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‘Bonnetheads’ fandom: information experiences of *Little House on the Prairie* cast members

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Abstract

Introduction. Fandom has been explored extensively in LIS research, but a gap exists in the study of information behaviour from the perspectives of fandom subjects. This research explored what motivates former cast members of the *Little House on the Prairie* television series to engage with their fans, as well as the extent to which nostalgia serves as a catalyst for information sharing within the *Little House on the Prairie* fandom community.

Method. Using a qualitative approach, six former *Little House on the Prairie* cast members were selected through purposive sampling for a survey with both open- and closed-ended questions.

Analysis. Survey responses were organized and coded inductively, line-by-line, using NVivo 12.

Results. Initial results revealed the prevalence of nostalgia for both fans and cast members. Loyalty, gratitude, and community also emerged as motivators for engagement with members of the fandom.

Conclusion. The study of cast members’ information behaviour within fandom may provide insight into the affective dimensions of reliving the past through media and shared experience.

Introduction

The rise of social media has boosted participation in both virtual and in-person fan communities, where shared interests, nostalgia, and parasocial relationships build strong bonds. This phenomenon reflects a broader one in which fandom has become dominant in all areas of entertainment. Through these fandom communities, enthusiasts receive support and admiration, perpetuating a comfort in expressing these interests in public. As a result, 'Geek' culture is growing, and often fans are involved in many different fandoms (Peeples et al., 2018). While current research focuses on information behaviour from fans' perspectives, a gap exists regarding fandom subjects. This research explored motivations for *Little House on the Prairie* cast members' engagement with fans and how nostalgia may prompt fans to engage within fandom communities. The guiding research questions were:

R1: What motivates *Little House on the Prairie* cast members to interact with their fan communities?

R2: How does nostalgia shape the shared information experience between cast and fans?

Theoretical framework

This study explores the intersection of information behaviour and information experience. While LIS research has traditionally addressed utilitarian information-sharing, this study explores the affective dimensions of information—specifically, how emotions like nostalgia drive engagement within fandom.

To analyse these interactions, the study utilized Nora's (1996) concept of *lieux de mémoire* (places of memory). Although typically applicable to physical places like museums, landmarks, or archives, this study presents the notion that in legacy fandoms, the cast members themselves function as living sites of memory who serve as human archives that enable a shared collective imagining of a world that no longer exists.

Background

From books to television

For generations, children worldwide have read the *Little House* book series by Laura Ingalls Wilder. What began as a literary phenomenon became a long-running television drama (1974–1983) and several movies, ultimately evolving into a 'transmedial world' (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024; Reagin, 2024, p. 155). As Fatzinger (2015) notes, 'few source texts ... evoke such strong memories' as Wilder's novels (p. 39).

This combined legacy earned a devoted fanbase known as 'bonnetheads,' who are 'nearly as loyal as Wilder's readers' (Fatzinger, 2015, p. 39). Set in Walnut Grove, Minnesota, the show explored the Ingalls family's lives, emphasizing themes of respect, forgiveness, empathy, and family values. *Little House on the Prairie* remains a global, top-ranked program in syndication. This enduring popularity establishes *Little House on the Prairie* as a significant site for studying long-term information practices.

Information behaviour in leisure contexts

A more focused study of quotidian (everyday) information behaviour highlights a need for further research into practices surrounding leisure activities, and fandoms have become an increasingly important area of leisure research. While fans are traditionally seen as passionate, enthusiastic followers of something or someone, Price and Robinson (2016) suggested they exist on a continuum, from casual to dedicated, who may produce cultural products relating to a fandom. Understanding these fan practices necessitates looking at information experience, or how individuals sense and feel information rather than how they seek it.

The affective role of nostalgia

Prior studies of fans and fandom have explored information behaviour and information seeking, sharing, and creation practices. The role of affect and emotions has been studied in various contexts in library and information studies (LIS). Ouaknine & Aharony (2020) noted a lack of LIS research on the role of nostalgia, particularly within information-sharing. While Kizhakkethil (2020) connected memory and documentation to fan communities through a diaspora lens and Stahlman (2022) explored nostalgia in data life cycles, further research is needed on the affective dimensions of nostalgia in information behaviour, both generally and in the fandom context. We address this gap using Nora's (1996) *lieux de mémoire* as a framework to investigate whether cast members themselves act as these affective 'places of memory' for the *Little House on the Prairie* fandom community.

Methods

This exploratory study employed serendipitous and snowball sampling to capture the information experience of fandom subjects. The study originated when a former *Little House on the Prairie* cast member overheard the researchers discussing *Little House on the Prairie* fandom in a conference hotel lobby. We then used purposive sampling to recruit additional *Little House on the Prairie* cast members, or participants 'most likely to yield appropriate and useful information' (Kelly, 2010, p. 317). Recruitment emails sent to eight cast members resulted in six completed surveys.

Data was collected through an online survey with 10 open-ended and 4 closed-ended questions addressing cast/fan interaction motivations (R1) and the role of nostalgia within these interactions (R2). At this exploratory stage, web surveys were suitable because they enable reach within a geographically dispersed, well-defined audience (Hank et al., 2017).

Of the six respondents, all participate in fandom but only one identified as a social media influencer. While a small sample size often necessitates more in-depth qualitative methods like interviews, we first employed a survey to identify the breadth of thematic motivators across a geographically dispersed group. This first phase was necessary to understand cast members' perspectives before moving into more intense qualitative study.

Quantitative data from closed-ended questions were analysed deductively to provide descriptive context, while open-ended responses were analysed inductively using thematic analysis to identify patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Analysis was conducted using NVivo12.

Results

A three-tiered conceptual model was developed from survey responses to categorize how cast members engage within fandom (Figure 1), distinguishing between the broad group of cast members, the subset of fandom participants who attend physical events, and social media influencers who maintain regular online engagement. This represents a range of perspectives from private nostalgia to professional online information-sharing.

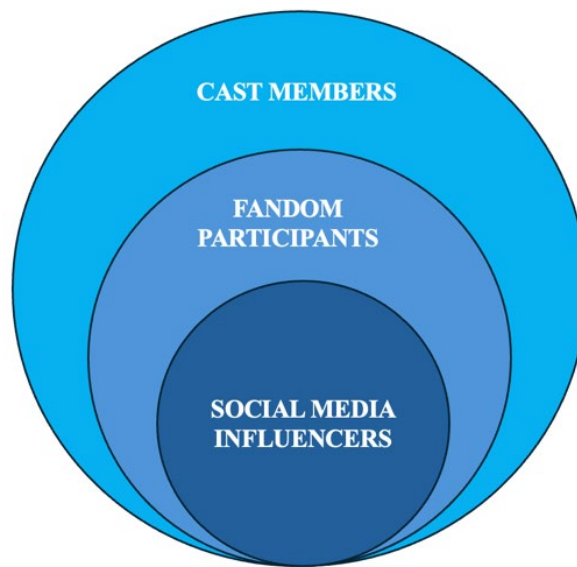


Figure 1. Categorization of cast members according to degree of interaction within fandom.

An inductive data analysis of survey responses yielded four primary themes that directly address the research questions: loyalty and gratitude (addressing R1), and community and nostalgia (addressing R2). Some themes could be further divided into subthemes, as indicated below.

Loyalty

The data reveal a sense of loyalty toward the *Little House on the Prairie* books and television series, serving as a motivator for participation in the fandom for both *Little House on the Prairie* fans and former cast members.

Fan loyalty

Participants emphasized fan loyalty, referencing ‘a loyalty and dedication to the books and TV show,’ and ‘this incredibly loyal group of people who love *Little House*’. Fan loyalty was further described as follows:

They are one of the most grateful gatherings of people who are appreciative of what the series meant to them at some point in their lives, what it means to them now, and why they share it with their families. They drive for miles for the chance to meet cast members, and they often dress in costumes, sometimes identical, to the characters in the series.

Cast member loyalty

Participants also expressed their own loyalty, noting their own fandom of the *Little House on the Prairie* books and television series prior to being cast in the show:

Because I loved the books, I watched and loved the series, and I daydreamed of being a part of the show, I honor the responsibility I believe all cast members have to the memory of Laura Ingalls Wilder, to the vision of Michael Landon, and to the fans around the world who continue to support the series and keep it on the air.

Gratitude

Cast members expressed gratitude for both the experiences of their engagement within the *Little House on the Prairie* fandom community and the financial gain it provides.

Gratitude for the experience

Participants appreciated their experiences both as a cast member within the fan community. One found it *'gratifying to be adored, admired and respected'* and was *'flattered to have been a part of something so impactful'*. Another focused on *'living in gratitude and graciousness having been given the honor of being a cast member'* and feeling *'fortunate to have experienced something very special and rare.'* A third participant stated, *'I feel that I owe it to the fans to show my appreciation for their loyalty in making the show what it is.'*

Gratitude for financial gain

Participants also mentioned gratitude for the financial benefits they gain from their role as cast members. One appreciated the *'chance to give back to the people that keep us relevant and employed'*. Another noted, *'It's super fun. And it has become a source of income for me'*.

Community

Participants mentioned the strong sense of community present in the fandom: *'People attend these events because of a like-minded community. This sentiment is common all over the world'*. Another said, *'They want to thank us. They want to be part of the community. They want to know us and be our friends'*.

Meeting fans is rewarding for cast members too. According to one participant, *'Meeting people and hearing their stories of how any particular episode helped them navigate a challenge in their life...it's incredibly inspiring...and again, traveling with my castmates is terrific'*. Also noted in the data was a strong sense of community among the cast members themselves: *'Mostly, I love hanging out with my fellow cast members. This happens at events where we are meeting fans'*.

Nostalgia

The theme of nostalgia, specifically mentioned in the survey and present in the data, was important for both cast members and fans.

Nostalgia of cast members

One participant stated, *'It was a very big part of my childhood that shaped a lot of who I am now'*. Another spoke about their love for the show, the historical era it represented, and their experience within it:

I love this time period and I love the idea of it living on forever through film and video.... I always feel like I left one foot back in the past, and my forward moving foot is never eager to march into what seems a cold, techno-future where we spend more time pushing buttons and looking at monitors than we do talking to people and hugging them.

A participant articulated, *'I think we are all proud of being part of such an iconic, nostalgic show. It makes me want to represent what we created for generations to enjoy'*.

Nostalgia of fans

Participants agreed nostalgia drives fan participation. One noted how the fandom gives them *'a sense of family, of virtues, a return to a time and a way of life gone by, and a feeling of safety'*. Another said, *'We were an integral part of their lives. People had the show on in the background on a loop without having to worry about anything inappropriate. They feel like we were their family'*. Another stated, *'[Little House on the Prairie] fans are grounded, salt-of-the-earth, devoted people who represent a variety of occupations, religions, political groups, ethnicities, and age groups. They walk the walk of the characters and stories represented in Michael Landon's Little House on the Prairie TV series'*.

Discussion

The data reveals that cast members are linked by a shared information experience rooted in loyalty, gratitude, and community. Regarding R1, cast members are motivated by a reciprocal desire to ‘give back’ to a loyal community through events that facilitate connection among fans and former colleagues alike.

In response to R2, nostalgia functions as a catalyst for engagement rather than just a sentiment. This shared imagined past serves as a bridge where the affective bond transforms traditional information-sharing into a lived information experience. Figure 1 enhances these findings by visualizing how different degrees of engagement—specifically within the Participant and Influencer tiers—contribute to fandom preservation.

Reagin (2024) identified Wilder homeplaces as lieux de mémoire, and this study proves that cast members function as ‘living archives’, expanding traditional LIS perspectives by demonstrating that human actors embody the ‘emotional touchstone’ more meaningfully than print or digital media (McKechnie et al., 2007, p. 190). These human archives facilitate ‘memorable events’ that help fans navigate a ‘cold, techno-future’. These interactions demonstrate how emotion yields insights into how legacy fandoms preserve cultural heritage in the digital age.

Conclusion

This research explored motivations for cast members’ engagement and the role of nostalgia within *Little House on the Prairie* fandom. The analysis of data clearly shows that affective dimensions of nostalgia drive participation for both cast and fans. This is supported by motivators like loyalty, gratitude, and a strong sense of community, suggesting that for the broader entertainment industry, the cultivation of affective, nostalgic bonds shows that human connection within fandom endures beyond just the content itself.

The study’s small sample size, limited by the age of the series and deaths of most of the adult cast, relied largely on former child actors. The sample, though small, provided vital insights into how nostalgia motivates cast/fan interactions. Phase two of this research will include an online focus group with cast members.

Future studies may investigate how *Little House on the Prairie* fandom acknowledges modern societal issues like racism and feminism. Further research may also investigate the intersections of social computing and online fandoms—specifically, how fandom subjects’ use of online platforms might transform parasocial relationships into mediated social computing encounters.

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