

Representation of fandom in mainstream media: Analysis of production and content of Flemish television's *Superfans*

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Abstract

By means of a qualitative analysis of *Superfans*, a five-part reality television series in which fans are followed in their daily activities, ranging from singing along at concerts to intimate camera confessions in a room dedicated to their idol, this article studies the representation of fandom in mainstream television and participants' and TV-producers' reflections upon it. Empirical content analysis and interviews reveal different aspects of fandom, as identified by Abercrombie and Longhurst, to dominate the representation: intense media use and fan productivity, strong hierarchical communities and a lack of critical interpretative skills. Fan–idol relationships are shown to be based on emotions and to go beyond mere identification to include parasocial relationships and neo-religiosity. Results thus confirm the theoretical paradox between the television industry's promotion of celebrity to attract loyal audiences and the rejection of fandom through a carefully constructed representation hereof as 'freaky business'.

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Introduction

The current media and television landscape exemplifies a conspicuous paradox regarding celebrities and fandom. Media stimulate the construction of celebrities and use them as part of their marketing strategy to help attract a loyal audience (with fandom as the apex of loyalty; Van den Bulck and Claessens, 2013). At the same time, media often represent fandom in a negative way, scorning it as the extreme, ‘abnormal’ worship of celebrities (Jensen, 1992) or, more recently in series such as *The Big Bang Theory*, as inherently related to ‘nerdness’ (Geraghty, 2014). This is striking, as this negative view has long been regarded as outdated in academic theory and fandom research (Sandvoss, 2005) and as fandom is today considered part of the everyday lives of ‘normal’ people (cf. Jenkins, 1992). The paradoxical stance of media on celebrities and fans reflects a wider societal paradox. On one hand, there is the image of a class-free society (Lash, 1999), in which identity is based on lifestyle rather than class and in which everyone has become a cultural omnivore, resulting in the disappearance of the high versus low culture distinction (Peterson and Kern, 1996). On the other hand, there are indications that so-called omnivorousness is more problematic than assumed (Lizardo and Skiles, 2012). Indeed, a new hierarchy has arisen within popular culture (Gans, 1999), in which the consumption of some cultural forms is accepted more easily than that of others (e.g. drama series vs soaps). This paradox is reflected in celebrity culture, as celebrities from a culturally more highly esteemed context (e.g. opera’s Luciano Pavarotti, film star George Clooney) are represented differently from those from a context deemed culturally lower (e.g. pop idol Justin Bieber or reality TV star Honey Boo Boo). This contradiction extends to the way in which media represent and discuss fans of these respective types of celebrities – as ‘normal’, ‘respectable’ people or as ‘freaks’ – and how they are positioned on the social ladder – with more or less cultural capital (see Bourdieu, 1979).

This article aims to study these media-related contradictions by means of a case study of the five-part television programme *Superfans*, which follows 23 fans of various celebrities as they engage in everyday endeavours in which their fandom plays a key role. The episodes were broadcast in 2011 on Flemish commercial broadcaster VT4 (1995, part of the SBS group, now VIER). The television station appears to epitomize the aforementioned paradox. It uses celebrities as presenters, announcers and brand faces, and creates them in reality shows such as ‘Komen Eten’ (Come Dine with Me) and ‘Tienermoeders’ (Teenage Moms; Mast, 2014). At the same time, it appears to mock the phenomenon of (extreme) fandom in a programme such as *Superfans*, which was criticized for its negative and even ethically questionable nature (e.g. Vandendaele, 2011). This begs the question: What image of fans is created in *Superfans* and how does this reflect the aforementioned paradox? Is fandom represented as a normal part of everyday life or as ‘freaky business’ of ‘pathological fans’, as the television critics suggest? This article studies these questions by means of a qualitative content analysis of the programme’s representation of fans, complemented by interviews with participating fans and a

programme producer. As Reijnders et al. (2012) point out, media create a virtual reality 'which has many intersections with, and is inextricably related to an empirical, tangible reality' (p. 118). As such, an analysis of *Superfans* can provide us with an understanding of the current paradox in relation to celebrities, fans and culture.

Bridging celebrity and fan studies

Before analysing *Superfans*, the key concepts in this study – celebrity and fan – shall be defined. A celebrity is conceptualized as a construction resulting from an interaction between a well-known person and his or her entourage, the media and audiences (Rojek, 2001). Celebrities can be distinguished based on, among others, the domain they work in. Contemporary celebrity culture dominates the realms of entertainment (film, music and television) and is thus affected by different cultural appreciations of its subsections (e.g. thespian vs blockbuster actors). Increasingly, it dominates other domains including politics, economics or religion. Celebrities are considered both products and ambassadors of the commodification of society (Marshall, 1997) and are laden with meaning and evaluations insofar as their ideas and behaviour, the field in which they work and the way they obtained celebrity status represent, modify or reject social norms and values (Van den Bulck and Claessens, 2013; Evans and Hesmondalgh, 2005). This makes *Superfans*' celebrities interesting to analyse.

However, *Superfans* is first and foremost about fans. Traditionally, the 'fan' label was used only in the context of popular culture and not regarding people who enjoy so-called high culture like theatre or the arts (Grossberg, 1992). Thus, the term 'fan' itself implied a hierarchical (lower) position. Despite the notion of an omnivorous culture taking hold, Western society and, interestingly, depictions of fans in popular cultural texts such as television programmes still consider fans as 'nerds', 'obsessed loners' or 'frenzied crowd members', characterized by dysfunctional or irrational personalities and behaviour, often vulnerable to external influences beyond their control (Geraghty, 2014; Hills, 2007; Jensen, 1992; Sandvoss, 2005). This image of fandom as an aberration or pathology can equally be understood as the result of class and status hierarchies that polarize 'normal' people with fans in us versus them, reason versus emotion (fans as emotivists) or safe versus dangerous (fans as infantile or pathological freaks) binaries (Hills, 2002, 2007; Jensen, 1992). This suggests that fandom is still associated with marginalized and subordinated groups in society (see Fiske, 1992) and begs the question to what extent this is reflected and articulated in *Superfans*. In contrast, in academic theory and research, the image of fandom has changed considerably in recent decades from fans as freaks and passive victims of the industry (1950s–1970s), over efforts (from the 1980s) to reverse the image of fans as active and the relationship between producer and fan as much more complex, to the current, third generation of fan studies that regard fandom as a normal aspect of everyday life in an industrialized world and an important factor of identity development (Sandvoss, 2005).

Within fan studies, a common denominator among the varying definitions of fandom is the role of affect or emotions. Cases in point are the way Sandvoss (2005) describes fandom as 'the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text' (p. 8) and the way Grossberg (1992) emphasizes fans' affective sensibility.

A second recurring characteristic of fandom is its intense character, exemplified in Fiske's (1992) definition of fandom as 'an intensely pleasurable, intensely signifying popular culture' (p. 30). Fandom can vary in style, intensity and object, resulting in fan typologies such as Abercrombie and Longhurst's (1998), among others. They distinguish three fan types – 'fans', 'cultists' and 'enthusiasts' – using a range of criteria. The typology can be criticized for its terminology (using 'fan' as one type of fan (Hills, 2002: ix) and 'cultists' having overly religious connotations (Sandvoss, 2005: 31)) and for a replication of societal prejudices (Geraghty, 2014), yet it provides a useful set of dimensions, confirmed by others (cf. *infra*), by which to analyse the characteristics of fandom. Dimensions include the type of fan object, which can be a media text (person and programme) or activity (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998: 138); the extent to which it is 'media-focused and -organized' (p. 30); and its level of (textual) productivity and performativity (cf. Fiske, 1992; Hills, 2002). Other dimensions include the existence of fan communities with internal power differences and hierarchies (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998; Reijnders et al., 2012; Sandvoss, 2005) and various skills (technical, analytical and interpretative). Skills are conceptualized in this study as the ability to take a critical distance from the fan object and fan behaviour (cf. restricted and elaborate code, Bernstein, 1971).

Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) use the criterion of *identification* to explain the fan–idol relationship, but we adopt a broader view of the relationship between the fan and the idol. This can take the form of identification: 'an intense, if temporary, merging of the self with a media character' (Cohen, 2009: 229). However, a fan can also maintain a parasocial relationship with a celebrity: the illusion of a long-term friendship, analogous to social relationships, encompassing an emotional connection, yet mediated and one-sided (Claessens and Van den Bulck, 2015). Most people maintain a moderate degree of parasocial relationship with celebrities, while fans show a strong to extreme (emotional) involvement (Jensen, 1992; Reijnders et al., 2012). The fan can also consider the idol to be a god(-like creature). Indeed, both religion and fandom are based on 'acts of devotion' (Hills, 2002: 118), and fans often employ a religious discourse (Reijnders et al., 2012).

Reality television provides a particularly meaningful context for an analysis of fan dimensions and associated paradoxes of contemporary celebrity culture. As a prolific popular television phenomenon, it plays an active role in the construction and promotion of celebrities, most notably through the established subgenre of the 'celebrity docu-soap' (cf. *supra*), and has become an object of fandom in its own right. As such, reality television epitomizes the celebrity–media–audience nexus while being generally positioned at the lower end of the television genre hierarchy. As a typical exponent of reality television, *Superfans*' portrayal of fandom is particularly relevant. Reality television's factual basis, premised on 'captur[ing] the warp and weft of lived experience' (Kilborn, 2004) in a *vérité* style and on first-person narratives and self-reflections that are set, in the case of *Superfans*, in people's everyday lives, has the potential to open up mainstream discourse to an alternative conception of fandom that demonstrates its ubiquity and vital role in identity work in contemporary omnivore culture. At the same time, this 'empowering' potential (Dovey, 2000) interacts with reality television's commercial nature and its primary focus on diversion, as programme makers construct a 'preferred reality' through narrative and dramatic techniques (Shufeldt and Gale, 2007). Such market and entertainment considerations have equally informed programme makers to capitalize on the mere

titillation and emotional intensity of publicizing the private; to cast colourful, telegenic character types who conform to preconceived participant roles and who enable (anticipated) story developments; and to edit selectively for narrative interest. As such, reality television may perpetuate long-standing social stereotypes and middle-class standards of normalcy, to the extent that it plays up – exploits – the dramatic ('shock') value of exposing the 'extreme' or 'extraordinary' through 'excessive' public disclosures and displays of emotion, while presenting and thereby judging these qualities as essentially associated with the tastes and mores of the cultural 'Other' (Grindstaff, 2006). Analysing *Superfans* can lay bare the complex relationship between reality television's varying potential roles.

Method

All five episodes of the television programme *Superfans* were collected digitally and subjected to qualitative content analysis. Each episode lasted 1 hour and was broadcast on Wednesday at 10 p.m. between 9 November and 7 December 2011. The aim was to find recurring characteristics and patterns in the representation of fans in *Superfans* by analysing them against the dimensions described above. Texts (i.e. episodes) were read starting from sensitizing concepts, leading to open and axial coding (Strauss, 1987). To confirm or modify findings from the content analysis, it was complemented with information gained from interviews with respondents and a producer. A total of 25 fans were presented in *Superfans*: 20 females and 5 males – 4 teenage girls, 5 girls in their 20s, 14 middle-aged men and women and 1 couple of older adults (Table 1).

Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants and with a producer of the television show who co-developed the programme's concept and was involved in all production stages. Interviews were carried out face to face in March and April 2013, usually at the interviewees' home, and lasted 50–120 minutes. Interviewee selection was informed by findings from the content analysis and aimed at interviewing a cross-section of the variety of fan types portrayed in the series. Occasionally, these theoretical criteria interacted with pragmatic considerations, for instance, when participants declined our interview request. Eventually, we interviewed seven participants. We believe the sample faithfully grasps the extent of fandom portrayed in *Superfans*, insofar as it comprises fans of different ages and gender; fans who experience fandom individually and in groups; and, finally, fans of local and international, contemporary and historical, and music and sports celebrities, enjoying different degrees of cultural status. It also includes some of the most debated cases, like the mentally impaired mother and daughter Anita and Sylvia; Frans, who identified extremely with former cyclist Eddy Merckx; and the all-encompassing devotion of Vivianne for Flemish singer Willy Sommers.

A life in the day of ... a *Superfan*

Fan object

Analysing the objects of fandom in the programme, we found no television series, films or activities (cf. Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998) but 11 celebrities, predominantly local and some international. Interestingly, both international stars are deceased while all

Table 1. Overview of fans, their idol, gender and age.

No.	Fan	Idol	Gender	Age
1	Talitha	Ian Thomas	F	Teenager
2	Kimberley	Ian Thomas	F	Teenager
3	<i>Lisa</i>	Ian Thomas	F	Teenager
4	Sylvia	Sven Nys	F	Middle age
5	Rita	Sven Nys	F	Middle age
6	Karin	Sven Nys	F	Middle age
7	Sévérine	Sven Nys	F	20s
8	<i>Gerrit</i>	Ray Charles	M	Middle age
9	<i>Vivianne</i>	Willy Sommers	F	Middle age
10	Marleen	Willy Sommers	F	Middle age
11	<i>Anita</i>	K3	F	Middle age
12	<i>Sylvia</i>	K3	F	Teenager
13	<i>Ginette</i>	Christoff	F	Old age
14	Gustaaf	Christoff	M	Old age
15	Rachel	Natalia	F	20s
16	Miranda	Natalia	F	20s
17	Talitha	Natalia	F	20s
18	Nancy	Elvis Presley	F	Middle age
19	<i>Frans</i>	Eddy Merckx	M	Middle age
20	Marie-Christine	Gary Hagger	F	Middle age
21	Frieda	Christoff	F	Middle age
22	Yvonne	Christoff	F	Middle age
23	Martin	André Hazes	M	Middle age
24	Guido	Christoff	M	Middle age
25	Adeline	Christoff	F	20s

Italics indicates interviewed participants.

local celebrities are contemporary. The local character of most idols is related to practical production considerations and to the strategic objectives of connecting to Flemish audiences with the familiar and recognizable, as well as of enhancing the likelihood of more comprehensive fan performances, including direct fan–idol interactions, as producer Dewitte (2013, personal communication) confirms. All celebrities come from the domains of sports or music. Regarding musical celebrities, there was a striking presence of local (three Flemish, that is, Willy Sommers, Christoff and Gary Hagger, and one Dutch, that is, André Hazes (†) (deceased)) singers of Schlager music, a genre that takes up a ‘low’ position in European music culture (Simon, 2000). Other music celebrities included Ian Thomas (Flemish equivalent to Canadian teen idol Justin Bieber), Ray Charles (American singer (†)), K3 (Flemish children-oriented girl band), Natalia (Flemish singer similar to Anastasia) and Elvis Presley (American rock legend (†)). Sports celebrities were local cyclists Sven Nys and Eddy Merckx. Both domains are characterized by the central position of affect (Marshall, 1997; Rojek, 2001; Van Zoonen, 2005), which may explain the strong emotions and intense fandom of the participants in *Superfans*. Producer Dewitte confirmed that emotion was an important selection criterion:

We actively looked for fans who are entirely devoted to their fandom, who live for their idol [...] They needed to be expressive, so that you could really sense that they are fans, that they radiate it, and you're drawn into their fandom. Preferably people with a story to tell. (Dewitte, 2013, personal communication)

This confirms the idea that programme makers believe emotion, rather than reason, is key to fandom. All male fans had male idols, while female fans followed both male and female celebrities, confirming previous findings on the preference for male celebrities among audience members (Van den Bulck and Claessens, 2014). Unsurprisingly, teen idol Ian Thomas was adored by three teenage girls and the Flemish Schlager singers by middle-aged female fans and one older couple, each typical audiences for these kinds of musical idols (Van den Bulck and Van Gorp, 2011). In contrast to what is generally assumed (Ganz and Wenner, 1991), all fans of cyclist Sven Nys were women. Finally, a mother–daughter duo with mental disabilities was presented as fans of children-oriented girls band K3.

Media use and productivity

Most participants in *Superfans* were shown to be heavy consumers of their idol's mediated accomplishments in the form of televised concerts or sports races. Ginette and Gustaaf watch and sing along to broadcasts of Christoff's concerts every morning and Eddy Merckx fan Frans watches televised recordings of cycling races on a daily basis while imitating his idol.

Regarding news media coverage, almost all fans were presented as collectors, confirming Geraghty's (2014) insistence on the relevance of collecting in fandom. However, while most research focuses on fan collectors of programmes (e.g. Star Trek) or material texts (e.g. Barbie), *Superfans* is about fans of celebrities. As a result, collecting is not prominent in the programme – partly due to its unspectacular nature, as producer Dewitte explains: 'We also need there to be things that can be portrayed visually. So, not just a scrapbook with some pictures, but fans who are actively doing all kinds of things' (2013, personal communication). Moreover, what is collected differs from what most academic literature portrays and includes, for example, Anita and Sylvia's comprehensive scrapbooks of all media coverage of K3 and Rachel's collection of 'Seven scrapbooks full of Natalia, I collect everything and neatly cut it out of magazines and newspapers' (quote from *Superfans*). Nancy has collected everything she could find on Elvis since she was 10, and Vivianne on Willy Sommers since age 13. The programme thus reproduces the stereotype of such fan behaviour as being a 'childish' endeavour (Hills, 2007). Interestingly, Frans, the programme participant with the strongest identification with his idol (cf. *infra*), looked down on this aspect of fandom: 'I am not a regular fan who collects pictures from newspapers' (quote from *Superfans*). Probed further about this in the interview conducted for this study, he stresses how this sets him apart from 'regular' fans:

There are facts that I need to learn by heart from newspapers and books, so I can stay in character, as Eddy Merckx. [...] But I'm not a collector. I don't have anything from Eddy Merckx. I'm just mesmerized by Eddy Merckx. (2013, personal communication)

Fans often produced their own fan material, such as Marie-Christine who made a variety of cut-and-paste pictures of Gary Hagger and herself on romantic trips or the teenage Ian Thomas fans who produced personal video messages to their idol, declaring their love.

Superfans shows fans' productivity as being strongly commodified. This is not surprising as fans continuously consume products linked to their idols to express their fandom, which is known as 'performative consumption' (Hills, 2002: 29, 159). This includes buying concert tickets, CDs, objects related to the idol (signed posters) and merchandizing (e.g. Sven Nys clothing line), presented to the fans by the celebrity industry, but also fans collecting objects used by the idol himself or herself: 'His [Ray Charles'] sweat was in here, delightful' (Gerrit in *Superfans*) or 'He (Sven Nys) touched it with his soft lips' (S  verine in *Superfans*). The fans explain this: 'I started collecting everything [Elvis-related], for me it was a way to keep him with me' (Nancy in *Superfans*). Rojek (2001) links this to the partial convergence of religion and celebrity culture: 'the preservation of relics from the bodies and possessions of the saints is a common feature of religious practice' (p. 59). Furthermore, fans often buy presents for their idol, which they hand over personally, preferably backstage. These gifts are often expensive: 'I don't care about the price, because it is for Christoff' (Ginette in *Superfans*). While the programme presents fans in this regard mainly as victims of a celebrity industry that exploits the emotional (i.e. irrational) nature of fandom to sell products, the interviews conducted for this study present a modified picture, underlining rational decision making behind fan consumption (cf. Geraghty, 2014). For instance, Ginette explains, 'I don't pull money together. When I buy something, it really needs to be something personal. Not just a part [...] of a suitcase he gets from ten different people' (2013, personal communication).

Interviews with participants further reveal that participation in the programme itself can be conceived as part of the commodification of celebrity/fan culture, where fans trade their privacy for the (commercial) benefit of their idol. In this sense, the readiness of fans to publicly share their fandom on television can be understood as a way of 'returning the favour' for the symbolic or emotional 'gifts' they have received from the idol (Stevens in Hills, 2007: 469), as some fans indicated: 'I think we primarily did it to do K3 a favour' (Sylvia and Anita, 2013, personal communication), or 'If they asked me to do it again, I certainly would, for Christoff' (Ginette, 2013, personal communication).

The material aspect of fandom was not limited to collecting objects but included fan performances, such as Gerrit's singing and comedy performances or Frans 'playing' Eddy Merckx at home and at cycling events. The latter's performance was presented in the programme as extreme and Frans as hardly able to distinguish between the 'real' self (Frans) and the performance (Eddy Merckx). The representation of Gerrit and Frans thus exemplified high degrees of fan productivity as they moved beyond (inter)active media use to effectively replicating the (original) fan object and illustrated productivity's relationship with the commodification of fandom. Gerrit's and Frans' participation in *Superfans* fits into this scheme insofar as it facilitates performance and promotion. Tattoos linked to the idols – for example, their name (Miranda and Talitha) or image (Gerrit and Martin) – were another more permanent form of productivity: 'Look friends, this is Ray Charles, burnt in ink for the rest of my life' (Gerrit in *Superfans*). According to Talitha and Miranda, the tattoo distinguishes them from 'regular' fans: 'A "real" fan'

(Talitha in *Superfans*) and ‘Yes, die-hard’ (Miranda in *Superfans*). The tattoos can be linked to the concept of ‘cult bodies’ although they are more permanent than role-play. A less permanent form of these cult bodies in *Superfans* are the repeated request, especially from female fans, for a signature of their idol on a body part.

Community

In 1992, Jenkins described fan communities as friendly and egalitarian. Hills (2002), however, acknowledges internal hierarchy and tension. While some *Superfans* participants, like Frans, are presented as loners, several others are presented as members of fan communities: ‘We have become one family and this is the Hazes family’ (Martin in *Superfans*). A ‘gang of die-hard Natalia fans’ (quote from *Superfans*) was shown to give her a group present at the final leg of her concert tour. The fans of Christoff are portrayed participating in fan trips to Djerba, which Ginette and Gustaaf compared (and preferred) to family trips.

To some extent, these communities are shown to function as a way to share a passion and to belong to a group: ‘For me, these are all friends and soul mates: What they feel for Hazes, I feel as well’ (Martin in *Superfans*). However, several participants suggest a hierarchy in fan communities by indicating that they are their idol’s biggest rather than a ‘regular’ fan. They ‘prove’ this by showing not only their tattoos or collected items but also their willingness to sacrifice things for their idol: ‘I would walk through a burning fire for Christoff. I would give my life for him’ (Ginette in *Superfans*). Hierarchy is further indicated by the level to which the celebrity dominates the fan’s life: ‘I am André Hazes’ biggest fan in Belgium, I wake up with André and go to bed with André’ (Martin in *Superfans*). This reflects the social hierarchy discussed by Hills (2002): ‘fans share a common interest while also competing over fan knowledge, access to the object of fandom, and status’ (p. 46). To elevate their status, fans try to build up skills, knowledge and distinction, that is, subcultural capital (Sandvoss, 2005).

Interviews revealed that the appearance in *Superfans* affected participants’ position in the hierarchy. Ginette and Vivianne explained how it created jealousy in the community towards them as their status as ‘superfan’ was recognized and established through the programme. Ginette, for instance, was forced to defend her selection to other members of Christoff’s fan community (‘Who had been fans for much longer’ (2013, personal communication)), by stressing that she was picked and had not intentionally elevated herself above the others. Vivianne was confronted with feelings of resentment from other fans. As a direct consequence of her appearance in *Superfans*, at the time of the interview conducted for this study, Vivianne was involved in a law suit against a fellow fan, who set her up by sending a threatening letter to Willy Sommers in her name. Feeling betrayed by her idol, who (momentarily) believed the accusations against her, Vivianne left the fan community and, after 45 years, totally aborted her adoration for Willy.

Fan–idol relationship

The relationship between celebrities and fans can take different forms, of which [only] some were presented in *Superfans*. First, female fans often had a parasocial love

relationship in which the idol was seen as ‘the one’, ‘the perfect man’ or ‘the man of my life’ (quotes from *Superfans*). They described physical elements of infatuation such as ‘butterflies’, ‘goose bumps’ and ‘melting away’ (quotes from *Superfans*). The teenage girls proclaimed themselves in love with Ian Thomas, further demonstrating it by their eagerness to kiss him during a photo shoot. Similar feelings were expressed by the much older fan Vivianne, who talked freely about her long-term infatuation with Willy Sommers: ‘I was in love then, I am in love now and I will stay in love’ (quote from *Superfans*). Portraying a grown woman’s feelings as similar to those of adolescents, the programme stresses the ‘immature’ and ‘abnormal’ nature of Vivianne’s affection (Hills, 2007), which is then further underlined by her admittance that she has been married for 35 years to a ‘very sweet [man], I can go to Willy anytime’ (quote from *Superfans*). Her husband adds, ‘There are two men in Vivianne’s life: me and Willy. But it’s me who sleeps with her, not Willy’ (quote from *Superfans*). The strength of Vivianne’s infatuation is also shown when she admits on camera to thinking about Willy instead of her husband when in bed.

Second, the parasocial relationship between fans and idols can take the form of a friendship. Anita is shown asking her idol Kristel (K3) whether she sees her as a ‘good fan or a good friend’ (quote from *Superfans*). In our interview with Anita (and Sylvia), she explains that ‘the one positive outcome of participation in the programme for me personally, is that I became friends with Kristel [...] On Facebook, that is. Privately, we’re still working on that’ (2013, personal communication). Similarly, for Lisa the photo shoots with Ian Thomas that are part of the programme were ‘something she got out of it’ because it allowed her ‘to actually talk to him’ (2013, personal communication). Ginette, in turn, reveals that what she ‘dreams of most, is having half an hour with Christoff alone, to have a good conversation’ (2013, personal communication). This suggests that participation in the programme may at least in part be motivated by the fan’s desire to gain access to the idol in order to turn the (one-sided) parasocial relationship into a real-life interaction or the ‘emotional/symbolic’ into ‘physical’ closeness (Hills, 2007: 470).

While the programme shows respect for the idols’ achievements as a basis for fandom, it mainly stresses the emotional aspects of fandom (cf. emotivism, Hills, 2007). For one, it is shown as a source of moral support: ‘I was a broken man both financially and emotionally. [...] Thanks to André’s music, I am still here. He put me back on track’ (Martin in *Superfans*). The fan–idol relationship can also mimic that of child and parent. Ginette loves Christoff as a son, and she and her husband compare a fan trip with Christoff to a family trip. Gerrit, conversely, considers Ray Charles to be a surrogate father/grandfather to him and his children because he never knew his own father and Ray Charles saved him from a miserable youth. Some fans consider their idol like a family member: ‘I love her [Natalia] like I love my family’ (Miranda in *Superfans*). At the extreme end of fan–idol relationships shown in *Superfans* is Frans, who is the only fan presented in a relationship of identification as he tries to imitate his idol’s life to the tiniest detail. He did not object to this extreme presentation in the programme, as he states in an interview for this study: ‘I feel completely like I’m Eddy Merckx now’, and ‘As you may have noticed, I look like Eddy Merckx, my nose, chin, mouth, eyebrows. [...] Being Frans is not enough for me, I want to be Eddy Merckx as well’ (2013, personal communication).

Crucial for the portrayal of fandom as a ‘normal’ part of the mainstream (or not) is the way in which *Superfans* places the fan–idol relationship in a wider context of fans’ social lives, stressing the difficulties resulting from their fandom. The producers’ purposefulness in this was recognized by some of the participants in interviews with the researchers. For instance, while Frans did not question his portrayal as trying to be like Eddy Merckx, he pointed to the producers’ eagerness to have the fans’ family feature in the programme, hoping for conflict (Frans, 2013, personal communication). In the programme, some fans claimed that they did not have ‘anything else in their life’ (Séverine in *Superfans*) or did not need a boyfriend or husband: ‘I don’t need a friend because I just ... the friendship and love that I get from Elvis is enough’ (Nancy in *Superfans*). Fans’ family members are repeatedly shown to worry about this social isolation: ‘as long as she stays like this, she will never find anyone’ (Séverine’s sister in *Superfans*). In response, the fans state that their idol will stay in their life forever, despite their family’s wishes. Families were also shown to worry about how the idol controls the fan’s life: ‘Everyone is brainwashed to the point that it drives me a bit crazy [...] There is a whole world apart from Ian Thomas’ (Talitha’s mother in *Superfans*). The most extreme example in *Superfans* is Frans, whose identification with Eddy Merckx is shown to cause marital problems, since his wife ‘married Frans, not Eddy Merckx’ (Frans’ wife in *Superfans*). Both Frans and his children admit to daily conflicts about his fandom: ‘When my parents have an argument, it is almost always about Eddy Merckx’ (Frans’ daughter in *Superfans*). The programme thus confirms the image of the ‘obsessed loner’ (Jensen, 1992) and reflects the producers’ own view on fans, as producer Dewitte explains:

I think you could tell from the programme that there was a lot of loneliness for these people, that the fandom serves as a way to feel better [...] Many of them feel the need to belong, are lonely, have been through some hardship, and need something to hold on to. (2013, personal communication)

Interviews with participants further revealed that relationships with family and environment were affected by the programme participation. Ginette fell out with her family over her revelation that she would rather die in the arms of Christoff than amid family – a statement she claims she was encouraged to express by producers but now regrets. K3 fan Anita’s son (not portrayed in the programme) was put in a boarding school by child services following her participation and fan revelations in *Superfans*. Finally, an interview revealed that Vivianne regrets the (inclusion in the programme of) candid remarks she made about her affection for Willy Sommers because of the emotional fallout for her husband, who was ridiculed at work and in public.

The fan–idol relationship can also be neo-religious when fans worship their idols or describe a religious connection or calling (cf. Reijnders et al., 2012; Rojek, 2001). In *Superfans*, fans are shown to compare their idols to god-like creatures: ‘Svenneke, he is my god’ (Sylvia in *Superfans*) or ‘I compare my life to that of a nun: she dedicates her life to Jesus and I dedicated my life to Elvis’ (Nancy in *Superfans*). Some fans mention a religious revelation. In Gerrit’s case, this happened the first time he heard Ray Charles’ music: ‘It was a revelation, it made me calm, it made me another person’ (Gerrit in *Superfans*). Martin ‘feels like I am in contact with André [...] It is my task and I feel like André steers me: “Martin, collect all my things. I know it, they are in good hands,

continue what you are doing” (Martin in *Superfans*). *Superfans* shows how fans turn rooms in their house into shrines, filled with pictures, posters, personal objects or merchandizing – places where they come to relax: ‘Here, I feel completely at home’ (Gerrit in *Superfans*). For Sylvia, the room in which she has a showcase of products linked to Sven Nys ‘is sacred [...] When I am in this room, yes, then I feel happy’ (quote from *Superfans*). Vivianne is shown to have taken it one step further: ‘My whole house is Willy, it is a Willy-house and that is my Willy-room, that is my sanctuary’ (quote from *Superfans*).

The religious aspect was further indicated by fans’ descriptions of their connection to deceased celebrities. They visit graves of deceased idols, for example, where they experience revelations. When Nancy visited Elvis’ grave in Graceland, it started raining ‘as if Elvis was crying with her from heaven’ (Nancy in *Superfans*). Touching the grave had a special meaning: ‘Gerrit became very emotional, started crying’ (Gerrit’s wife in *Superfans*). Rojek (2001: 59) considers celebrity grave pilgrimages as secularized societies’ equivalent to Christian pilgrimages. Fans are further shown to visit memorials, statues (Martin) or the idol’s former house (Nancy and Martin), all in an attempt to stay connected to their idols beyond death. Some wish to be buried with their idol’s pictures, posters and other merchandise: ‘My greatest wish is to be buried in this shirt [which belonged to André Hazes]’ (Martin in *Superfans*). Others hoped to die in their idol’s arms: ‘It is my greatest wish, if I ever die, to die in Christoff’s arms’ (Ginette in *Superfans*). Some fans, like Nancy and Gerrit, want their ashes scattered in their idol’s grave.

Touch features centrally in the holy fan–idol connection: ‘When his hand touched us, then it is so ... yes, really sacred’ (Lisa in *Superfans*). This is reminiscent of what Reijnders et al. (2012) found when studying meet-and-greets: physical contact carries almost sacred meaning for fans. However, not all physical contact is linked to religion because it is often about sexuality. For instance, Vivianne and Marleen constantly try to touch (and kiss) Willy Sommers. When the teenage girls win a photo shoot with Ian Thomas, they want to kiss him, and when this actually happens, they are deliriously happy: ‘My dream came true, I kissed him on the mouth’ (Kimberley in *Superfans*). Physical contact also stimulates fan fantasies, as, for instance, Sven Nys’ fans fantasize about touching his behind. Often, the ‘real thing’ is replaced by kissing posters.

Skills

Skills are interpreted here as the distinction between fans being able to adopt a more critical, complex, distant stance towards their idol and their and others’ fandom (Bernstein’s (1971) notion of elaborated code) and a more immediate attitude (restricted code) based in the personal and emotional rather than the abstract and rational. Overall, the programme presents fans as using restricted code, characterized by high intensity and strong emotions, focusing on fans’ obsession with their idols. The voice-over often states that ‘X rises with [idol] and goes to bed with [idol]’ (quote from *Superfans*), and in the interview with the researcher, producer Dewitte confirmed that they aimed for the emotional: ‘[a] combination of happiness, affection, and sorrow. The mix of human feelings that come with it’ (2013, personal communication). Confirming its obsessive nature, some fans in the programme compare their fandom to an addiction: ‘Willy is a drug for me’ (Vivianne in *Superfans*), or ‘This is unhealthy of course, but I can never control it.

[...] I think normal people cannot understand that' (S  verine in *Superfans*). This contrast with 'normal' people recurred throughout the programme.

Considering that extreme emotions are an important aspect of fandom (Grossberg, 1992; Sandvoss, 2005), it is no surprise that they feature heavily in *Superfans*. The fans almost continuously express their love for their idol: 'He [Christoff] always gets to me deep in my heart [crying]' (Gustaaf in *Superfans*), or 'He [Gary Hagger] is very close to my heart' (Marie-Christine in *Superfans*). In addition to these positive emotional expressions, a lot of tears are shown in the programme, especially when the fear of an idol's potential retirement is discussed: 'If Natalia were no longer here, I would not know what to do [crying]' (Talitha in *Superfans*), or 'We cannot think about it, but the day will come that Sven will quit [crying]' (Rita in *Superfans*). Fans are also shown crying when discussing other people criticizing their idol: 'That voice is not appreciated by some [crying], that can really make me angry' (Marie-Christine in *Superfans*). The K3 fans get angry with people who do not appreciate their idols, and Frans defends himself and his fandom to his wife. The fans take criticism of the idol personally, which can be linked to Sandvoss' (2005) notion of the idol as an extension of the fan's self, where processes of projection and introjection are at work.

Discussion and conclusion

Starting from criteria recognized as relevant characteristics of fandom in the literature, this contribution aimed to understand the varied dimensions of fan representations in mainstream television. The results confirm the relevance of characteristics that recur in fandom literature, in particular the focus on emotions and the aspects of media use, productivity, community, skills and identification. At the same time, our analysis shows that an understanding of the representation of fandom benefits from additional insights from other sub-disciplines of communication and cultural studies. In particular, the broadening of an understanding of fan–idol relationship from identification to a wider range of parasocial relationships has proven fruitful since many of the relationships presented in the programme fitted the latter rather than the former. The aspect of neo-religiosity was another valuable addition.

The programme presented us with highly emotional fans who showed intense relationships with idols that appeared to fill their entire lives. Media use and productivity were means of making the idol part of fans' everyday existence and (parasocial) relationships. Interestingly, media use and productivity did not feature prominently in the programme but were rather used as a background to focus on the intensity of the fans' emotions. These emotions were manifest in a wide variety of forms, from fan–idol relationships, ranging from friendship and moral support, over family-like and strong feelings of love to, in one case, extreme identification. Emotions further functioned as a leitmotiv for all other dimensions of fandom. The commodification of fandom was revealed to have 'free reign', as fan-related consumption was fuelled by strong emotional attachment. Money was not considered an obstacle if it allowed fans to feel connected to the idol. Emotion – both positive and negative – also played a key role in the fan community, as community ties were strongly affected by emotions like jealousy. The lack of skills, observed in the use of restricted rather than elaborate code, resulted from the strong emotional meaning of their fan object, prohibiting fans from taking a critical

distance. Moreover, within the context of neo-religiosity, the emotional prevailed and led fans to look for a connection beyond life and death.

The interviews conducted for this study revealed that emotions were an important criterion in selecting candidates and editing the series. To some extent, this follows almost 'naturally' from reality television's premise of 'emotion-based authenticity' (Aslama and Pantti, 2006) and its 'obsession' with personal and intimate narratives (Dovey, 2000). However, *Superfans* pushes the envelope in this regard by zooming in on the obsessive and the extreme – as the title of the series suggests – in the interest of narrative pleasure or dramatic impact and by accentuating these attributes through a particularly condensed and de-contextualized portrayal of the fan experience. As such, the series perpetuates the derogatory notion of the freaky and obsessed loner fan which academic literature on fandom has long discarded. So, similar to Hills' (2007) study of mainstream media representation of pop music/celebrity fans in *Wacko about Jacko*, our analysis of *Superfans* shows that its portrayal of fan experiences is firmly situated within the 'structures and strictures of common-sense ideology [of] emotivist fandom' (p. 474), undermining the normalization of fandom.

What is more, through editorial selection, *Superfans* confines this stigmatizing image of fandom to particular types of cultural expression and media fandom, namely, those commonly held in low esteem, thus building on and reinforcing – naturalizing – their cultural devaluation. Indeed, the strong focus on the emotional seems related to the types of fan objects selected in this programme. Affect and emotion are central to music and sports (cf. Rojek, 2001), the only two domains from which celebrities and their fans were presented. Within these two domains, particular types of celebrities were selected. Cycling is traditionally considered a working-class sport with low accessibility thresholds, making it easy for fans to get close to their idol. Similarly, schlager music, the dominant music style represented in this programme, has long been considered a lower cultural form (cf. Simon, 2000) and mostly has a local range and appeal. As such, the programme framed fans within a lower cultural context, stressing the difference with high culture. These results further confirm the paradox by which mainstream media are keen to promote celebrities in a quest for a loyal audience while criticizing fans as freaky business. The notion of an omnivorous culture thus appears to remain problematic as hierarchies are still strongly present within popular culture.

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