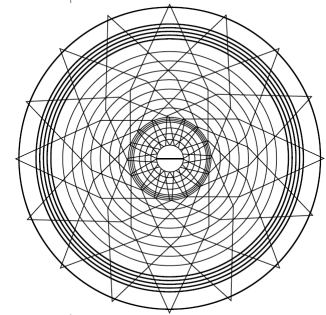


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*Specific Features of Online Communication  
in Twitter TV Fandoms*



## SPECIFIC FEATURES OF ONLINE COMMUNICATION IN TWITTER TV FANDOMS

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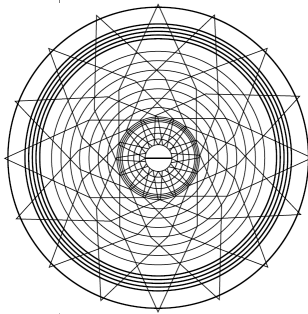
### **Abstract:**

The article is devoted to the specifics of online communication in TV shows' fandoms. Based on symbolic convergence theory and the emerging concept of online creative collaboration, this study focuses on several communicational processes in fandoms, such as causal factors of intergroup and intragroup conflicts, motivation to interact and co-create with fandom peers and sources of hierarchy inside fandoms. Qualitative research, including nine semi-structured interviews with fandom members from different countries and a netnographic study of Twitter fandoms, offers in-depth insights into communication in TV shows' fandoms. International youth fan communities in social media are of scientific interest as a cultural and communication phenomenon. As fans become more influential, the results also have practical implications for the promotion of TV shows.

**Keywords:** fandom, online communication, TV shows, social media, TV fans

### **Introduction**

A fandom is a subculture in which fans are united in one community and connected by a common interest in a TV show, film, series of books or a musician. Fandom is not something new, although in recent years it has acquired a completely different meaning and value as a phenomenon. The relevance of this phenomenon rises to a new level. Nowadays, a fan's opinion can have the same weight and value as a critic's opinion for the creators of TV shows and films. By exploring fandoms, we get an idea of the connections between fan social structures and cultural transformations in the world. A fandom allows people from around the world to form a collective opinion, since



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everyone brings a unique viewpoint to this group. Communication through fandoms has achieved an unusual status in recent years. Although fandom research has grown in recent years, there have been few empirical studies focusing on such topics as the influence of social media communication on existing fan structures and hierarchies in these fan communities.

Many researchers have considered the problem of fandoms from different points of view and approaches, which indicates the versatility of this phenomenon. In the literature review, we explored not only TV shows' fandoms, but also music, game and sports fandoms, to identify the differences between them, and also draw attention to online communication in such communities. Each fandom requires a separate and more detailed study. However, this work focuses on the specifics of TV shows' fandoms.

There is a lack of studies that explore the specifics of online communication in TV shows' fandoms. The activity of the TV fans is not something that can be created without the involvement of the fans themselves, and fandom is not a community that can be controlled. Therefore, we pose the following research questions. Why do fandom members interact with each other? What is so special about creative collaboration in these fandoms? What are the reasons for fans' conflicts?

### **Online communication in fandoms research**

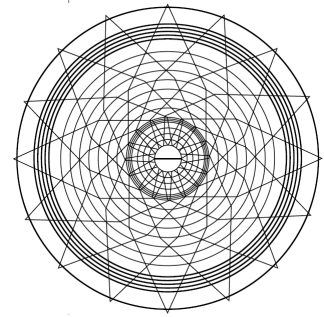
Why is interpersonal communication important to online communities? People who join these communities are looking for more than just information; they see it as a 'meeting place with other people to find help, support, friendship and love' (Zhang & Hiltz, 2003). They tend to develop new relationships in fandom. Before the advent of social networks, fandoms were not such a huge part of our society as they are now. Their first examples arose after the First World War in the 1920s. After the war, people wanted to accept what was happening and create something unusual. However, without technology, this work was limited only to art. All in all, sports, music and cinema have become an important part of fan culture. This advanced transformation has had a significant effect upon being a fan and led to new types of social and cultural creativity (Pearson, 2010); also, the problems raised by fan communities have certain consequences – and not only for fandom but for other parts of this whole media world as well.

TV series' fandoms were among the first online communities created for fun and leisure (Baym, 2000). Thus, the history of fandom research exploring online communication and fan art dates back to the second half of the twentieth century. Nancy K. Baym (1993) studied informal communication norms and specifics of fan creative activities as a new form of folklore on the rec.arts.tv.soaps discussion group of

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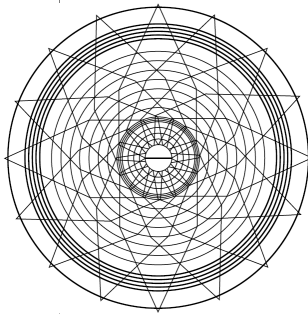
the Usenet about popular soap operas on American TV. The rise of new mass media objects was propelled by a central need to empower the formation of fan culture (Click & Scott, 2017). For the most part, research on online communication in TV shows' fandoms over the past three decades has focused on different aspects of communication in soap operas' fan communities, such as forming interpersonal relationships (Baym, 2000) and discussion of the social issues presented in the series (Lopes, 2012). However, recent shifts in media production and media consumption have led to a change in fan communities. Modern TV shows of different genres attract younger audiences, which form new international-wide fandoms. As noted by fandom researcher Nicolle Lamerichs (2018), 'the transcultural dimensions of fandom cannot readily be captured through generalizations'. Thus, we cannot transfer previous research of soap operas' fandoms on youth TV series' fandoms.

Twitter is among the most widely used social networking services for forming relationships in fandom. Since 2006, it has become the primary means of communication between the audience and celebrities. The greatest motivation for people to start using Twitter itself and forming relationships among a specific audience in it is the desire to 'be closer' to their idols (Hargittai & Litt, 2011).

Speaking of social media, it was initially studied in terms of interpersonal communication. Since groups of people increasingly use social networks for communication, scientists more often observe the intergroup and intragroup processes and communication that occur on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and many other platforms (Lampe, Ellison & Steinfield, 2007). Social media unite groups whose members are located far from each other. However, the complexity of group communication in social networks is associated with the complexity of the social networks themselves (Carr, 2017).

Social interaction in fandoms is distinctive from regular communication on social media. Users meet new people who later become their friends. The main function of social networks is to develop and maintain relationships through effective online communication. Various factors can influence online communication on social networks (Pinjani & Palvia, 2013). A key indicator of human interaction is trust. Regardless of the problems that online communication can bring, social media networking expands, and individuals need to establish a certain level of trust with other users (Cheng, Fu & Vreede, 2016). Therefore, attention is paid to building trust in the field of interpersonal communication in social networks. Trust serves as a kind of moderator that facilitates relationships and makes relationships better (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1998).

A substantial number of studies focus on psychological and socio-cultural factors and motivations for different behaviours that impact interactions in social networking



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sites (Shankar, 2011). The problem of the influence of factors in social networks on the creation of intergroup communication, and how social media can promote group interaction, has been extensively studied, but there is a lack of knowledge of this problem in a deeper and more specific format. Studying fandom and its relationships can itself be considered a broad field of study, since this topic is closely related to the comprehensive field of cultural research.

### **Specifics of TV fandoms on Twitter**

The fandom for TV shows and movies comprises an audience that actively changes media content, creating something completely new, while enjoying the old content as well. The participants build their own culture from the already existing content for their own pleasure. TV fans want to do the things they love much better, so they find something they don't agree with, such as a problematic view or a social problem that can be highlighted; then they talk about it, work with it and try to explain or understand. To be a 'fan' does not mean to be a 'meaningless consumer' of certain content. To be a fan means to be a 'fanatic', which indirectly means more than just absorbing something. Creativity is not something that is easy to define. For example, fanfiction.net, a site dedicated to the creation and publication of all kinds of fanfiction, allows people to share their work with the world in the simplest and most understandable way (Guldenpfennig, 2011). The internet is quickly becoming a platform for everything that a fan might want to do, whether it is chatting with other fans through social networks or watching their favourite series. The previously mentioned fanfiction.net site encourages people to be creative and create content themselves. Thus, it is easy to understand why fan fiction and any creative activity of TV fans have become so popular: people were given the opportunity to produce content. Nicolle Lamerichs (2018) studied the fans of TV shows' creative work using the example of the 'Glee' TV show's fan fiction. However, her research was focused on the fan texts themselves, separately from the communication processes of their co-creation and discussion inside the fan communities.

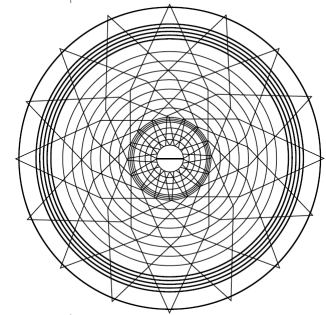
After reviewing the previous research on different types of fandoms, we can draw an inference that fandoms have different traits and can be distinguished by motivation for being part of the fandom.

### **Theory and hypotheses**

According to Ernest Bormann (1972), communication is about people sharing common fantasies and ideas; therefore, these groups of people turn into one cohesive group. His symbolic convergence theory explains that people themselves can create a community that will become stronger due to the fact that they share a common vision of

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something (Griffin, 2011). The theory of symbolic convergence provides an accurate description of dynamic trends in the processes of social interaction, which leads to the development of communication skills and practices. The theory provides insights into the processes of creating a group consciousness through the exchange of various stories or fantasies. The theory gives us an understanding of the nature of TV shows' fandoms.

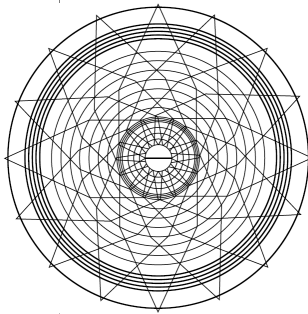
*H1: Creative collaboration distinguishes TV shows' fandoms from other fandoms.*

Since fandoms emerge as a cultural phenomenon, it is worth paying attention not only to co-creation itself as a communication process but also to its role in forming and preserving relationships in fan communities. Collaboration is also closely related to people's creativity. A creative collaboration can be described as a relationship between two or more people with the common goal of creating new content through specific ideas or a common goal. Thus, a creative collaboration is more narrowly focused and unites the members of the fandom through joint creativity. Despite the fact that at present there is no generally accepted theory of collaboration, there are many theoretical approaches to joint practice and activity that have been developed over a wide range of disciplines.

Creative collaboration distinguishes two types of fandoms: sports fandoms and creative fandoms. The sports sector is not characterised by any creative activity due to the different motivations of the fans in the fandom. However, creativity is the main feature of movies and series fandoms. The key role here is played by the factor that fans try to get the attention of their 'objects of adoration' through the means of fan videos, fan arts and fan fiction. In addition, with the true collaboration that occurs with true desire, there is a commitment to shared resources, power and talent: no one's point of view dominates, the authority for decisions and actions is in the group and work products reflect the combination of the contribution of all participants.

*H2: Motivation of collaboration with other fans promotes new relationships in fandom.*

Fans are even interested in minor details of the object of adoration in their fandom. The topic of fan interest can be focused on something like one particular celebrity or TV show, movie, musician and so on. Since TV shows' producers and actors tend to interact with online fan communities, social and parasocial relationships, not only with other community members but also with the TV shows' makers, are a feature that is presumably an important motive for spending personal time on communication in fandom.



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The motivation for working together will give us an understanding of why TV fans don't need any benefit from the projects they make and why they are guided simply by the enjoyment. The more content they create together, the more their motivation increases to develop further and form new relationships through collaborations. Special attention in the fandoms of the series is given to creating video content. These fan videos can be made by two or more people in a fandom. With the increasing use of social networks such as YouTube, Facebook and Instagram, fandoms have grown markedly in recent years. The presence of online fandom communities allows these fans to interact with others and gain confidence.

*H3: Fandom specifics such as being able to interact with actors and other members of the community affect fans' desire to spend their free time on fandom.*

The hierarchy is expressed in the primacy of someone at the expense of more subscribers, likes and retweets. This aspect helps us understand not only the priorities in the fandom, but also the nature of these communities themselves. Since TV fans participate in the creation of new content, we assume that the degree of their participation in any activity favours their position in a hierarchy, both within and between fandoms. Among fandoms, TV fans are particularly popular in the group and are accepted by others, while others follow them; these people are called informal leaders. Informal leaders are like ordinary leaders, and such a leader has the power to attract followers.

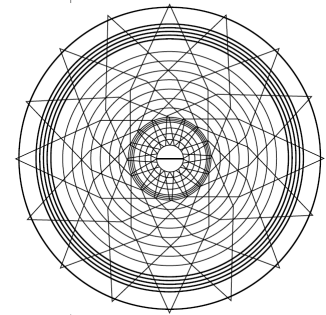
### **Data and methods**

To test the hypotheses, data were collected by interviewing nine members of fandoms from six countries (Russia, USA, India, Israel, Spain and Puerto Rico). The informants were chosen the following way: it was important to choose people from TV fandoms on Twitter who were involved in the community's online life. Online ethnography was also applied to test H4 to discover the reasons for TV fans' conflicts. The data were collected from Twitter and later analysed in NVivo. This social platform was chosen because Twitter allows you to analyse conversations' threads and tweets. All the fan communities are open; it is possible to see all the tweets and conversations between fans. For example, Twitter, unlike Instagram, does not focus only on visual content and comments.

The first step of our research consisted of in-depth semi-structured interviews with informants from different countries and fandoms (TV shows, music, sports, games and comics' fandoms). The interviews allowed us to identify the important characteristics of TV fandoms that indicate the distinctiveness of such online communities. RQs were

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about fans' communication and collaboration in such online communities, and it was crucial to ask only people who had been in this 'habitat' for a long time.

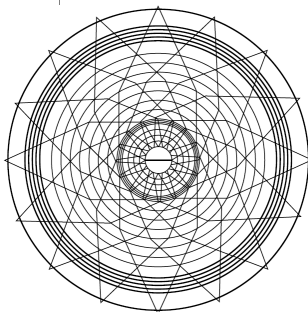
The first step was to identify the specifics of fandom that make people spend their time there. Therefore, we asked the informants if there was anything unusual and unique in fan communities that makes fans stay there. Based on their responses, it can be concluded that the main reason that attracts fans is communicating with other people. Fandom is a safe place for fans where they feel completely comfortable. Two of the informants said that they are introverts, and it is much easier for them to communicate with people on social media than in real life. Fandom gives people the opportunity to communicate with people from different countries while discussing a common topic that greatly interests them.

*I think that for me, for a person who has been in fandoms for nine years, this is more about friendship; it is about the people you meet there. It begins with the fact that you are a fan of something, but later you stay because of the people you have met. – Maria, 21, Puerto Rico*

*For me, this, of course, is friendship with people. Ever since I have been in the fandom, I have met a lot of people. Some even managed to meet at a concert of a beloved musician, and everyone was as sweet as they seemed online. In fact, this is one big family that loves the same 'things' as you. – Daniel, 21, Tel Aviv, Israel*

*I think that content, actors, producers – this is why people stay in fandoms. But later you make friends in the fandom and this also becomes the reason. Most often, you don't have contact with many people in real life. Maybe you have little in common, but you 'come' to social networks to find something that you like. In fact, you advertise your interests, and it attracts other people with the same interests. – Aranya, 19, Mumbai, India*

Informants were also asked questions about creative collaboration and the hierarchical structure within the fandom. We made an assumption that a hierarchy is formed in the course of fan fiction or other content creation. Our informants confirmed that creative fans may be treated differently due to their 'superiority' over the others since not everyone is able to create something so unusual that it attracts the attention of other fans. The creative process also helps to establish and develop relationships between fans who create content together.



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*When people see all these videos, they usually share them. For example, on Twitter, on Instagram stories. People appreciate you for creating something new. If you like to make videos and still tag people, then yes, it affects your popularity, since on Instagram everyone shares the work of others. – Aranya, 19, Mumbai, India*

*I think that if someone gets a lot of retweets and likes, then even the actors begin to recognise these people who make the content. It affects your recognition, because you create something new, and not everyone in fandoms does it because they simply don't have these skills. – Daniel, 21, Tel Aviv, Israel*

The central focus of this study is exploring the role of TV fans' creativity and its interconnection with the development of new relationships in a fan community. No previous research has considered this topic through the fan fiction phenomenon. The informants confirmed that their motivation to create something for their own pleasure grows into building new relationships through joint activities. TV shows' fans create new content on the basis of existing ones, as they get what they lack from the creators of the series. They continue to create for themselves and other interested fans, while promoting not only their work on various online platforms, but also the series itself.

*Yes, I met a lot of people, because I posted something on Instagram. First, they comment on the post, and then you begin to communicate in private messages. If you like someone's work, then you want to talk to them, regardless of whether they are popular or not. – Aranya, 19, Mumbai, India*

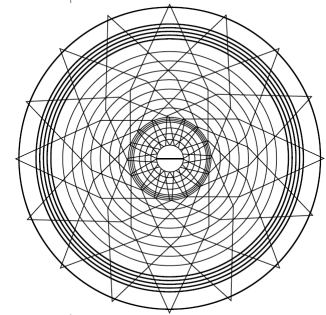
*It often happens that in TV shows, fandoms, regardless of whether their opinions on the couple coincide or not, make videos together and write fan fiction; sometimes it turns out something qualitative that other fans react to, maybe it will even positively affect their opinion about the series. On the basis of such creative collaborations, friendships or closer further communication between the participants of this collaboration may definitely arise. – Ekaterina, 21, Moscow, Russia*

Speaking of TV shows' fandoms, the goal of TV fans is basically to maintain the brand of a TV show. The more fans talk about the series, the greater the chance for the series to develop and raise ratings and views. TV fans not only maintain relationships online, but also decide the fate of their TV show. But they are also aimed at creating something new from existing content based on series and films. By doing this creative work, fans express their support and respect for the actors they support online every day. Through the active participation of fans in the life of the fandom and the series



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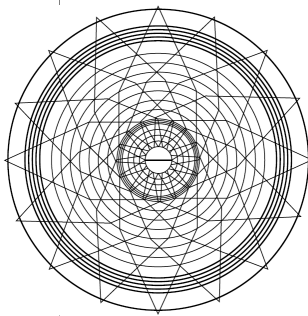
itself, there is daily communication between actors and fans, which is one of the key characteristics of TV series' fandoms.

We also explored the differences between types of fandoms, as some of our informants also took part in music, sports and comic books' fandoms. All the fandoms have some common features, for example, the support of an actor, athlete or musician, but each fandom has its own motivation and nature.

*We need to start with the fact that there is a creative element in TV shows' fandoms. People devote time to creating videos, fanfics and other creative ideas, and in sports, discussing results, making forecasts for future competitions, discussing success. It should be noted that in sports fandoms, this can all go one level higher, that is, get to the public and television levels. For example, after the Olympics in 2018, there was a conflict between the two skaters, and this came out in the media, in fact, thanks to the fans and their influence. – Ekaterina, 21, Moscow, Russia*

*I think there are a lot more people in TV shows fandoms, because there aren't so many of them in comic book fandoms, for example. I noticed that even movie fans and comic book fans are two different worlds, although they are interconnected. Many people are only fans of comics, and they don't care about movies. The music fandoms I was in were much bigger. These were people that everyone knew about. But surprisingly, these fandoms are less active than TV show ones. Because it takes longer for singers to release an album or song; for example, you can wait two years. As for the series, then the series are released every week; although they are smaller, they are still more active. – Maria, 21, Puerto Rico*

To explore the nature and specifics of conflicts and 'drama' in TV series fandoms, we asked the informants the following types of questions: 'Whenever there is "drama" in fandom, do you feel like you are part of it even if you are not personally involved?', 'Do conflicts in fandoms damage personal relationships in fandoms?' and 'Can a conflict be provoked by the personality and behaviour of a fandom member?' Considering that conflicts can be a sensitive subject, a projective technique was also applied in interviewing the informants. More specifically, the informants were encouraged to speak not on their personal history of conflicts but to project their experience on given situations; for example: 'Envision a situation in which there are two friends who have a different opinion about something in their favourite TV show. Will there be "drama" between them? Will they try to overcome or ignore the conflict, since they are friends?' The informants shared the following thoughts and experiences on conflicts in fandoms:



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*I always feel that I am part of this, because I am part of the fandom in which the conflict occurs. And everyone thinks that if a conflict happens, then this should worry the whole fandom as well. – Kellyanne, 16, Gibraltar, Spain*

*Do you know how many people blocked me? They all hate me. Interesting fact about dramas in fandoms, which is a daily activity for us, I would say that in any case it affects everyone, and everyone feels the conflict on themselves. Especially in our fandom, this is strongly manifested; people can say just awful things. I'm not always involved in these dramas, but if they happen, then you have friends who will protect and support you. – Julianne, 20, New York, USA*

Thus, the reasons for conflicts in fandoms are complex by nature. People can ruin the relationship in the fandom due to emotional conflicts during the discussions of the show's content or the actors. At some point, TV fans are just struggling to win the argument, no matter what the issue is. However, if people consider each other close friends, then there will be no quarrel that would destroy their relationship. Personal conflicts, not connected to the TV shows' content, occur in fandoms as well.

*This should not be what affects the relationship in the fandom, but it happens. Sometimes, on the basis of the series, you can go to a personal quarrel, personal insults, if this is a critical case. – Ekaterina, 21, Moscow, Russia*

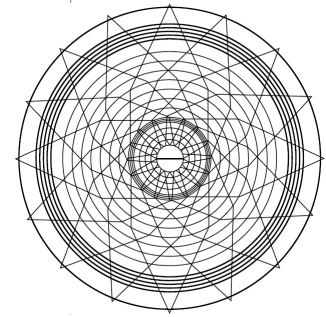
We further expanded the study to explore the nature of conflicts in fandoms. We applied online ethnographic methodologies, including content collection and brief online interviews. Using NVivo software for qualitative data analysis, we collected 6,247 tweets. Two fandoms were selected to collect the sample: the TV show 'Timeless' and the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). Both fandoms are active on Twitter and were previously mentioned by the informants during in-depth interviews.

In 'Timeless' fandom, the most popular words in conflict tweets are: '#Timeless', 'Negativity', 'Tonight', 'Tension', 'Hulu', 'Fame' and 'Ships'. Part of the tweets are connected to the struggle to get the series reinstated for a third season; therefore, the fans mentioned the streaming service Hulu. Part of the tweets refer to the so-called 'ship wars', which are disagreements about couples in the series. MCU fandom has its own specifics, as the universe includes many shows and characters that divide the fandom into many sub-fandoms. Conflicts often arise around new shows.

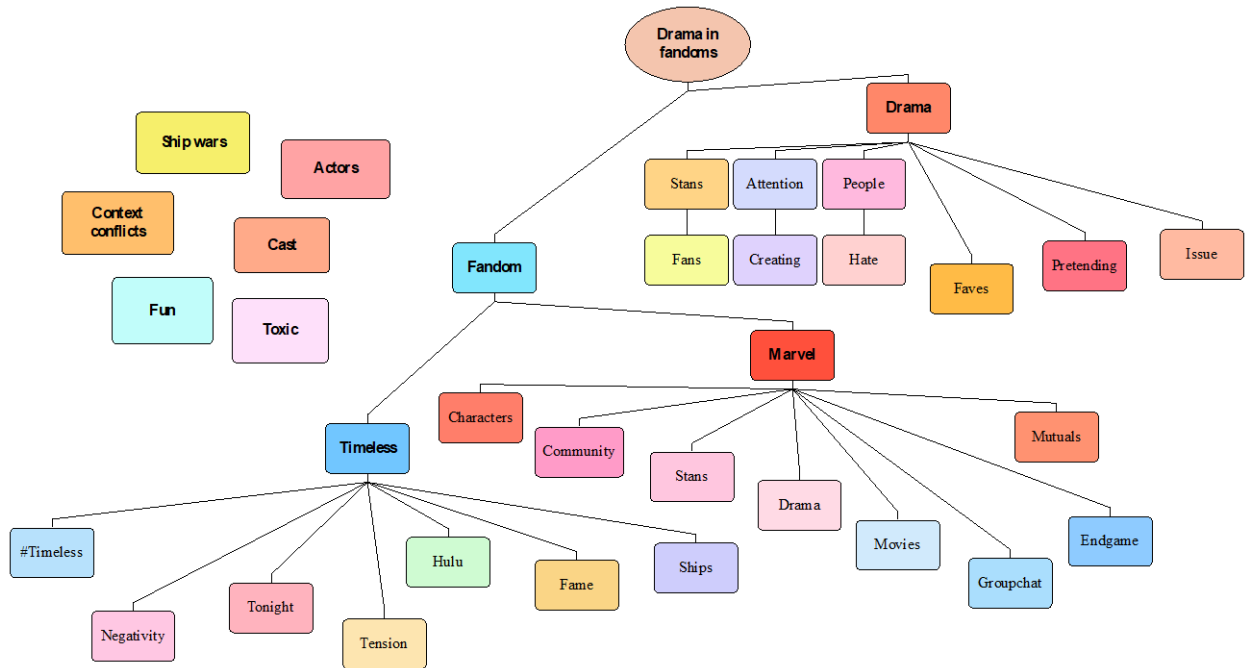
One of the main causes of conflicts in fandoms is the fans themselves, who create quarrels, thereby attracting the attention of other fans. The 'drama' in fandoms arises from the actors of a series or films. Thus, we can conclude that TV fans want more attention from other members of the community, but also from the actors who are the centre of the conflict. By analysing the tweets of both fandoms, we can identify the six

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main causes of conflict in these communities: ship wars (disagreement about couples), actors, context conflicts (disagreement about the context in the series), cast (cast of the series or movie), fun and toxicity (characteristic of other fans). We created a conceptual word map (see Figure 1) that illustrates the context of conflicts in both fandoms.



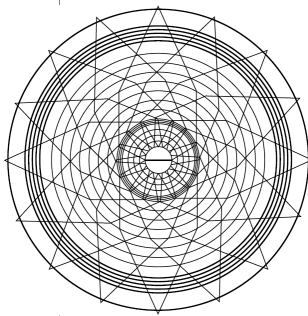
**Figure 1.** Conceptual map of words most used in fans' conflict tweets

To define the context more precisely in addition to the conceptual map, we also interviewed several fans in private messages:

*Yes, because of disagreements about the characters in the series, drama can go to a new level. People can become furious when they see that their beloved character or couple is not respected, at least to some extent, and they feel that they need to intervene in this situation.* – Grace, 15 years old, Knoxville, Tennessee, USA

*I always feel whether I am involved in a drama depending on how much I see it in my tape. Basically, I see how people simply participate in it, not knowing the primary source of the conflict. However, now I am less involved in it because of my own growth and development.* – Lauren, 17 years old, New Jersey, USA

Based on the results of interviews and netnographic study, we can conclude that the sources of conflicts in fandoms are complex; they include both personal conflicts and disagreements about the show's content. We also learned that conflicts are considered by some community members as a form of leisure. Some informants



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recognised that they were interested in witnessing others' conflicts in fandom or participated in 'drama' for fun.

### **Limitations**

The study was focused on researching the English-speaking fandoms of modern world-renowned American youth series. Young people under 21 from different countries were interviewed as typical representatives of these fandoms. For digital ethnography, we only collected the data from Twitter where the fandoms are active.

However, we did not study less widespread fandoms of local TV shows, which can have some differentiating features. Other genres, like soap operas or telenovelas, were not the focus of our attention as well; thus, we did not interview fandom members with different demographic profiles who are target audiences of these shows. Specifically, studying how fans of senior generations who have been watching particular shows over dozens of years (Harrington, 2013) communicate online is one of the prospective directions for future research. Fandom communications on other digital platforms may also have particular specifics.

### **Results**

The purpose of this study was to explore the nature of modern TV series fandom as a communication phenomenon. We focused our research on the processes of creative co-creation, hierarchy and conflicts in fandoms.

H1 – 'Creative collaboration distinguishes TV shows' fandoms from other fandoms' – was confirmed. Creative content co-creation is a large part of communication in TV series' fandoms. This process is not typical for sports, music and game fandoms.

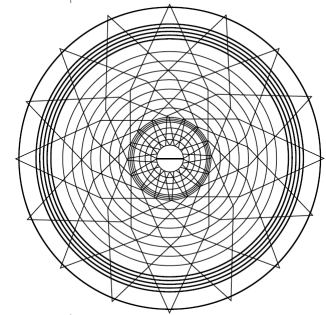
H2 – 'Motivation of collaboration with other fans promotes new relationships in fandom' – was confirmed. Creative activity in series' fandoms is the main aspect of the formation of communication and relations in series fandoms.

H3 – 'Fandom specifics such as being able to interact with actors and other members of the community affect fans' desire to spend their free time on fandom' – was confirmed. Interaction with the actors of the series affects the person's desire to remain in the fandom and spend all their time on this community. Communication with other fans from different countries reinforces people's desire to spend their free time in fandom.

The research provides new insights into online TV shows' fandom as a social and communication phenomenon and a serious element of modern culture. The study also has practical implications for TV shows' producers. The value of TV fans is increasing more and more today. Understanding the characteristics of interaction in fandoms can be of practical value for communication in the promotion of TV series.

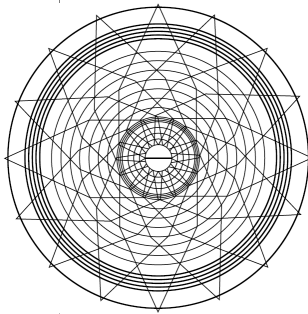
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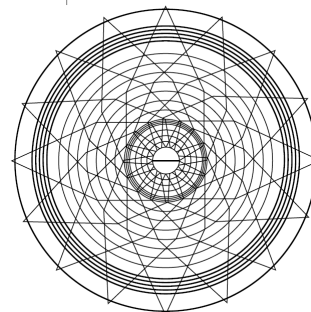
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# ОСОБЕННОСТИ ОНЛАЙН-КОММУНИКАЦИИ В ФЭНДОМАХ ТЕЛЕВИЗИОННЫХ СЕРИАЛОВ СОЦИАЛЬНОЙ СЕТИ TWITTER

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### **Аннотация:**

Статья посвящена особенностям онлайн-коммуникаций в фэндомах телевизионных сериалов. Основываясь на теории символической конвергенции и развивающемся концепте творческой онлайн-коллаборации, данное исследование фокусируется на нескольких коммуникационных процессах в фэндомах, таких как причины возникновения внутригрупповых и межгрупповых конфликтов, мотивы общения и совместного творчества с другими участниками фэндома, источники формирования иерархии в сообществах фанатов. Качественное исследование, включающее в себя девять полуструктурированных интервью с участниками фандомов из разных стран, а также нетнографию фандомов в Twitter, позволило углубить наше понимание коммуникации в фэндомах телевизионных сериалов. Международные сообщества фанатов в социальных медиа представляют научный интерес как культурный и коммуникационный феномен. Поскольку влияние фанатов растёт, результаты исследования также актуальны для практического применения в продвижении телевизионных сериалов.

**Ключевые слова:** фэндом, онлайн-коммуникации, телевизионные сериалы, социальные медиа, фанаты телевизионных сериалов