

**DRAFT – WORK IN PROGRESS**

**FORTHCOMING IN ASHGATE RESEARCH COMPANION TO FAN  
CULTURES**

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**Abstract**

*This chapter will give particular attention to the intersection of the notions of drama and ageing in the context of online fandom by examining networked fan practices that center on the actor Keanu Reeves. The results of documented interpersonal exchanges that could be retrieved on (archived) forums and mailing lists, and so forth are used as evidence. The findings yield insight into how drama and the work it does in adult lives is age-related, and a mechanism to maneuver one's own life course and the role of fandom in it. It demonstrates that notions of ageing in these 'drama' instances seem to defend one's position in the community hierarchy rather than being used for self-reflection in one's fandom over time.*

**Keywords** fandom; celebrity; networked fan sites; drama; ageing; life course; interpersonal exchange; performative orientation

## **Much Ado About Keanu Reeves: The Drama of Ageing in Online Fandom**

“Today is my b-day and I am avoiding ALL drama and conflict and giving myself the gift of a peaceful day” (UGossip, 2012).

### **Introduction**

In the 1990s I was a film grad student at Utrecht University at a time when the Internet was still emerging. I had developed an interest in audience research, particularly in creative and participatory activities such as fan fiction vis-à-vis the production process involved in filmmaking. Rather than focusing on the interaction between the text and reception underlying extensive debates about active-passive and homogenous-divergent perceptions of audiences, I focused on ways content from mass media got produced, distributed, consumed, appropriated and reshaped, conceptualizing audiences as ‘producers’ of both meanings and texts (Fiske 1987; Jenkins 1992; Livingstone 1991; Morley 1992).

In order to investigate these production and consumption dynamics I focused on the ‘construction of celebrity culture’ with the actor Keanu Reeves serving as a case study. At that time, Keanu had performed in commercial and independent movies including *Bill & Ted’s Excellent Adventure*, *My Own Private Idaho*, *Speed* and *The Devil’s Advocate*, performed in theater (*Hamlet*), toured around the world in a band (*Dogstar*), and was about to become a mega star with his portrayal of Neo, ‘The One’ in *The Matrix* movies. I had set up interviews with ‘the industry’ including the actor, band members, agents, managers, directors, talk show hosts, journalists and publicists, as well as with several

fans and I attended a fan convention. While I did not focus on fans or their (online) behavior per se, I became intrigued by how they not only met in real life but also increasingly seemed to flock to the Internet to interpret, assess and appreciate the actor.

Fans tended to meet at concerts or at the side lines of movie premieres, while more adamant fans could attend ‘KeanuFest’ (1998) which was the only organized gathering in the US and, at that time, organized by a fan-led club called ‘Zero Distortion’. Starting out in 1996, KeanuFest was considered to be “a funky experience for all Keanu-philes” and attended by about twenty American and Canadian women (some returning each year) “married and single, ages 25-72, and all shapes and sizes”.<sup>1</sup> It provided me with an opportunity to interview and observe female fans – most of which were in their thirties and early forties - preparing lunches and dinners based on things Keanu’s characters ate, reading Shakespeare together (based on the actor’s declared interest), discussing how the actor was portrayed in the media and what he was like in reality, and so on. KeanuFest seemed to offer its participants an ‘atmosphere of trust’ in which they could open up and share the influence of Keanu in their lives, offering a sense of validation that some did not receive in their daily lives (van der Graaf 1999).

It is here that I also learned about the most important (often password protected) online sources, particularly, ‘The Garden’, ‘Chateau Ke’ and ‘JTJ Net’ served the needs and interests of various Keanu-fandom communities underpinned by a hierarchy of fan members who ‘have access’ and those who do not have trusted connections to verify or provide authentic information about the actor (and his family, friends, coworkers, etc.). More strikingly, however, was not so much the sharing and dissection of the actor’s sexuality and love life, whereabouts, past and upcoming projects and so forth, but the

‘drama’ between fans varying from sophisticated mind games like trolling, to arguing, and impersonating each other.

For several years, I was not exempt from such practices. The combination of being a student (conducting fieldwork for the first time) and not a fan of the actor in relation to the ‘touchy’ subject of being a fan - fandom “is very personal and I would rather not have someone else to read it, especially if Keanu is going to read it one day” (van der Graaf 1999: 58)<sup>2</sup> - did not sit well to establish my credibility and to gain trust from fans (van der Graaf 1999).<sup>3</sup> As a result, from time to time I (and friends, colleagues, etc.) would, especially, online be confronted with unfriendly discussions about myself such as being the ‘Anti-Christ’ and impersonations which led me to occasionally monitor certain sites.

Over the years, some fans stayed others went, some new ones came and others went, but the ‘drama’ stayed, and in which increasingly the topic of ageing has come into play (Harrington and Bielby 2010; Marwick and boyd 2011). Not only the actor (1964) has come of age but his fan base as well, or so it seems; “I wonder if he worries about the fact that his fans are his own age. We have aged with him. [...]” (UGossip, 2007).

By focusing on ‘drama’ within fan exchanges supported by a life course perspective, this chapter will give particular attention to fans who negotiate social positions and ownership over the fan object in Keanu fandom on the Internet. More specifically, it demonstrates that notions of ageing in these ‘drama’ instances seem to defend one’s position in the community hierarchy (rather than being used for self-reflection in one’s fandom over time) offering a more rounded understanding of the make-up of drama in fandom in adulthood.

The structure of this chapter is as follows: The first section discusses the roles of

drama and ageing in fandom on the Internet. This is followed by an overview of the methodology. The third section explores the performative orientation of Keanu fandom at the intersection of milestones, coming of age and showing age within fan exchanges. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the findings demonstrating how drama and the work it does in adult lives is age-related, and a mechanism to maneuver the role of fandom in it.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.angelfire.com/ms/feelingminnesota/news.html> (accessed 6 July 2012).

<sup>2</sup> All names and identifying information have been changed (or removed) to protect the privacy of authors.

<sup>3</sup> For example, my credibility was tested by fans who posed questions about the actor; such as "Why does he cut his pants?" One fan explained "you have access to them so you know these things, plus you study them so you ask them these sorts of questions, because those are the questions we would ask" (KeanuFest participant, 06/23/98). It was my position 'to know'. At the same time, my knowledge was feared or reacted against, because academic knowledge could be seen as the 'truth', and which would clash with their explanations of and feelings about the actor (cf. Seiter 1990). Moreover, some of the fans had opened up to a reporter thought to be another fan. They felt betrayed and ridiculed when an article appeared (Bakulski, L. (1995), 'Keanu fever: On the road with fans who would die for Keanu Reeves,' in: *Boston Phoenix*). This experience complicated my acceptance as well as, confusion over consent regarding some obtained data (which, as a result, was never used and destroyed) and the degree of access I had to the actor.