between groups is an expected convention and fans of teams or individual athletes, derive their self-esteem from the relative success or failure of their fan objects. With social identity the importance of group membership is predicated t on the extent to which the individual self-categorizes and perceives themselves to be part of the group, or the level of "we" sense felt.

While direct expressions of generational identity were not as prominent as expected during my conversations with toy collectors, there was a clear sense of generational difference not only related to age, but to types of toys collected. All of my subjects easily self-identified and labeled themselves as members of specific generations, though that membership did not seem very significant. Interviewees did evoke another social identity by distinguishing themselves as a specific type of collector via social comparison. For example, within the toy collector world, toylines that have continually been produced are identified by their generation, demarcated by the era in which a toyline was produced concurrently with a specific era of cartoon, comic book, or film series and therefore exhibit a specific aesthetic, theme, or gimmick. The first line of *Transformers* toys was produced in the United States by Hasbro between 1984 and 1990, promoted by an original animated series (1984-1987) and a comic book series (1984-1991). In 1992 Hasbro released a new Transformers line with "Generation 2" in the title, and so the term "Generation 1," or G1 for short, was coined by fans of the toys to distinguish between the eras of toys and adopted as moniker for toy collectors "G-Oners." Fans of other toy properties like *G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero* and *My Little Pony* likewise adopted this strategy to differentiate both the era of toylines and toy fans who collect them. So, then the toy collectors had a Comparisons between collectors of different toylines were present but less noteworthy, with an obvious recognition of a distinction between what the collectors interviewed were into and what others collected.

There was also a surprising amount of crossover, particularly among men, who tended to specialize with one toyline, but also dabbled in collecting other action figure lines the enjoyed as kids. Among the toy collectors who participated in this study, there were definite elements of a social identity in play specifically related to knowledge of membership within an identification with certain toylines and collector communities. However, their social identities did not manifest as strong through the salience of that group membership nor the in-group/out-group dynamic. I expected to observe more expressions of competition between collectors of the same thing, considering that vintage toys exist in a finite number and have significant financial value as well as between groups that collector different toys. My interviewees noted that there are elements of competition involved when bidding on a needed item on eBay and a bit of one-upmanship present in online arguments about the qualitative differences between different generations of the same line. But other than that, there wasn't the strong sense of "us" versus "them," generally tied to social identity.

As addressed in the qualitative findings, toyetic fandom appears to be somewhat less community driven than other media fandoms and perhaps, as just examined, collectors exhibit less social identity. Since there emergence in the mid-20th century, fandom studies have explored and, in some cases, championed the communal or participatory nature of fans. This is the well-deserved legacy of some the early preeminent fan scholars like John Fiske and Henry Jenkins. Fiske well used tripartite typology of fan production distinguished fans from other media consumers through their *semiotic productivity,* the internal meaning construction at the point of media reception, *enunciative productivity*, the articulation of that affective experience, or non-exclusively linguistic "fan talk" that occurs "within a local community" (p. 38), and *textual productivity*, the creation of new texts through the appropriation of characters, settings, plots, and themes from favored fan objects. Although

semiotic productivity is primarily individual, *enunciative* and *textual* are inherently participatory. One could certainly produce a new text, individually for private enjoyment, but those texts only find meaning when shared within "interpretive communities" for praise, critique, and validation. According to Jenkins, perhaps the most cited fan scholar, "to speak as a fan is to…speak from a position of collective identity, to forge an alliance with a community of others in defense of tastes which, as a result, cannot be read as totally aberrant or idiosyncratic" (Jenkins, 1992, p. 23). These early theorizations influenced future waves of scholars who distinguish fans from traditional spectators not only in their emotional attachment to media but also in their level of participation with other fans in the collective interpretation and co-production of texts. Thus "one becomes a 'fan' not merely by being a regular consumer of media but by translating that consumption into cultural activity, by sharing feelings and thoughts about the textual content with friends, by joining a 'community' of other fans who share common interests" (Jenkins 2006, p. 41).

Regarding toy collectors, as fans, the survey responses at least partially supported the participatory impulse as respondents indicated feeling a bond with other toy collectors, communicating with others about toys or collecting, and actively participating within collector communities. Additionally, the social motivation of collecting was of moderate importance to the collectors surveyed. These findings in conjunction with the number of toy-specific conventions, YouTube channels, websites, discussion board forums, and Facebook Groups dedicated to toyetic media, one might infer a strong communal component was present in toyetic fandom. However, some of the toyetic fans I interviewed indicated that connection with other collectors and participation within collector communities were seemingly not as important to their fandom experience. For about half of my interviewees, much of the work that constituted their toy fandom, including research,

price valuation, toy hunting in person and online, and collection maintenance and appreciation is more solitary in nature. Mind you, all the individuals interviewed were recruited from Facebook Groups and thus were active enough in these groups to see my recruitment posts to respond accordingly. Though most thought of themselves as only being loosely connected to other collectors, primarily through a Facebook Group, periodically liking or disliking posts, making occasional comments, or posting pics of recent toy finds to receive feedback. They also utilized collector communities to get the best deals on new acquisitions which made seem more transactional in nature.

On the surface, this might support more recent scholarship questioning the de facto assumption that fandom is inherently participatory. Some scholars like Rosemary Lucy Hill in fact argue that "this idea of a community is idealistic and nostalgic and exists in contradiction with the experiences of community members so that it portrays an ideal rather than a lived reality" (Hill, 2016, p. 40). Hill further suggests that fan studies have perhaps focused too much on the publicly visible performative aspects of fandom and more research should be done into "those whose fandom is usually hidden" (Hill, 2016, p. 37; see also Sandvoss et al., 2017, pp. 10–11). I agree with this somewhat and would say the findings of this project indicate that social aspect of adult toy collection is perhaps less salient and constitutive of toy fandom than it is with other fan cultures, but it is still important. For example, those subjects who felt less connected to other collectors valued membership within a community, even infrequently exercised, as a certain level of trust was present within that Facebook Group, opposed to open markets like eBay, so much so that they preferred buying and selling collectibles within these collectives. Not all collectors resold as discussed above, but for the ones that did they appreciated their toys going to other collectors who would keep and value them, even if they didn't get as much money as they

could on eBay. Furthermore, for the other collectors interviewed, participation within

Facebook Groups and local in-person collector clubs held greater meaning. These

individuals worked with other collectors instrumentally to find the missing pieces they

needed but also relied on them for knowledge about toyetic media for authentication,

valuation, and validation. For some, the social component of toy collecting has become the

most significant aspect of their fandom and although the toys are still central, friendship and

community are they reason they continue to collect. Several individuals even met their

significant others through their toy fandom. So, while the act itself of collecting is frequently

exercised as a solitary endeavor, collectors do still form communities around the material

objects they collect (Hills, 2009; Heljakka, 2017). One key distinction I see with vintage toy

collector communities is that they operate differently than other "interpretive communities"

and there is less emphasis on production, although that is changing.

Because toys are the central nodes in the toyetic transmedia systems, they appear to

inspire less interpretative practices observed in other fan cultures where favored media texts

are celebrated, challenged, continually dissected, and sometimes produced. None of the toy

collectors I spoke to indicated that they spend lots of time debating key plot points or

elements of characterization from the narratives that promoted the toys they collect. This

likely occurs in some fan groups that celebrate toyetic media narratives (cartoons, comic

books, films) but wasn't observed in collector focused groups that were solely focused on

the toys. I also didn't get the sense that some of the more traditionally fannish modes of

textual production like writing fan fiction were of any importance. It isn't unreasonable to

think that someone has written a "Slash" story about two presumed canonically heterosexual

same-sex characters like He-Man and Skeletor that paired romantically (Bacon-Smith, 1992)

but it wasn't something I encountered. According to my participants, some collectors do

engage in cosplay, almost exclusive at conventions, and there are variety of creative expressions of fandom which toyetic media fans undertake. One of the more discussed examples of textual production within collector communities is that of customizations and 3D printing. Customization is not something I thought would have been as prominent among vintage toy collectors, given that traditionally any modification of vintage objects tends to decrease their value. However, the popularity of customizing vintage action figures, generally referred to as "beaters" because of their poor condition, is increasing and something discussed by my subjects. Some fans produce character toys that more accurately represent the characters in cartoons or film as the ability to faithfully render toys in the image of their on-screen counterparts was limited by pre-computer assisted technology of the era. Other fans are creating new characters that were never officially produced during the heyday of toyetic media but may have been featured in media. There are even third-party companies who specialize in the unlicensed production of custom toys based on toyetic media franchises. Several collectors I spoke to were in the process of do-it-yourself customizations that they learned how to do from other collectors. It should be noted that a handful of interviewees were adamantly opposed to "customs" feeling that hurt the purity of the original toyline in some way. So although the role of community was not as central to the experience of toyetic media fandom among all those interviewed, the toy collector identity has both an individua and undeniable social dimension.

The Influence of Toyetic Media

The data from the online survey and the insight provided from semi-structured interviews supported my assertion that toyetic media systems significantly influenced the cultivation of specific brand-based audiences whose devotion now manifests as toy fandom. While there were toyetic media properties before *Star Wars* (1977), Kenner's successful

merchandising of the iconic space opera demonstrated that transmedia characters and narrative universes inspired the creation of a new transmedia genre of children's entertainment whose primary purpose was to sell toys. Within these transmedia systems, cartoons seemed to have the strongest influence across the board with toy collectors due to their animation, visual aesthetic, short episodic storytelling, memorable sounds, and their existence during unique political economic circumstances.

Bringing Toys to Life

According to Henry Jenkins (2007), in an ideal transmedia narrative, each medium brings something unique to the storytelling experience based on its affordances. To paraphrase Jenkins, each medium should contribute to the overall narrative by doing what it does best. Despite its perceived aesthetic deficiencies, toyetic animation's most obvious and distinctive affordance was the 2-dimensional moving image which, along with voice acting, brought the characters and other story elements to life on screen. In fact, the word "animate" is derived from the Latin *animare*, meaning "to give life to" (Solomon 1989, p. 10). This affordance to grant anything on screen agency through movement, or more accurately give the illusion of motion, is of course one of animation's most salient and enticing contributions to toyetic transmedia systems. It also had the transitive effect of imbuing the toys in children's hands with the personality and voice they saw on screen, something my research subjects noted and valued. Although critically derided, cartoons of the 80s were vibrant audiovisual mediums with virtually unlimited storytelling potential, unlike live-action productions that were constrained by reality, scalable sets, special effects, actor performance, the audience's suspension of disbelief.

Animators had complete creative control over all aspects of the design process to achieve any desired visual or auditory effect. Image and sound were finely tuned into a

synergistic message where all elements worked together to tell stories and portray characters in a way that promoted toys. Animation was an ideal toyetic medium in that the images on screen could be specifically crafted to resemble the toys they were meant promote. In an era of hand tooling without the aid of computer-aided design (CAD) software or 3D printing, designing toys based on live action films like *Star Wars*, proved challenging, often lending to toys that were more representational than realistic. This might seem like a small issue but within a transmedia system, visual consistency is important, especially for children because if designs vary too much between mediums, consumers may not adequately connect the two transmedia nodes sufficiently (Johnson, 2017, p. 150). Animators had a much easier time depicting the toys their cartoons were intended to promote because unlike photo-realistic characters with distinctively human detail, animated characters are more iconic caricatures, and therefore were easier to design toys of, given the technology of the day. Several collectors mentioned their appreciation for character fidelity which occurred across cartoons, comic books, and toys within properties like *G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero* compared to the original *Star Wars* toys which only loosely resembled what they saw in the films. Additionally, animators had complete control over the character design and every nuance of their action, which they used to co-create meaning with the audience on a much deeper symbolic level than live action (Wells, 1998, p. 69). Most animation in the 1980s operated within the liminal space between realism and fantastical abstraction.

When many people, particularly older individuals, think of cartoons, they recall the classic fun silly, primarily comedic fare of early Disney, Hanna Barbera, or Warner Bros. Looney Tunes. As programs targeting children there was always a fair amount of comedic relief present in toyetic cartoons however already explored, most programs were built around the seemingly never-ending battle between good and evil. This required a more

serious tone at times though conflict still played out in a more sanitized manner on magical and futuristic battle fields that partially staved off critics and concerned parents alike. Many animated characters were humanoid or anthropomorphic, identifiable as "people," but their "cartoony" nature was enough to soften any mature, negative, or subversive content. A parent would certainly be weary of letting their young child consistently watch war films with bullets constantly flying. However, when those bullets are brightly colored laser beams that never actually do any damage, it seems less harmful. On top of that, the pro-social messages at the end of episodes further inoculated the program-length commercials from such scrutiny. Another key structural affordance that animated television brought to the table was its efficient storytelling.

Short Stories, Big Toy Sales

As discussed previously, cartoons migration from the big screen to small one, required changes in the animation process. Unfortunately, in the minds of many, this also reduced the overall aesthetic quality of the animation and for some signaled "the worst moment in animation history" (Banet-Weiser, 2007, p. 184). The adult toy collectors I spoke to were well aware of and to some extent agreed with this criticism however also cherished the unique lo-fi aesthetic of these cartoons as part of their nostalgically remembered childhoods. The length of cartoons also had to be reduced for television to fit within handy 30-minute blocks, attractive for advertisers. It was believed that shorter stories were more effective for selling toys to kids, which after all was its raison d'exister. Children have notoriously short attention spans and thus quick, intense bits of information seemed to work better opposed to longer forms like feature films, which cost a lot more money and time to produce and were riskier. As discussed already, toyetic television shows were episodic self-contained stories that could be neatly wrapped up in 22-minute intervals (30 with commercials). Story

plots were simple with most episodes ending with some type up tidy resolution, usually with good defeating evil, and of course learning a valuable lesson in the process. The episodes did loosely connect for a semblance of seriality with some larger story arcs unfolding in multi-episode mini-series, or the occasional season ending cliff-hanger. Characterization was garnered from those episodes that focused on a particular character's back story or personality along with other transmedia texts like comics or toy packaging. The hope was that any viewer could pop into the tale at any moment, with or without prior knowledge of it, and easily understand the characters and plot. While these toyetic narratives are fondly remembered by research subjects, critics have bemoaned their simplicity, arguing that these stories were lacked any qualitative depth or the educational merit (Kline, 1993). As program-length commercials though, cartoons were incredibly successful because of their multimodal semi-immersive quality achieved through highly stylized sights and unforgettable music.

Toyetic Tunes

Toyetic cartoons began with rocking theme songs that dually demanded the audience's attention and provided necessary exposition to orient viewers. *He-Man, G.I. Joe: RAH, She-Ra* did this explicitly through detailed prologues opening each episode. The *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1987-1996; *TMNT*) theme song similarly gave viewers a 60 second breakdown of the turtles' backstory and a hint to each hero's personality.[7] Toyetic tunes also set the emotional tone of the story. Opening title sequences for action figure cartoons featured heavy synthesizer riffs and edgy animation generally better than that within the episodes themselves. For programs targeting younger viewers or girls like *Rainbow Brite* and *Care Bears* the music was softer, more upbeat, and happily invited viewers to join in their adventures. Plot was more implied through animation sequences showing heroes and villains. Catchy

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[7] The TMNT theme song was written by sitcom megaproducer Chuck Lorre (Big Bang Theory).

jingles further served as mnemonic devices to help kids remember key branding messages like the "I have the power," "Turtle Power" or "Robots in Disguise" that also summarized the properties' premises. Plots were built around easily identifiable themes that kids could comprehend merely by watching the intros. Today these well remembered tunes makeup the respective childhood soundtracks of many viewers lives and exist now in innumerous YouTube montages and ranked lists. Several of my participants even sang short snippets of their favorites during our conversations. Toyetic cartoons were successful in large part because of their animated affordance however toy-based television was also highly effective because of the unique nature of the mediascape of the early 1980s when these transmedia systems came into existence.

A Product of Their Time

Up until the 1990s there were only 3 major television networks that utilized the broadcast airwaves, CBS, ABC, and NBC. Though cable tv would gain popularity throughout the 1980s and Fox came online in 1986, the "Golden Era" of toyetic television largely occurred on the "Big Three" networks. Additionally, by the early 1980s, children's programming was almost exclusively shown on Saturday mornings and cartoons were must-watch appointment viewing for kids. This meant that these half-hour toy commercials had truly national audiences with very little competition in a way that can't exist in the post-network era given the endless home entertainment options, cable television, and mass adoption of on-demand streaming services. Saturday Morning Cartoons were both an industry strategy and a cultural phenomenon for three generations of young media consumers. These dedicated blocks of animation provided children both with entertainment and the necessary tools for generating cultural capital. Knowledge of popular cartoons, characters, plot point developments, and theme songs were the roots of a common language

for community building and commerce. For the first time in the history of television, large blocks programming content were designed exclusively for kids. Seiter suggests that this is part of the appeal of toyetic franchises was that they often engaged in "the subversion of parental values of discipline, seriousness, intellectual achievement, respect for authority, and complexity by celebrating rebellion, disruption, simplicity, freedom, and energy" (1995, p. 11). Furthermore, the commercials aired during and between programs informed kids about which cereals, candy, games, toys, and venues should be desired. So, of these commercials would themselves used animation, blending live action scenes of kids playing or eating cereal with animation featuring cartoon versions of popular characters. Possessing these products, particularly the toys, on the playground made one "cool" in the eyes of their peers according to my interviewees. This was sometimes encouraged structurally in classroom through "show-and-tell." Some of these commercials were also promoted through toyetic characters. Cartoons were clearly central to the experiences of adult toy fans but as examined already, they were only part of the synergistic transmedia systems created to sell toys.

Comic Relief for A More Mature Audience

Comic book series and feature films also played a key role in the dissemination and circulation of the transmedial narratives along with a variety of other ancillary mediums like toy packaging, story books, records, films in some cases, and video games. Many properties promoting action toylines released comic books alongside their cartoons to cultivate and maintain interest in their brands. According to my research participants, comic books were especially important with collectors who were teens or young adults when the toys they would eventually collect came out. Their popularity with an older demographic was a result of both form and content.

Comic books were, in many ways, superior to television animation. Although both mediums were hand drawn art forms, comic book artists did not have the same time and budget constraints that cartoonists did lending to a higher aesthetic quality. It was also cheaper to produce a paper comic book than construct a cartoon episode for television. Printed comic books were however entirely visual mediums requiring more effort to interpret than cartoons. Marshall McLuhan categorized comic books as "cool" media that invite greater participation from the reader to fill in the cognitive gaps and complete the message. According to McLuhan, comic books "provide very little data about any particular moment in time, or aspect in space, of an object [therefore] the viewer, or reader, is compelled to participate in completing and interpreting the few hints provided by the bounding lines" (1994, p. 161). By the 1980s comic books were an established medium in American society and had developed their own interpretive grammar consisting expected of visual codes and symbols. For example, scenes are portrayed in storyboard panels that act as a "general indicator that time and space is being divided" (McCloud 99). The negative spaces between the panels, known as "gutters," is where the reader cognitively fills in the gaps. Although there is no auditory element in comic books, sound is inferred through graphic text and word balloons that provide dialogue, punctuation, volume, and emotion. Motion is similarly depicted through the use of directional lines which the reader must interpret. This greater mental effort may be one of the reasons for the popularity of comic books among older toyetic consumers.

Comic books were also popular with teens and young adults because of their seriality allowing for more complex plots and larger story arcs that could unfold over multiple issues, sometimes ending in a cliff-hanger, or the suspension in the narrative continuity that occurs from issue until the next. The serial format also allowed writers to explore character back

stories and personalities in much depth than could be achieved in a 22-minute cartoon. Several of my interviews credited the *G.I. Joe: Real American Hero* (1982-1994) and *Transformers* (1984-1991) comic book series specifically, both published by Marvel, with keeping them interested in the franchise much more than the cartoons. In the minds of several collectors, comic books were where some of the quality world building occurred, a key trait in successful transmedia stories, and well-established draw for media fans. Transmedia world-building occurs when each textual extension helps construct and enrich a broader fictional "world" to create a more cohesive entertainment experience for audiences. (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 95-96.). These comic book series would sometimes continue being published far beyond the life of the cartoons sharing their name and the toys they provided narrativization for. Furthermore, comic books were not subject to same FCC regulatory framework as cartoons and were generally less scrutinized by parents for some reason, allowing for more mature content in the form violence, character deaths, foul language, and sordid romance, which of course appealed teens and young adults. In addition to cartoons and comic books, films were also present in some of the toyetic media systems.

Tiny Toys on the Big Screen

Obviously, the original trilogy of *Star Wars* films were the main storytelling vehicles for Star Wars fans. There was a Marvel comic book series that, along with the toys, helped keep fans interested in franchise but outside of a few notable issues, its transmedia contribution to the larger narrative and potential for world building was severely curtailed by Lucasfilm. Similarly, for *Transformers* toy collectors *Transformers: The Movie*, released in theaters in 1986, was a seminal collective memory for first-generation fans. The most memorable aspect of this film was the deaths of several key characters and especially the death of Optimus Prime, the franchises primary protagonist, something that had never been done in

children's media. Feature-length films were made for other properties like *My Little Pony*, *Masters of the Universe, Rainbow Brite,* and *Care Bears.* There was a planned theatrical release for *G.I. Joe: The Movie* (1987) in which Hasbro intended to kill off a lead character but the overwhelmingly negative reaction to the death of Optimus Prime led to Hasbro releasing the film as a multi-part mini-series on television, with miraculous resurrection of said character. In addition to higher quality, full animation and fully produced soundtracks, feature films contributed to the transmedia systems by introducing new characters, which also happened to be toys, and revitalizing fan bases, some of whom had grown tired of the repetitive and episodic nature of the cartoons. More significantly going to the movie of your favorite toy franchise was viewed by fans and promoted by producers as an event to be experienced, different from that of the cartoon or comic book. The contributions of cartoons, comic books, and films were important pillars supporting the toyetic transmedia systems that inspired the toy fandom of today. As discussed already, I contend that vintage collection is a type of fandom. I have deployed the term toyetic fandom as most individuals who collect the toys at the center of the transmedia systems created to sell them, also include the continued consumption of said media (cartoons, comic books, films, etc…) as part of their fandom. Only a few individuals I spoke with who collected toys were aware of the transmedia associated with them but either didn't consume it as children or not longer. It should be evident by now that cartoons, comic books, and films were influential mediums in the lives of these collectors, though the most important nodes of toyetic transmedia systems that cultivated their toy fandom, were the toys themselves.

Touchable Transmedia, Collectible Feelings

It wasn't surprising the toy collectors' favorite part of the toyetic franchises they have dedicated so much time, money, and emotional energy to, would be the actual toys. Though

sometimes overlooked, collectors greatly value the "sensuous aspects of collecting – the handling, touching, playing with, and care for the collection" (Danet & Katriel, 1994, pp. 224 – 229). The tangibility of the collectibles was of great importance to my participants, evident in the consistently expressed value they placed on being able to physically interact with them and the specifically evoked label as "Out-of-Box" collectors. Though they recognized that keeping toys sealed in their original packaging made them worth considerably more money, they valued being able to pull them off the shelve and touch them more, outside of perhaps a few exceptions of ultra-rare, fragile, or hard-won items. This Out-of-Box preference might also be indicative of a social identity since it is an example of self-categorization, there are specific Facebook communities exclusively for it, and it stands in stark contrast to another well recognized group of "Mint-in-Box" collectors. Related to this was the sentiment shared by many that ultimately toys, even older ones, were made to be played with, and there is something inherently wrong with never taking them out of the package. According to toy collectors, touching the objects brings back vivid memories of Christmas mornings, birthday presents, bring toys to school, and playing in the backyard. We might describe this a tactile nostalgia, where the materiality of the object triggers a nostalgic response in the same way that an image, sound or smell might. This also speaks to "one of the richer aspects of mature play with toys entails a fascination with their aesthetic elements – their construction, their smell, or aspects of their design – that stems from erudite familiarity with toys that comes out of experience with them" (Bryant, Bielby, & Harrington, 2014, p. 28). A handful of my collectors spoke of their enjoyment for the texture of the plastic or rubber as well as the specific smell of their favorite toys.

Once collected my subjects did a variety of things with their toys that required touch. Depending on their condition and where they were collected from, they might require a

careful cleaning or grooming in the case of dolls, ponies, and plush animals. A few collectors would catalog and photograph their toys for posterity and insurance purposes. Others enjoyed physically restoring broken or incomplete toys like playsets or vehicles. All the collectors interviewed though engaged in various display practices that not only required the placement of toys but the proper arrangement and posing in some cases. Furthermore, the collectors I spoke to largely enjoyed the regular maintenance of cleaning, dusting, and rearranging of the toys in their various display setups. A few individuals even shared that they feel guilty if they don't touch their toys on a regular basis. This was especially prevalent with *Transformers* collectors that given the toys inherent affordances warranted periodic transformation from robot to vehicle mode. The importance of being able to physically interact with their collectibles is also connected to the key role the toys played in the transmedia franchises that has allowed their fandom to endure.

Material artifacts like toys are not often thought of as communicative mediums or as contributors to transmedia narratives however a growing body of research is recognizing their function as such. In toyetic transmedia storytelling each medium represents a different type of play and ideally reveals different narrative elements that contribute to the overall narrative. The cartoons, comic books, films, and toy packaging provided the requisite storylines, characterization, and world building that establish a context and potential script for play. The animated series were especially effective mediums for getting young consumers to invest emotionally in the characters who happened to purchasable toys, through their ability to grant their plastic pals with personality and literal voices that became inexorably imbued onto the toys. This latter fact should not be overlooked or viewed an unintended effect as the producers of the toys deliberately made it very difficult, nigh impossible "to separate any memory of a text (cartoon) from its accompanying paratexts" (Bainbridge,

2017, p. 25). My interviewees reported taking great pleasure as children from replicating what they saw and heard on screen, including the seemingly naturalistic impulse to imitate Alan Oppenheimer's iconic Skeletor. Moreover, as noted in the qualitative findings, several of my interviewees still hear the voices of the cartoon characters in their heads while interacting or "playing" with toys. In this way, in addition to introductory theme songs and tag lines, character voices served a mnemonic function that has lasted the better part of four decades. The toys primary contribution to a transmedia network lies in its playability and the material affordances that encourage an intense level of audience participation that cannot be achieved through animated television, comic books, or film. "Whereas the virtual, [in this case cartoons or film], can only be rewatched, reread, or revisited, the material figure can be redeployed, rewritten and reimagined" (Bainbridge, 2016, p. 32). I would humbly add that that toys can also be felt, in ways than purely visual or auditory media cannot. There is a materiality to comic books, which are also heavily collected by adult toy collectors, that might have contributed similarly to the toyetic experience. In this ways toys as mediums are more malleable to the desires of the child player or adult collector. Toys were particularly engaging because they facilitated a unique, more tactile, form of engagement, often during formative ages, which amplified its emotional resonance. This embryonic fandom fostered a tangibly affective relationship that would inform and frame all future memory and interpretation of a property (Harvey, 2015, p. 147). Toys granted the kids who would collectors the ability to actually touch the media the so love, making the toyetic stories they consumed and the parasocial relationships they developed to characters more real.

The original use of toyetic was to describe the play potential of a specific narrative text. Thus, if sufficiently toyetic, toys would be designed after characters, creatures, vehicles, and settings within the story world, operating more as paratexts (Gray, 2010). This was the

case with the original *Star Wars* line of toys. With the properties comprising the toyetic transmedia genre however, this is reversed and cartoons, comic books, and films are all created in the image of the toys which were created first or in most cases in tandem with a story world to support and promote it. Therefore, "it is the toys provide the source for transmedia adaptation" (Bainbridge, 2016, p. 32). For this reason, the toys are the central text in the transmedia system, although one that is best read in conjunction with its animated, comic, or filmic paratexts, that communicate through a more traditional narrative structure. Now, children, even those who would become collectors don't always recognize this relationship, nor does it really matter for the purposes of play. A few of my participants noted that as adults they were somewhat shocked to learn that the toys, they cherished so were not made to reflect their favorite cartoons or comics, but the opposite. This realization and the accompanying awareness that the bulk of their beloved childhood cartoons, comic books, and films, were glorified commercials did not seem to dimmish their passion for the them or their associated play memories. The materiality of the toys is also at the root of their collectability.

According to Heljakka (2017), for a toy to achieve collectible status it must exhibit *wow*, *flow*, and *glow*. These attributes are also stages in the life cycle of an ideal toy (Heljakka, 2013). First, "toys become objects of desire because of their capacity to *wow*" (p. 96), that is the play potential evident in the affordances of the toy that draws in the prospective player or collector upon initial encounter. Second, *flow* is the play potential actualized during playful engagement with the toy. For adult collectors, flow is derived "in the manipulation of physical objects besides collecting – play patterns such as customization of toys, creating stories of toys, and cosplaying with them" (p. 100). Other than cosplay, these are activities my collectors exhibited, in addition to photoplay and the display practices described

previously. If the tactile qualities of toys sufficiently invite their fans into playful engagement, the toy's wow will transform into the experience of flow, and subsequently the object of play will come to gain an auratic *glow* that adds further value to the toy. This can be seen toyetic properties like *Star Wars* and many of the toylines from the 1980s discussed in this work. According to Heljakka (2013), a fourth stage/quality, perhaps most central to vintage toy fandom, *afterglow* may also occur when the toy avoids disposal and reenters the sphere of play with the potential to wow a new player or collector as it were. This afterglow may happen on the shelves of a thrift store, a vintage toy shop, or online through a nostalgia-fueled "down the rabbit hole" like search for the lost toys of one's childhood.

Toy fandom is clearly very tactile and like other media fans, collectors engage in material based interpretive practices in like the consumption of "the entire history and network of significance surrounding the collectible" (Morrison, 2010, p. 6). It is not uncommon for toy collectors to spend time researching the production history of their toys, including how they came to be, who their creators were, and how they were made. Much of this work has already been by other fans, documented on various discussion board forums, Facebook Group posts, YouTube channels, and professionally produced documentaries like Netflix' *The Toys that Made Us*. Though to trace the specific histories of their own toys they utilize tiny material clues like copyright and country of origin stamp ("COO"), "to reconstruct and imagine the circumstance of the toys production" (ibid). Often more important to collectors though is the social history of toys they have come to own. Almost all the collectors I spoke to still had a few of the toys they personally owned as children, however many of the items that make up their collection have passed through multiple hands. According to some of my interviewees the toys take on not only greater authenticity, as fake reproductions exist, but great meaning when they know whose toys they have come

to possess and a bit about the toys history of ownership. This is done through communication with other collectors and detailed investigations of the material markers. Another creatively interpretive practice of toy fandom relates to the displaying of ones toys, an activity that interviewed collectors engage in.

Whether it be on an Ikea shelf, office desk, or in a backlit glass curio cabinet, character toys not only get displayed but also periodically arranged and posed. As children, these individuals would use their toys as plastic avatars of onscreen characters, creatures, and vehicles, transforming dialogue, personalities, plot, and theme seen in cartoons or read in comic books into "play scripts," which led to more symbolic or mimetic play[8]. As toys though, they also possessed the capacity for more unscripted free-range play enabling the exploration of alternative story arcs, themes, relationships, and other elements of the toyetic narratives that may have been unrecognized, underdeveloped, or ignored. Apparently, this also included franchise crossovers between Hasbro's *My Little Pony* and Kenner's *M.A.S.K.*, as recalled by Peter, one of my interviewees, where his younger sister's ponies would get attacked in their Paradise Estate by V.EN.O.M., the swarm enemy of M.A.S.K., and his guys would have to save the day. Although adult collectors, at least those ones interviewed, did not engage in this level of play, except for with their kids, the regular rearrangement and posing of their toys was often done in a way that replicates key scenes from toyetic narratives or creative vignettes. I contend that both mimetic or replicative narrative play conducted by children and the imaginative rearrangement and display practices of adult toy collectors could be considered a form of performative fan fiction.

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[8] Stephen Kline, *Out of the garden: Toys and children's culture in the age of TV marketing*, (London: Verso, 1993).

CONCLUSION

The initial goal of this research project was to explore the relationship between vintage toy collection by adults and identity-constructing media consumption as it relates to generations and toyetic media. Most of us have a fondness for the material culture of our past, particularly those things that represent cherished memories of significant events or relationships. For some members of the more recent generational cohorts, childhood media developed to sell toys from the 1970s and 1980s has left an enduring legacy of brand loyalty that now manifests in adult fandom through the celebration, collection, curation, and commerce of vintage toys. Gen Xers and older Millennials especially were born into an environment that readily adopted these transmedia supersystems as a natural part of children's culture. These material mediums from their formative years were the centerpieces of transmedia franchise that are now an important component of their adult lives, worthy of study. Toyetic media was a unique genre of children's entertainment that emerged through an assemblage of political, economic, and social factors that further commodified children's culture. The success of toyetic media was symptom and cause of a change in both toys and the very nature of play itself. There are very few cartoons or films produced today that aren't based on either a toy line or were created with toys in mind. The collectability of vintage toys is also due to the role and commodification of nostalgia by modern media producers where these pieces of cherished plastic are tied to "nostalgically remembered relationship with the text that came at least in part from the toys" (Gray, 2010, p. 185). Clearly the desire for, acquisition, and possession of these commodities is not merely about consumption but an

expression of fandom through affective investment, personal and social identity, and community.

This research is important because it helps explain how people finding meaning and form connections through media. In contemporary Western societies, ideological pluralism, cultural heterogeneity, and the decline of traditional social institutions have made broad types of unification problematic. However, since the Industrial Revolution capitalistic driven media consumption is a common experience that connects, socializes, and provides us with the resources for individual and social identity formation. Consuming media and media derived commodities symbolically link us together facilitating new cultural forms like *toy fandom*. In many ways fans are the ideal citizen of the 21st century consumer society as they make both economic and affective investments in select commodities, in this case toys utilizing the objects of their fandom to construct personal and social identity as well as foster community. This project was an attempt view adult toy collection through the lenses of audience and reception studies, consumer research, and material culture scholarship to provide a more nuanced view of identity-related media consumption and fandom. I hope that my research will add to the burgeoning scholarship focused on the materiality of media and that this work will be a seminal reference for future toyetic media scholars.

LIMITATIONS

There were several limitations to this study that warrant acknowledgement. One major limitation of this was not asking more direct questions in the online survey. For some reason, I did not directly ask participants their current age or specific birth year. Although generation was the focus, I could have easily had them indicated their exact age. This would have given us a more precise picture of the average age of toy collectors and allowed for a broader range of statistical analyses. There is no specific reason it was left off. It was merely an oversight. Similarly, in hindsight it would have been prudent to ask for an estimated household income to determine if socioeconomic status was a contributing factor influencing vintage toy collection. I believe when constructing the survey, I didn't want to unduly overwhelm my participants with demographic questions, but one more or two more questions would likely not have negatively impacted the respondents' experience.

While constructing my survey I was highly cognizant of the number of questions and estimated length of completion as calculated by Qualtrics. Research indicates that surveys over 10 minutes see a significant amount of respondent drop off. With that in mind I purposefully limited what I asked but given the passion and gratitude expressed by many individuals who took the survey, I believe I could have asked more questions and been fine. Accordingly, I wish I would have asked more open-ended questions about the meaning of toy collecting for my participants. While this would have extended the length of the survey the potential responses from 800-plus toy collectors would have provided greater insight into this phenomenon and perhaps changed the direction of my interviewees. Specifically, if done over, I would have tried to capture more data about generation identity. Polling 800-

plus respondents about aspects of their generation they identify with would have likely yielded some interesting results. I also would have asked a more focused question about what collectors like about the toys themselves, separate from their promotional media, to enable a deeper dive into the materiality of toys.

Another potential limitation is regarding the lack of diversity in my survey sample and a more thorough exploration of the relationship between intersectionality and toyetic media audiences, especially in the areas of gender, sexual orientation, and race. I felt that my recruitment methods were broad enough to capture a wide array of collectors however I could have perhaps intentionally sought out more diversity-focused groups of vintage toy collectors. Fan scholarship has, since its genesis, championed for powerless individuals within society and fandom itself characterized as a haven for the marginalized to form communities around a shared celebration of media. However, it has been noted that even in 2021 there is a lack of diversity within certain fan communities and an underrepresentation of fandom scholarship that addresses race directly. Simply put when most people in the United States think of media fans, they think of white men (Stanfill, 2011). This is certainly not reflective of reality as media fandom in the 21st century is quite common. Many fandoms have arisen specifically around media with diverse themes or characters and some fan objects like superhero movies and comic books have achieved an almost ubiquitous appeal, despite contested representational issues within the source material. Clearly there is much work needs to be done in this area. I did intentionally overrepresent women and people of color in my interview recruitment pool specifically to better understand why adult toy collection and toyetic media fandom is seemingly dominated by white men. Despite my efforts to explore race during our conversations, it did not seem as salient to my interviewees' collector experiences as other factors like age, socioeconomic status, and gender. While there was a

general recognition among several of my participants that there were a lot of white men who collect, the various toyetic properties were portrayed as having a broadly diverse appeal. In the future, I want to explore this more, particularly to see to what extent whiteness is coded into the products themselves in the form of visual character traits and voice acting, and what if any affect that might have on the lack of diversity in the consumers of said properties.

A final limitation relates to the American-centric nature of this project. A simple review of literature reveals that a significant amount generational scholarship has been produced from within the United States and thus exhibits a clear American-centric bias. The Greatest Generation, Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Millennials while often used universally, are labels derived almost exclusively from sociocultural depictions of individuals from the U.S. Therefore, at best, the generalizability of the findings regarding generational identity may only extend so far. Concerning adult toy collection and toyetic media, a significant portion of my survey participants were from outside of the U.S. and several of my interviews were also international. By all accounts, while toyetic media is thought to be more of American product, its reach extends far beyond the continental United States. Toyetic media was syndicated on television sets and sold on toy shelves all over the world. Certain properties like Hasbro's *G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero* was from its inception an international collaboration between American toy makers, advertisers, and Japanese animation studios. The point here is that adults of a certain age all over the world are collecting these toys, and a focused examination of the similarities and differences between American collectors and those outside the United States is likely to yield some fascinating results.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This was an ambitious project and the findings presented in this work are the just tip of the potential scholarly iceberg. There were many other interesting qualitative findings that were not as prominent or that deviated too far from the original goals of the study that it would have required more time than needed to adequately analyze. For the sake of time, I will only mention two.

First, the tendency of adult toy collectors to conceptually and semantically frame the physical manipulation of their toys as distinctly different than what they did with the toys as a child, or what their own children do with them, was incredibly fascinating, and in my opinion worth further exploration. It likely has to do with the persistent stigmatization around

Second the toy collectors I spoke with, for the most part, all seemed to be primarily emotionally invested in their collectibles, valuing them for sentimental reasons over financial. However, all of them were keenly aware of the monetary worth of their collectibles, both individually and as a collection, bringing it up periodically during our conversations. I would surmise that emotional and nostalgic value of the toys is paramount, the monetary worth serves as some type of validation. In the United States, money directly equates to value and although I got the sense that none of these individuals would ever sell their toys, they take pride in the fact that they are worth more than their feelings, in a way that validates their childhood love toys and their continued collection as adults. This is something could also be an interesting research project.

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APPENDIX A: ONLINE SURVEY PROTOCOL

Informed Consent Form for Participation in Toy Collector Survey

You are invited to participate in a web-based online survey regarding adults who collect toys. This is a research project being conducted by Jonathon Lundy, a doctoral student at Drexel University. It should take approximately 15 minutes or less to complete.

PARTICIPATION
Your participation in this survey is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to take part in the research or exit the survey at any time without penalty. You are free to decline to answer any particular question you do not wish to answer for any reason.

BENEFITS
You will receive no direct benefits from participating in this research study. However, your responses may help us learn more about *Star Wars* fandom and our broader relationship to mediated popular culture.

RISKS
There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life.

CONFIDENTIALITY
Your survey answers will be sent to a link at Qualtrics.com where data will be stored in a password protected electronic format. Qualtrics does not collect identifying information such as your name, email address, or IP address. Therefore, your responses will remain anonymous. No one will be able to identify you or your answers, and no one will know whether or not you participated in the study.
At the end of the survey you will be asked if you are interested in participating in an additional interview by Skype (or other VOIP service) or telephone. If you choose to provide your email address, your survey responses may no longer be anonymous to the researcher. However, no names or identifying information would be included in any publications or presentations based on these data, and your responses to this survey will remain confidential.

CONTACT
If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact myself at jnl48@drexel.edu or my research supervisor, Professor Wes Shumar via email at shumarw@drexel.edu.
If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or that your rights as a participant in research have not been honored during the course of this project, or you have any questions, concerns, or complaints that you wish to address to someone other than the investigator, you may contact the Drexel University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB reviews research projects so that steps are taken to protect the rights and welfare of humans subjects taking part in the research. You may contact them at (215) 762-3944 or email HRPP@drexel.edu for any of the following:
 Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team. You cannot reach the research team. You want to talk to someone besides the research team. You have questions about your rights as a research subject. You want to get information or provide input about this research.

ELECTRONIC CONSENT: Please select your choice below. You may print a copy of this consent form for your records. Clicking on the "Agree" button indicates that
- You have read the above information
- You voluntarily agree to participate
- You are 18 years of age or older

Section I: Demographics

1. **When were you born?**
   - ☐ Before 1928
   - ☐ 1928-1945
   - ☐ 1946-1964
   - ☐ 1965-1980
   - ☐ 1981-1996
   - ☐ After 1997

2. **Please specify the gender you identify with. You may select more than one option.**
   - ☐ Female
   - ☐ Male
   - ☐ Transgender Female
   - ☐ Transgender Male
   - ☐ Gender Variant/Non-Conforming
   - ☐ Other (please specify)
   - [   ]
   - ☐ Prefer not to answer

3. **Please specify the race or ethnicity you identify with. You may select more than one option.**
   - ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native
   - ☐ Black or African-American
   - ☐ Afro-Caribbean
   - ☐ Hispanic/Latin(x)
   - ☐ Asian
   - ☐ White or Caucasian
   - ☐ Native Hawaiian or Pacific islander
   - ☐ Unknown
   - ☐ Other (please specify)
   - [   ]
   - ☐ Prefer not to answer

4. **What is your current relationship status?**
   - ☐ Single/Unmarried
   - ☐ Married
   - ☐ Divorced
   - ☐ Separated
   - ☐ Widowed
   - ☐ Prefer not to answer

5. **What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?**

○ Some high school, no diploma

○ High school graduate, diploma or equivalent

○ Some college

○ Trade/technical/vocational training

○ Associate degree

○ Bachelor's degree

○ Master's degree

○ Professional degree

○ Doctorate degree

Section II: Toy Collection Questions

6. **What age did you start collecting….?**

7. **Which toylines do you collect? (Select up to 3 and rank them according to which are your favorite or most collected)**
☐ Star Wars
☐ He-Man and the Masters of the Universe
☐ G.I. Joe
☐ Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles
☐ Transformers
☐ Barbie
☐ My Little Pony
☐ Care Bears
☐ Beanie Babies
☐ Lego
☐ Mighty Morphin Power Rangers
☐ Other (Please specify)

8. **Please provide more information regarding which toy series you specifically collect. For instance, if you selected Star Wars, do you collect all Star Wars toys or just vintage Kenner action figures and vehicles (1977-1985).**

9. **What, if any, other media (cartoon, TV show, movie, comic books, commercials) influenced or informed your desire to collect the toys you indicated above?**

Section III: Fandom Questions

How much do you agree or disagree with the following?
1-Strongly Disagree 2-Disagree 3-Neutral 4-Agree 5-Strongly Agree

10. I feel emotionally connected to my toys.
11. I often describe myself as a toy collector.
12. Being a toy collector defines me.
13. Toys/toy collection play(s) a part in my everyday life.
14. Within my social group, I am the go-to person for toy related knowledge.
15. Toy collection is my most enjoyable form of entertainment.
16. I feel a bond with other toy collectors.
17. I devote a lot of time to studying toys/toy collecting.
18. I like being known as a toy collector.
19. The toys I collect say something about who I am
20. Toy collecting is just a hobby*

How often do you do the following?
1 Never 2 Almost Never 3 Sometimes 4 Often 5 Very Often

21. Communicate with others about vintage toys/toy collecting online or in-person.
22. Study toy related media (books, magazines, documentaries, Youtube videos, etc.).
23. Think about my toys/toy collecting.
24. Actively participate as a member of a toy related community online.
25. Visit physical toy stores.
26. Attend toy-related conventions.
27. Engage with my toys (organize, display, catalog, photograph, curate, play, show others)

Section IV: Collector Motivation

How much do you agree or disagree with the following?
1-Strongly Disagree 2-Disagree 3-Neutral 4-Agree 5-Strongly Agree

28. The most enjoyable aspect of toy collecting is hunting/searching for toys
29. I am friends with other toy collectors
30. Collecting is primarily a private activity for me*
31. If I want or need a toy for my collection the cost does not matter*
32. I prefer to collect toys in their unopened original packaging because they are worth more
33. I feel compelled to collect any toy related to _____.
34. My goal is to collect all the toys of the specific toyline I am interested in
35. I rely on other collectors for their expertise
36. Sometimes my toys/toy collecting makes me wish I were a kid again
37. Collecting toys as an adult brings reminds me of playing with childhood friends or family
38. I mostly collect toys I played with or wanted as a kid
39. Toy collection primarily a profession for you in that your main interest in toys is to resell them for profit?

40. Are you willing to be interviewed regarding your toy collecting?
  - **If yes, please provide a contact email.**

APPENDIX B: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Collecting

1. How long have you been collecting toys?
   - Probe: How did you get started collecting?
2. What do you collect?
   - Probe: What do you collect the most of?
   - Probe: What is your favorite thing to collect?
3. What is your most prized collectible?

For interviews conducted via VOIP (SKYPE, FACETIME, etc..) I will ask the participant to show me their favorite toy and discuss it with me.

   - Probe: How you came to acquire it?
   - Probe: Why is it so significant to you?
4. Describe your typical process to acquire a new collectible?
   - Probe: Where do you go?
5. What do you with your toys after you have "collected" them? (let them define their interaction)
   - Store them?
   - Photograph?
   - Display them?
   - Sell them?
6. What other activities do you engage in related to toy collection or the toys you collect?
7. What criteria does a toy have to meet to be included in your collection?
   - What makes an old toy collectible?
   - What about the toys you collect do you like so much?

Collector Identity

8. Tell me about the importance of being a collector to you?
   - Prompt: "*I know for me…*"
9. Do people in your life know that you collect?
   - When you tell people that you collect for the first time what is their reaction?
10. Has anyone ever identified you as a collector or introduced you to someone else as a collector?
    - How did that make you feel?
    - Do you like being known as a collector?
    - Do you think about collecting or your collectibles often?

What do your toys represent about you?

Generational Identity

Do you think what you collect now was influenced by your age/when you were born?

Do you think most people your age are familiar with what you collect?

Did you and your friends play with the same toys as kids?

Were the toys an important part of your social experience as a child?

- How so?

Do you identify with any particular generation?

- What are some common traits you see in other people around your age?
- Are there common things that are important to you?
- When you are with others around your age, what kind of things do you discuss?
- When you think about being a member of [BLANK] generation, what comes to mind?
- What are some important moments or memories related to collecting or your toys?

Considering the time, effort, price, and space required, why do you think collecting toys is popular with adults around your age?

Culture

Tell me about your relationship with other collectors.

- Do you know many other collectors personally?
- Do you consider them friends?
- How much interaction do you have with other collectors?
- Where does this interaction take place?

Do you belong to or feel connected to a specific collector community?

- Tell me about collector community.

Describe a typical toy collector?

- What are some typical characteristics of a typical collector?

How are [BLANK] toy collectors similar to or different from other collectors?

Tell me about toy collecting culture.

- Are there different types of collectors?
- Are collectors competitive with one another?
- Is price a major consideration when acquiring a new (old) toy?
- How do you determine the cost or value of a collectible toy?

What do you need to know to collect _____?

- What kind of knowledge is valued in collector communities?
- Who are the experts?
- How do you earn respect within a collector community?

APPENDIX C: LIST OF FACEBOOK GROUPS RECRUITED FROM

Group Name	Members
(Philly's Star Wars) Sinister Six Bounty Hunters Collective	501
My Little Pony ~ G1 Collectors	3,800
60s, 70s, And 80s Toys, Action Figures And Comics For Sale	11,400
80-90s Vintage Toy Online Flea Market	21,800
80's - 90's Saturday Morning Cartoons The Group	28,100
80s Cartoons, TV Shows, Movies & Toys	5,400
80s Commercials, trailers, toys and more…	257,200
80's Toy Collectors	1,900
90's Marvel/Toy Biz Collectors	2,200
All Things Toys And Collectibles	5,100
Barbie Collectors	39,100
Battlestar Galactica Vintage Toys collectors group	3,500
Beast Wars Buy Sell and Trade WORLDWIDE	1,900
Bravestarr Collectors	2,500
Cabbage Patch Kids Buy, Sell & Trade	4,300
Care Bear Collectors	5,300
Care Bears Forever in the Kingdom of Caring	5,800
Centurions Power XTreme - discuss, buy, sell, trade	1,500
Classic Toys	13,000
Collect It! Vintage Toys & Collectables	8,300
Collectors Toy Shoppe and Auction House	26,500
COOL COLLECTIBLES FOR SALE Toys, comics, movie, TV	6,800
Dino Riders	1,300
ETERNIA DREAMS Toys & Collectibles LLC	8,000

FOOD FIGHTERS - MATTEL - TOY GROUP	794
Freaks N Geeks and All Things Toys	3,900
G.I. JOE A REAL AMERICAN TOY STORE™	11,900
G.I. Joe Collectors (1982-1994 ONLY)	5,000
G.I. Joe Uncensored	15,500
G1 Forever	16,400
Gem State Star Wars Collectors Club	24
GENERATIONS OF TOYS LIVE AND REPLY AUCTIONS	5,100
Ghostbusters Collectors	5,900
Ghostbusters Toys Sale And Trade	5,100
Ghostbusters Vintage Collectors	11,300
GI Joe ARAH Vintage Toy Line 1982 to 1994	18,600
GI JOE by HASBRO 1964-1976	3,700
GI Joe Toy Collectors	4,900
Girls Toys Collections 70's, 80's, 90's and 00's	931
He Man MOTU Vintage Toy Line 1982 To 1988	4,700
He-Man And The Masters Of the Universe Collectors Group	10,600
Hot Wheels Collectors & Customizers - Official Group	56,400
I LOVE GOBOTS !!!	1,400
Identification Help for Vintage Girls Toys + Accessories NO SALES/VALUATION	4,200
I-Remember-That! Vintage Toys For All	5,300
Jabba's Court - Vintage Star Wars Collectors Group 1977 - 1988	7,700
Jem and The Holograms!	1,400
Jem Dolls, She's Truly Outrageous.	1,400
JP Toy Collectors	1,800
Kenner Mask	4,600
Kenner Super Powers Collectors	6,600

League of Extraordinary Collectors	12,700
M.A.S.K. Comics, Movie, Toys, Etc.	2,400
M.A.S.K. Toy Collectors	6,700
Marvel Secret Wars Collectors	1,800
MASTERS OF THE UNIVERSE CLASSICS COLLECTORS	6,200
Masters of the universe. Buy, sell, trade.	12,900
MEGO - The Mego Corporation Toys	2,900
Midwest's Toy Chest	5,200
MLP Collectors	3,600
MOTU NATION - Masters of the Universe	15,400
My Little Pony - Extras FOR SALE	4,300
My Little Pony G1 World	2,000
Oola's Booty - Vintage Toy and Collectibles Trading Group	4,000
Power Rangers Traders, Buyers, and Sellers	18,000
ReAction Figure Fans	5,100
Retro gaming and Retro toys	1,300
Retro Toys 1980's 90's Buy Sell Trade And Nostalgia.	6,100
Star Trek Action Figures	1,300
STAR TREK TOYS & COLLECTIBLES	3,200
STAR TREK TOYS!	441
STAR WARS Toys - Vintage and Modern, Authentic or Repro (Reproduction)	4,500
Star Wars Vintage Collectors Group	12,400
Star Wars Vintage Toys Collectors group	14,400
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles Action Figures Collectors	10,900
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles Buy, Sell, Trade	15,200
The Animated Batman Collector's Group	1,200
The Attic Toys (UITA)	3,900

The Greatest Toy Group on Earth!!	19,300
The Hardcore Collectors	7,600
The Imperial Commissary - 1977-1985 Vintage Star Wars Toys, Buy Sell Trade	23,400
The Jem Fan Group	2,200
THE MOST WANTED VINTAGE TOYS PRE 1994	10,300
The Real Ghostbusters Vintage Figure Collectors	4,300
The Smurf Collectors Club	3,700
THE SYNDICATE TOY HUNTERS	6,400
The Whispering Woods: She-Ra - Princesses of Power	1,100
Thundercats and silverhawks	8,400
Thundercats Collectors Zone	4,900
TMNT Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles Fans 1984-Forever	24,500
TMNT Toy Collectors	10,800
TOY COLLECTORS	1,800
Toy Hoarders Anonymous	13,500
Toy Hunters' Den	2,000
TOY JUNKIES	1,000
Toy Trader	7,800
Toy Wonderland - Buy, Sell, and Show & Tell	487
ToyBizness Live & Reply Auctions	7,300
Toys and Collectibles	2,300
Toys Are Us	3,500
Toys From The 50s 60s And 70s	12,700
Toys of My Youth (1959-1989)	15,300
Transformers G1 Vintage Only , Collecting and Discussion (Honor of G1)	3,900
Transformers Generation One G1	27,000

Transformers Liberated: Buy/Sell/Trade/Discuss	7,300
Unofficial M.A.S.K. Discussion and Trading Group	2,300
Vintage 1960's Toys for those who love the 60's	4,900
Vintage 80's toys	38,200
Vintage and Modern Toy Hunters	7,500
Vintage GIRLS TOYS ONLY Buy, swap & Sell	12,600
Vintage Lego Collectors	17,300
Vintage My Little Pony *G1*	3,300
Vintage Polly Pocket Buy Sell And Trade	4,200
Vintage Strawberry Shortcake: Buy, Sell or Show & Tell	4,300
Vintage Thundercats Collectors	6,600
Vintage TMNT Toys (Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles) 1988-1998	13,500
Vintage Toys & Action Figures Exchange	4,900
Vintage Toys and Action Figures	63,500
vintage toys buy and sell	23,700
Vintage Toys, Vintage Toy Ads and Vintage TV Toy Commercials	4,000
Visionaries Knights of The Magical Light	1,300
Voltron (toys and collectables)	5,800
🌈Rainbow Brite Rhelm🌈 - Buy Sell Trade Find Talk Love	2,500
🎀Vintage Girls Toys Dreamland🎀 Buy Sell Trade Find Talk Love	5,600
Total Members	**1,317,178**

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEWEE CLASSIFICATION LIST

Pseudonym	Gender	Generation	Race	Relationship Status	Education	Toyline
Timothy	Male	Baby Boomer	White or Caucasian	Committed Relationship	Post Graduate/Professional	G.I. Joe
Robby	Male	Gen X	Asian	Committed Relationship	Some College	G.I. Joe
Jefferson	Male	Gen X	White or Caucasian	Committed Relationship	Post Graduate/Professional	G.I. Joe
Trisha	Female	Millennial	White or Caucasian	Committed Relationship	Some College	He-Man
Bill	Male	Gen X	White or Caucasian	Committed Relationship	College Degree	Jem
Matthias	Other	Gen X	White or Caucasian	Committed Relationship	College Degree	Jem
Peter	Male	Gen X	White or Caucasian	Committed Relationship	College Degree	M.A.S.K.
Tori	Female	Gen X	White or Caucasian	Committed Relationship	College Degree	My Little Pony
Betty	Female	Gen Z	White or Caucasian	Committed Relationship	College Degree	My Little Pony
Katherine	Female	Millennial	Hispanic	Committed Relationship	College Degree	My Little Pony
Tom	Male	Millennial	White or Caucasian	Committed Relationship	College Degree	My Little Pony
Amy	Female	Gen Z	White or Caucasian	Single	College Degree	Rainbow Brite
Clark	Male	Baby Boomer	White or Caucasian	Committed Relationship	Some College	Star Wars
Justice	Male	Gen X	Asian	Single	Post Graduate/Professional	Star Wars
Jason	Male	Gen X	White or Caucasian	Committed Relationship	College Degree	Star Wars
Percy	Male	Gen X	White or Caucasian	Committed Relationship	Post Graduate/Professional	Star Wars
Lyle	Male	Millennial	White or Caucasian	Committed Relationship	College Degree	Star Wars
Jackson	Male	Baby Boomer	White or Caucasian	Committed Relationship	College Degree	Star Wars
Bailey	Female	Millennial	White or Caucasian	Committed Relationship	College Degree	Star Wars/Blythe
Gonzo	Male	Millennial	Hispanic	Committed Relationship	Some College	Ninja Turtles
Rich	Male	Gen X	Asian	Committed Relationship	High School Grad/Equivalent	Transformers
Brent	Male	Gen X	Black/African American	Committed Relationship	Post Graduate/Professional	Transformers
Mark	Male	Gen X	Hispanic	Committed Relationship	Post Graduate/Professional	Transformers
Sharon	Female	Gen X	White or Caucasian	Single	Some College	Transformers
Mitchell	Male	Gen X	White or Caucasian	Married/Committed Relationship	Some College	Transformers
Jade	Male	Gen Z	White or Caucasian	Married/Committed Relationship	High School Grad/Equivalent	Transformers

Jonathon Nicholas Lundy

2404 S. Wildrye Way, Nampa, ID 83686 – jonathonnlundy@gmail.com – 208-850-4302

Education

PhD Communication, Culture, and Media   Graduating December 2021

Drexel University, Philadelphia, PA

- Doctoral Candidate (ABD) Required course work and qualifying exams completed.
- Former Vice President of Finance for CCMADS graduate student organization.
- Current Chair of Alumni Relations for CCMADS graduate student organization.

Dissertation Title: *Toying with Generational Identity: A Mixed Methods Study of Vintage Toy Collectors*

Advisor: Wesley Shumar, Ph.D.

Master of Arts in Communication   December 17, 2010

Boise State University, Boise, Idaho

- Fall 2009 ASBSU Golden Apple Award Nominee for exceptional instruction in the classroom.

Thesis: Lundy, J. (2010). *Still flying: The communicative constitution of Browncoat fandom as culture*, Master's Thesis, Boise State University.

Bachelor of Arts (2) Mass Communications/Journalism & Political Science   May 14, 2005

Boise State University, Boise, Idaho

- Dean's List, National Collegiate Scholar Recognition

Teaching Experience

Summary:

- Successfully facilitated learning in lower and upper division courses at three different institutions, both in-person and online, receiving strong evaluations
- Periodically assessed student learning outcomes, utilizing qualitative research, quantitative data analysis, and innovative curriculum development
- Creatively engaged student a diverse array of students with dynamic presentations, exercises, and incorporation of relevant media

Drexel University, Department of Communication   Fall 2015–Present

- **COM 111 (In-person and Online)** – Introductory survey course to the diverse field of communication exploring perception, listening, verbal, nonverbal, intercultural communication, personal identity, interpersonal relationships, group and team communication, and media.
- **COM 150** – Media and Society; survey course in the history, political economy, regulation, current issues, and impact of the mass media in the United States and worldwide.
- **COM 160** – Introduction to Journalism; theoretical and practical immersion into the profession with a focus on journalistic writing and print/online publication.
- **COM 210 (In-person and Online)** – An introduction to prominent models and theories that are key to understanding the discipline of communication with a focus on application to interpersonal, group, organizational, intercultural, and mass communication contexts.
- **COM 230** – Techniques of Speaking; A workshop-based course in public speaking. Provides both theoretical and practical experience in speeches of explanation, persuasion, and argument.

- **COM 270 (In-person and online)** – Business Communication; Writing intensive course focused of strategic communication in the professional environment; business letters, traditional resumes, digital resume, blogs, infographics, memos, proposals, and reports.
- **COM 330** – Professional Presentations; A workshop course in the theory and practice of making effective professional presentations for the technical and business professional. Provides a systems approach to the planning, production, and presentation of visual/aural programs.

Boise State University, Department of Communication   Fall 2009–Summer 2016
- **COMM 101** – Fundamentals of Speech Communication; survey course in all areas of communication discipline with a focus on introductory public presentation.
- **COMM 294/494**—Science Fiction's Special Effects on Culture; concise exploration of the history and cultural significance of science fiction as a genre in literature, film, and television. SF provides a context to study the reciprocal relationship between media and culture.
- **COMM 360** – Media Aesthetics and Culture; Examination of both the formal principles and receptive significance of applied aesthetic fields as well as issues concerning culture, audiences, and thematic genres.
- **COMM 451** – Communication Practicum; Directed study of teaching assistant emphasizing the practical application of skills and theory relevant to human communication.
- **COMM 466** – Communication Technology and Social Change; Investigation into the history and evolution of communication technology with a focus on upon the interpersonal and cultural impact thereof.

Boise State University, Foundational Studies Program   Fall 2012–Spring 2013
- **UF 100** – Intellectual Foundations (discussion leader); Interdisciplinary course into scholarly discourse and critical inquiry with a focus on enhancing students' ability to communicate clearly, correctly, logically, and persuasively in spoken English.

College of Western Idaho, Department of Communication   Fall 2013–Present
- **COMM 101 (In-person and online)** – Fundamentals of Oral Communication; survey course in all areas of communication discipline with a focus on introductory public address.

Publications

Lundy, J., Jenkins, A., & Van Den Bulck, H. "Fandom." In: Van Den Bulck, J. (Ed.), *The International Encyclopedia of Media Psychology*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Lundy, J. (accepted but withdrawn). "Totally Toyetic: Totally Toyetic: The Enduring Legacy of 1980s Toys" In: Hains, R. C. Hains and Jennings, N.A. (Eds.). *The Marketing of Children's Toys Critical Perspectives on Children's Consumer Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Lundy, J. (2020). "From Kenner Star Wars Collection: Commercials Sold Separately." In: Sweet, D.R. and Nardi, D. (Eds.), *The Transmedia Franchise of Star Wars TV*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Conference Participation
Joss Whedon: A Celebration 2014   Saturday, May 3, 2014
DePaul University, College of Communication
Chicago, IL
- Guest panelist regarding "Religion and Ethics in Whedon"

A Celebration of Star Trek 2016   Saturday, May 7, 2016
DePaul University, College of Communication
Chicago, IL
- Guest panelist regarding "Otherness and Privilege in the Star Trek Universe"

2016 Mid-Atlantic Popular & American Culture Association   November 3 – 5
Atlantic City, NJ (Paper Presentations)
- "Disruption: Business News Coverage of Netflix and Amazon's Award Winning Shows"
- "In Joss We Trust: Fanactivism in the 21st Century"

2017 Drexel University Communication, Culture, and Media Graduate Conference
Tuesday, May 8
Philadelphia, PA
- "Star Wars Fanactivism" (Presenter)

2017 Mid-Atlantic Popular & American Culture Association   November 9 – 11
Philadelphia, PA
- "Star Wars Fandom, Collectible Toys, and Consumer Culture" (Paper Presentation)

2018 Drexel University Communication, Culture, and Media Graduate Conference   Tuesday, May 8
Philadelphia, PA
- "Playing with Generational Identity" (Presenter)

2018 National Communication Conference   November 8 – 11
Salt Lake City, UT (Paper Presentation)
- "Finding The Force in Consumption: The Search for Meaning in the 21st century Consumer Culture

2021 Popular Culture Association National Conference   June 2 – 5
Philadelphia, PA
- "Craft Brewing as Fandom" (Presenter)

Research and Scholarship Experience
Research Assistant
Fall 2015
Drexel University, Philadelphia, PA
- Reviewed, provided ongoing notes, and conducted research for Dr. Robert J. Kane' book proposal;
  Decoding #Ferguson: How Networked Crowds Convey Wisdom During Crisis and How They May Help Reform American Policing

Research Assistant   August 2008–May 2009
Boise State University, Department of Communication
- Assisted Natalie Nelson-Marsh PhD with two research projects related to organizational communication within the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF). Independently gathered and analyzed data then regularly and formally reported findings.

<u>**Relevant Professional Experience**</u>
Academic Advisor – Transfer Student Specialist   Fall 2011–June 2013
Boise State University, Advising and Academic Enhancement
- Conducted macro-level, assessment, gap analysis, leadership, and coordination of efforts to foster a more transfer receptive culture at the university
- Provided micro-level, in depth one-on-one advising for students in transition
- Collaborated with areas of campus like enrollment services to improve transfer student experience
- Designed transfer student website, course mapping documentation, required advising best practices, external and internal referral guides, transfer student updates
- Cultivated professional relationships with campus stakeholders and at top feeder schools
- Established a regular advising presence at top feeder schools
- Helped plan STEM Summer Adventure Program and 2013 Pacific Northwest LSAMP Conference
- Point person for transfer students at orientation, special project lead, liaison to College of Business and Economics.
- Organization, coordination, and participation in International Student Orientation programs

Library Assistant I/Administrative Assistant I   March 2006 – July 2011
Boise State University Albertson's Library
- Enthusiastically supervised circulation services to ensure superior patron relations
- Provided leadership and training to student staff, concentrating on effective staff-patron relationships
- Coordinated with staff, students, and faculty to maintain and build Reserve Library Collection; Managed online databases and Spearheaded Textbook Collection Project
- Positively assisted operations in Library Dean's Office
- Managed special projects; cataloging and cost-benefit analysis of library's online database collection

News Production Assistant - Internship   May 2005 – September 2005
KBOI Channel 2 News
- Provided general assistance across all areas of the newsroom
- Operated live audio board for the nightly news casts
- Edited and constructed video segments that accompanied stories delivered by newscasters

<u>**Special Skills and Training**</u>
Language; 5 years Spanish, 1 year French. Certificate in Online Instructional Design. Certificate in Educational Technology Microsoft Office Software training; Microsoft Excel, Word, Access, Outlook, PowerPoint. Electronic Publishing; Word Press, HTML, CSS, Dreamweaver, PeopleSoft, Statistics; SPSS, Storm S Video, Adobe Acrobat, Adobe Premiere, Voyager, I-Movies, Camtasia, OBS Studio, Zoom.