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Community and identity in fictional fandoms: a qualitative exploration of individual accounts.

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ABSTRACT
Research focused on identity and community aspects of fandoms has been largely quantitative (Groene and Hettinger, 2015; Obst et al., 2001; Chadborn et al., 2016), while qualitative research on these topics has not looked at the individual experiences of fans within their fandoms (Miller and Benqwitz, 2016; Delia, 2015; Hazlett, 2002). Using a critical realist approach, the aim of the present study is to look at fans' experiences of identity and community within their fandoms with reference to the frameworks given by Social Identity theory () and Psychological Sense of Community (). By using semi-structured interviews, and analysing data with thematic analysis, fours themes were established: fandom as shared interest, knowledge importance within fandoms' hierarchies, negative meta stereotyping and complexity of fan identity. These themes provide information on how these frameworks are helpful for the understanding of individuals' experiences, but do not account the whole spectrum of experiences that fandoms provide.

KEY WORDS:	FANDOM	THEMATIC ANALYSIS	EXPERIENCES	COMMUNITY	IDENTITY

Introduction

Reysen and Lloyd (2012) defined the concepts of fan, fandom and fanship. To them, a fan is any individual who is loyal, enthusiastic and an admirer of any interest. Fandom and fanship are defined regarding the extent to which these terms apply to a personal or social level. Fanship is the component of an individual's personal identity and comes apparent when the individual makes personal comparisons to others (e.g. when a person says 'I love Star Wars'). Whereas fandom is the social component, it refers to a sense of psychological connection to other fans of the same interest, I.e. with the same ingroup identity (e.g. when a person says 'We love Star Wars').

Despite these definitions, the terms of fandom and fanship are defined differently according to different authors. While some define fandom in terms of how a fan interacts with other fans of the same interest and define fanship as the relationship between the fan and the object of interest (Reysen and Branscombe, 2010; Reysen and Lloyd, 2012). Tsay-Vogel and Sanders (2015) propose that fandom has two dimensions: the perceived membership to the group and contact with other fans.

Social Identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 2004) provides a framework to analyse and understand fan related phenomena. Social Identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 2004) defines social groups as groups of people who perceive themselves as part of the same social category while sharing emotional involvement and agreeing about the evaluation of the group they belong. The social group that a person belongs to is referred as the ingroup, while the ones the person is not part of are outgroups. These groups are important because they provide the individual with an identification of the self in social terms – similar, different, better, worse, etc., than members of the outgroup. Social identity is therefore the way individuals perceive themselves according to the social groups they belong. Individuals strive to achieve and maintain a positive social identity, which leads to a positive self-concept and higher self-esteem. Groups are also object of connotations from members of outgroups which may lead to stereotypes.

Research showed that fandoms act as social groups and fans identify themselves to be part of ingroups and can name relevant outgroups (Reysen and Branscombe, 2010). There is also evidence that membership to fandoms provides the same benefits as other social groups: inclusion, self-esteem and engagement in the object of interest (Groene and Hettinger, 2015). These findings also inform on how fandoms are important to identity in the sense that individuals are sensitive to rewards and threats to their fan identity (Groene and Hettinger, 2015) providing evidence on how social identity theory is an important framework to explain fandoms. However, these studies are quantitative and experimental and do not provide information regarding the individual experiences of fan identity, as fans may feel differently about their fandoms in a way that measures cannot account for.

Another framework that allows the understanding of fan related phenomena is the theory of Psychological sense of community (PSOC) (McMillan and Chavis, 1986). This theory allows us to understand communities from individuals' experiences rather than the communities' structure. It focuses on how individuals perceive themselves to be part of each community in two distinct types: territorial communities (which are geographical) and relational communities (I.e. communities which are related to professions, spirituality, and others). McMillan and Chavis (1986) explain that Sense of community comprises four elements who work together in circular relationships of causality, these are: membership – a feeling of belongingness which includes boundaries of inclusion on the group, emotional safety where individuals are willing to share emotional feelings, sense of belonging and identification to

the community, personal investment by feeling that their place within the community has been earned and is meaningful to the community and a common symbol system which includes language, clothes, events, etc. - influence – a sense of mattering and opportunity to make a difference to the community as well as the community mattering to it's members – integration and fulfilment of needs in which members of the community have their needs met by rewards and a shared emotional connection, where members of the community show that they are committed and believe to have a shared history, time and experiences. These elements give us important information on how individuals feel towards their communities, and there has been evidence on how fandoms are communities that possess these elements (Obst et al., 2001; Chadborn et al., 2016)

The work of Obst et al. (2001) provided evidence that science fiction fans reported high levels of PSOC, as a relational community, fans rated PSOC highly in all dimensions the authors state that this may have been impacted by the fact that these individuals chose to belong to the communities and were drawn together for a shared interest, furthermore, fandoms are communities with fewer geographic connections than other relational communities, but individuals still rated highly in measures of contact with other fans, providing evidence that face-to-face contact is not essential to develop and maintain PSOC. Obst et al. (2001) further propose a fifth dimension of PSOC: conscious identification and awareness of other members, which according to them is an important and crucial role to understand PSOC that has not been present on the work of McMillan and Chavis (1986). This gives us a useful insight on how fans rate their fandoms. However, the data in this study was obtained via questionnaires filled at a science fiction convention in Australia and this may not be representative of the population of science fiction fans worldwide, since many may not attend fan events. Also, by using questionnaires they could only measure PSOC and its dimensions and elements, disregarding the fan's discourses on how they experience these elements of community, which would provide an understand on exactly how these processes impact fans' experiences.

Later, Chadborn et al. (2016) distinguished participants according to their fan interest (sport, music, media and hobby) and used measures to compare groups' PSOC with their local communities versus their fan communities. They obtained partial supportive data to the hypothesis that fans would rate higher PSOC for fan community than local community, supporting the PSOC framework. The author concluded that fans feel psychologically connected to their fan communities regardless of their fan interest, this is consistent with the findings of Obst et al. (2001). Although it gathered substantially more and varied data, their sample was of American individuals from different fandoms who filled out questionnaires aimed at measuring the dimensions of PSOC. Once again, this piece of work gives numerical data that is meant to generalize findings, however, it does not provide a representative sample of the population. American fans may behave and rate their fandoms differently from the rest of the world since many fandoms are based in America; also, the distance to travel to participate in fan related events is greater than it is smaller countries in Europe which affects again how fans interact with the object of their fan interest. Also, new technologies may impact on how individuals participate in fan events. Obst et al. (2001) mentioned the importance of new technologies to media fandoms, their findings suggested that PSOC can exist among individuals who interact within the cyberspace and that it may impact on reducing isolation of people who may live in remote areas or have disabilities. Furthermore, they state that the communities evolve with the new technologies and new societal trends. An example of this is the recent experience that fans of J.K. Rowling's universe had. To promote the new spin-off movies of the magical universe, fans had the opportunity to participate in a global event with cast-panels in America and England that

were broadcast live to 18 theatres across the world and through social media (Sciretta, 2016). This reflects how fan communities are shaped with the new societal trends of social media and the internet, even when not geographically present, fans were engaged with their fandom at the same time, all over the world, interacting with the object of interest and with the actors who play the characters, the creator of the stories and other fans worldwide, giving current evidence of the ideas stated by Obst et al. (2001).

 Cohen et al. (2015) provide evidence on how sci-fi and fantasy media fans are perceived, based on the unattractive, interpersonally unskilled, nerdy fanboy stereotype, when compared to sports fandoms. The former were rated as less attractive and awkward which has serious negative psychological implications to the fans who may feel ostracized based on a source of enjoyment. The findings reflect that there exists a negative stereotyping and perception for both male and female sci-fi and fantasy fans. However, the work of Tsay-Vogel and Sanders (2015) provides evidence that individuals who belong to media fandoms reap benefits cognitively (knowledge acquisition), affectively (enjoyment and appreciation) and behavioural (seek for fan related material) proposing that media fans are not passive media consumer but individuals who are cognitively and emotionally involved to their fandoms. Furthermore, Little (2012) who conducted ethnographic cross-case analysis found that the sci-fi knowledge that fans gained from their fandoms was transferred to other domains such as music, philosophy and science.

Qualitative research on fan identity has been carried by Miller and Benqwitz (2016) who addressed the topic of 'authentic' fan identity of football fans, they highlight the idea that fan identity is fluid and dependent on social context since is it constructed around a situational argument, furthermore, Delia (2015) focused on the idea of multiple group identities, she states how fans may belong to several fan communities and bask in reflected glory when one of these groups is successful, according to her basking in reflected glory provides fans with an enhanced sense of inclusiveness and distinctiveness. Although these pieces of research have been focused on sports fans it might be that other fans feel similarly, including media fans. Regarding sci-fi fans identity, Hazlett (2002) found that sci-fi fans use speech codes to create and transform their self-identities within their fandom. Furthermore, their identities and experiences change as their experiences and expertise within the fandom increase and because of their interactions with other fans within their fan communities, thus supporting the idea that sci-fi fans, like sports fan have a non-static, fluid fan identity (Miller and Benqwitz, 2016). Furthermore, McCudden (2011) explored how fans of multiple and diverse fandoms engaged with their interest and between them, fan authenticity and hierarchies within fandoms. Among her findings she does conclude that fandoms possess hierarchies within each fandom and between different fandoms, and that preferred placements within these vary according to each fan; and also that fans did not used the terminology of "authenticity" regarding their fanship but rather "true" or "big" fan compared with the opposite "casual" fan. This is particularly interesting since it gives a contrasting account to the research done on authenticity with sports fans (Miller and Benqwitz, 2016).

Based on the few qualitative research looking at identity and community experiences within fandoms, this paper's research question is 'how do fiction fans understand communities and identity within their fandoms'. It aims to understand how the individual experiences fit within the arguments and debates that rose from previous research and also, given the debate on terminology, to provide definitions to the concept of fandom by individuals who experience the reality of being immersed in these communities. Previous research has defined terms without acknowledging how fans themselves define them which may have impacted their

own results (it may be that if participants perceive terms differently, will talk about experiences in a different way).

Methodology
Epistemology
The epistemology for this study followed a critical realist approach and therefore the frameworks given by Social Identity Theory and Psychological Sense of Community were acknowledged throughout data collection and analysis while still accepting that these frameworks cannot possibly give the whole information about individuals' experiences since reality can only be assessed through thoughts, expressions and language (Howitt, 2010)

Design
This study took a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews which were thirty minutes to one hour long and covered the topics of concept of fandom, fan identity and belongingness to fandoms and related experiences.

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000) qualitative research is concerned in gathering rich, detailed and descriptive data (using interviews, focus groups and observations), and also interested in capturing individual perspectives, it does not focus in comparisons of psychological concepts between individuals (e.g. intelligence, personality). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) further discuss that qualitative research tends to reject positivism, it rather takes the stand point that language shows reality but does not represent reality itself, therefore, it is not concerned with generalizing findings. Furthermore, qualitative research' interest lies in getting accounts of real-life experiences of each participant (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Moreover, the authors state that qualitative research examines constraints of everyday life, in which the researcher emphasizes the social world, and individuals' lives are portrayed in a more detailed manner than is usually seen in quantitative reports (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000)

Participants
Participants were intended to be gathered through MMU's Psychology Research Participation Pool, participants had access to an advert (Appx. 5) explaining the study in order to decide to sign up to a preferred timeslot to attend the interview in a room at the Brooks building (MMU). The sample was intended to be all gathered through this medium, however it resulted in snowball sampling, since participants shared their experience with others who showed interest in taking part from outside the participation pool. A total of six participants took part on the interviews, three male, three female. Participants' ages were between eighteen years old and twenty eight years old, four of them were students and two had finished education by the time they took part on the study. All participants considered themselves to belong to a media or fiction fandom or to be fans of a media and fiction interest (fiction fandom defined as a fandom based on an object of interest that does not translate in actual reality or real facts, therefore, including fantasy, science-fiction, video-games, etc.). The media fandoms which these participants were part of included movies, TV series and videogames (I.e. Star Wars, Harry Potter, World of Warcraft, Skyrim, Bioshock).

Since the aim of qualitative research is not to generalize findings but rather to understand the multitude of discourses surrounding the phenomena to be studied a smaller number of participants part of a qualitative research sample is justified, furthermore, the sample size used was also the perfect quantity since qualitative research is time consuming -

transcription and analysis takes long to carry out (Willig, 2013) and there was a limited time available for the completion of the present study.

Sample size in qualitative research is usually justified by data saturation (Francis et al., 2009) however this is not relevant to the present study; data saturation is achieved when performing grounded theory research, in this case the aim is not to establish new theory but rather to understand individual's experiences and discourses and establish common themes across experiences.

Data collection method

Data was collected by using semi-structured interviews, based on fifteen questions on the topics of fan identity, concepts and experiences of belonging to fandoms. Semi-structured interviews are commonly used in qualitative research (Willig, 2013). The questions were created with information from past research and also by addressing the present research question. By using semi-structured interviews, participants were able to talk freely, and given the flexibility of this method the researcher was also able to ask further questions when pertinent but keep the conversation on topic. The semi-structured interview is focused on meaning rather than lexical construction, therefore, it is important that the researcher understands clearly what the participant means irrespectively of the way it was said, by asking illustrations of events and experiences to get insight on the topic of the research (Willig, 2013)

Some of the questions used were aimed at understanding how individuals were introduced to their fandom, what concepts mean to them, stand out experiences, hierarchies with fandoms, connection to other fans and perceived stereotypes (Appx. 6). Prompts were used when required in order to get further explanations, I.e. 'what do you mean by...'; 'can you please illustrate how...?'; 'can you tell me more about....'.

Semi-structured interviews aligned with the epistemology of this project since it allowed participants to speak freely about their personal definitions, experiences and meanings, which provided individual and substantial data about the phenomena under study; therefore it was possible to see the patterns across participants but also the uniqueness of each individual view on the topic.

Data analysis

Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) state that transcripts for thematic analysis need to be a rigorous, thorough orthographic account of all verbal and sometimes non-verbal information recorded from the interview, so it retains the original meaning of what the participant as said. The transcriptions made include punctuation, pauses and were verbatim – the exact sentences and expressions from the interview were transcribed in order to not lose any meaning.

Thematic analysis is defined by Braun and Clarke (2006) as the method that allows us to identify, analyse and report patterns or themes within the data, it also allows the researcher to interpret aspects of the research topic. The authors advise that six steps that were carried in order to produce thematic analysis. The first step's aim is to familiarize with the data, tha data was transcribed and the researcher read and re-read them and noted down initial ideas about the data set. The second step was carried in order to generate initial codes (features) that appear systematically within the data and quotes were collected to illustrate each code. During the third step codes were placed in potential themes (umbrella terms that cover related codes), again supporting quotes were gathered to illustrate each theme. The fourth step took place when the researcher reviewed themes, this was done by

making sure that the themes worked well together and had supporting extracts from data set. When this was finalized the fifth step was to define and name themes in a clear manner to the reader. The final step was to produce the written report. When writing, the researcher had the last opportunity to analyse the data. The report must tell the complicated story of the data in order to convince the reader that it is valid, it should not only include the themes and supportive extracts but include a logic and non-repetitive story of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006)

This method of analysis was particularly useful for this piece of research since it is "…a flexible approach that can be used across a range of epistemologies and research questions" (Braun and Clarke, 2006 :97). The epistemology followed was a critical realist approach, which allowed to explore experiences and meanings related to the specific phenomena under study, in this case experiences related to fandoms and meanings of terminology I.e. what are fans' experiences like and what does 'fandom' mean to them. Critical realism is the epistemology that accepts the existence of an objective and external world but also acknowledges that we can only understand said world through the medium of our own perceptions and thoughts (Howitt, 2010). Therefore, the researcher was able to gain knowledge on how experiences of belongingness to fandoms are like for individuals and how they shape their identities without forgetting that these are subjective experiences nonetheless.

Ethical considerations and risk assessment

By using semi-structured interviews, the participants were likely to be disclosing thoughts and feelings that are private, therefore ethical issues about topics to be covered, confidentiality and anonymity must be addressed (Newton, 2010).

Before the start of the interviews, participants were informed about the study and asked to fill a consent form (Appx. 2) and read an information sheet (Appx.3). Participants were aware of the topic and aim of the study and were not deceived, a full de-brief (Appx. 4) after the study answered any questions the participants might have had.

Although the topic under study did not cause upset or distress to participants, participants were aware from the beginning of the study that they had the right to withdraw at any point during and after the interview until data analysis commenced, furthermore de-brief sheets were given to participants in the end of the study with contacts for support in case participants needed them.

Interviews were recorded and posteriorly transcribed and anonymity was assured by changing the name of the participants to a pseudonym which they have chosen. Data was stored in a password protected file to which only the researcher had access to, and was permanently destroyed when the project finished. Participants were aware that anonymised excerpts of the interviews were to be shared between the researcher and supervisor during the analysis process and some quotes were to be used on the write up of the present research report.

Participants who signed up through MMU's psychology participation pool received points by taking part in this project in order to use them in the future, no monetary compensation was given to participants. Participants were not related to the researcher and therefore there was no sense of obligation to take part. The participants were not vulnerable.

The researcher was aware of the possible risk of carrying out interviews with participants alone, therefore she decided that interviews were to take place in the Birley Building (MMU) during the day and a family member or friend of the researcher knew where

and when the interviews were taking place to ensure safety. The location chosen was a safe and comfortable environment for both researcher and participants.

BPS research ethics (2010) were followed throughout, a full ethics form was also approved by MMU's ethics committee (Appx. 1).

Analysis & Discussion

Throughout the six interviews that were carried, four themes were established: fandom as shared interest, knowledge importance within fandoms' hierarchies, negative meta stereotyping and complexity of fan identity.

Fandom as shared interest

This theme came through on all interviews, participants talked about how they perceived what a fandom was. Despite some differences through the discourse on fandoms, the community aspect of fandoms was a feature that they all referred to what a fandom truly is about. Within the community aspect, participants talked how what made it important was the friendships and deep connections it entailed, even if you 'don't really know the person'. We can see that from the following extracts:

> "A fandom is a big group of people who all like the same thing (…) the main difference of a fandom to just fans of something is that in fandoms people tend to interact more with each other (…)" (Sophie)

> "fandom means 'international friendship' to me anyway, (…) other people who share the same interests as you. It doesn't matter who they are, if you share the same love for Star Wars you can speak to someone like you have known them all your life" (Richard)

> "[being part of a fandom] I connected with a lot of people with the same interest (…) a lot of [friendships] started online but I've met a lot of them in real life and then just recently I've met my boyfriend in real life who I met online [within the fandom]" (Rachel)

This provides us with some insight on how fans define the concept of fandom and how fandoms provide them with meaningful relationships (Rachel with her online friends becoming face to face friends and even meeting her boyfriend); and Richard stating that even if you don't know a person, just the fact that they enjoy the same thing as you provides a deep connection between each other. This relates to the work of Groene and Hettinger (2015) who stated that fandoms provide their members with the same benefits of other groups in this case the feeling of inclusion, 'being part of something' and engagement on the object of interest with others. We can also see the experience of Rachel who states the online friends she has met within her fandom and how they have become face to face friends later on, this goes in line with the work of Obst et al. (2001) who stated the importance of new technologies and how fan communities exist outside the geographical boundaries of where each fan is physically located. Furthermore, these definitions provided by the participants align well with the definition given by Reysen and Lloyd (2012) who defines fandom as a social level of connection between fans of a specific interest.

Knowledge importance within fandoms' hierarchies

The participants spoke how fandoms hierarchy was dependent on fans' knowledge about the object of interest, they perceive that knowledge is the stepping stone of what makes a fan higher or lower within the hierarchy. We can see that on the following extracts:

> "well some people base their living on kind of 'fandoming' […] they are like above [on hierarchy], they know it all they have done all the reading […] they know literally everything there is to be known […] so there is like the hardcore fans […] and there are people who are just 'yeah I saw the movies and thought they were good, yeah, you know, lots of shooting and spaceships'" (Jonny)

> "yeah definitely [there is a hierarchy] there's people who know every single detail about the lore [story line and background details of a game and series], they've done every part of the game and know every little thing, even though I love the game, I am a massive part of the fandom, I don't think I am into the lore and I had people call me a dirty casual because I don't know that much" (Rachel)

These two extracts tell us how knowledge is considered the feature that separates the ranks within the fandom hierarchy, but Rachel's account also sheds light on how fans within the fandom label each other according to the knowledge they each have, by stating that she has been called 'a dirty casual' we have the information that having lower knowledge and being on a lower rank, within her fandom specifically, may be seen negatively by other members of her fandom on upper ranks. However, this changes across fandoms since:

> "In Harry Potter everyone is like 'oh they only started to read the books but it's fine they will get to the point where I am' in sort of a way that encourages them […] there must exist, but I don't see the hierarchy thing that much in Harry Potter but I do see it in loads of other fandoms" (Sophie)

Sophie's experience and discourse describes how the hierarchy in her fandom seems to be different from others' and how that knowledge plays a part in the fandom as to keep newer or less knowledgeable members encouraged to engage with the object of interest more often and in a way to deepen their knowledge about it. Furthermore,

> "the only thing there is, is the knowledge. […] once you get to a certain point you are there doesn't matter whether you played fifty hours or a hundred or hundred and fifty, once you get to the fifty hours of game mark then you probably won't get much more out of it, and then the hierarchy won't really matter" (Chris)

Chris' account on the other hand states that even if you spend a long time in game play (in this case, the object of interest) there isn't much more you can achieve regarding the knowledge you may gain, since there is only a set amount of knowledge you can get from engaging with the game and after said time all fans will be within the same level of knowledge which will remove the importance out of the hierarchy.

These accounts tie in with the work of Tsay-Vogel and Sanders (2015) who stated in their work that "the more fans were exposed to the narrative world and tended to seek entertainment with profound meaning, the stronger these individuals perceived themselves as fans of the community and communicated with other members. It is unsurprising that eudemonic motivations were strongly related to fan community membership and contact" (Tsay-Vogel and Sanders, 2015 :41) when participants gave their accounts on knowledge it was possible to assess how these ranks that they refer to as knowledge are important to them and define how they connect and behave with other fans within their fandoms. By considering to have less knowledge about the lore of World of Warcraft, Rachel states she

is on a lower rank within her fandom and other fans categorize her and treat her in such way; Sophie states how her fandom is different and that she does not see the ranks very clearly but that knowledge separates members and how more knowledgeable members behave and react to newer and less knowledgeable members in a positive engaging way; and also on how Chris states that these ranks exist based on the knowledge but that they may not be important since everyone will reach the same amount of knowledge when engaging with the object of interest despite the connection between fans. Furthermore, this theme is also in consonance with the work of (McCudden, 2011) who stated that knowledge (quantity and exclusivity of knowledge) determined fans' level within their fandoms.

Stereotyping

This theme represents participant's perceptions on how their fandom is seen by outsiders of the fandom, and on how they perceive their own fandom. Most participants referred that although they see the fans within their fandom as eclectic individuals, all different and mostly nice people, they stated how they think others from outside the fandom perceive them. Here we can see that they state how they believe that people from outside the fandom perceive fans in a negative stereotypical way (also referred in the literature as meta stereotyping).

> "I see other people within the fandom as being a very mixed pack […] eclectic and nice cross section of the world population, but I think we are seen as being the recluses, […] poor social skilled, the kind of stereotypical recluse shutting […] no self-respect, that kind of thing" (Chris)

> "I think Star Wars fans are perceived to be quite nerdy, in the sense that they are not cool and I am generalizing here, but they are perceived to be uncool and be completely obsessed with that one thing that they don't (P) like they are not interested in anything else, […] people often like to label somebody as one thing […] there are hundreds of things that make up who you are and your identity but people often like to label someone as one thing" (Jonny)

In these two extracts, although the fandoms portrayed are of different media types (one being video games and other films and series) we can see the overlap of the meta stereotyping being a negative one, fans perceive that outsiders from the fandom see them in a negative way when it is not the fact. As another participant stated about the subject:

> "I think that is not the majority of players [who are aligned with the gamer stereotype] I think it just stands out so much because it is so extreme" (Rachel)

Here we see how Rachel draws on the gamer stereotype to state why she thinks people perceive her fandom according to it, although the majority does not conform to the stereotype, because it is such an extreme idea (she referred to it as a guy playing games in a basement) people are drawn to that idea and generalize.

Overall, this theme shows how there is an overlap between different media fandoms regarding the perceptions related to stereotypes, it also provides some enlightenment on negative meta-stereotyping. Even though fans themselves see their fandom as heterogeneous and diverse they believe they are seen as a negative stereotypical image, outsiders are seen as individuals who disregard all the factors that make up someone's identity by judging people based on their fandom often in a negative way. This conforms with the work of Cohen et al. (2015) who stated how fans were perceived as unattractive, interpersonally unskilled, nerdy fanboy stereotype. Although the present research did not

aim to assess how stereotyping impacted participants' self-concept, self-esteem or self-image, Cohen et al. (2015) stated how negative stereotyping has serious negative psychological implications to the fans who may feel ostracized based on a source of enjoyment. It would be of importance to get further discourse on how negative meta-stereotyping impacts fans' experiences with their objects of interest, since we can see how important fandoms are to them.

Fan's identity

In this theme is possible to see how fans speak on how being a part of a fandom shaped their own identities. There were different accounts, and different views, however there was the commonality of identity being tied with the fandom that they are part of.

> "hundred percent, because I got into this fandom when I was thirteen, fourteen and that's when you are figuring out who you are and stuff and I would say that if I didn't, if I wasn't part of these fandoms, I wouldn't be who I am" (Rachel)

Here we can see how Rachel is certain that belonging to her fandom has shaped her identity. However, we can see a very different account here:

> "Well it is difficult for me to think that a fandom could define me but I do think that what I am defines the fandoms that I will like and be part of" (Jason)

> "I don't personally believe it defines me, it sure affects my personality and character, but the fandom doesn't make me who I am […] I like to think it has had positive impact on my personality […] well I suppose it has defined who I am in a way and I just never thought about it like that" (Richard)

We can see from these three different accounts, personality and identity is tied to the fandom that these people are part of, Rachel states how she has been part of her fandoms for a long time and believes it shaped her since she has been part of them since her teen years; Jason gives a very interesting account on how his values and personality determine the fandoms he will join, which we can argue that impacts in a way in his identity, if he joined fandoms that did not align with his personality then he would possibly be a different individual, thus his personality and identity matches up with the fandoms he is part of. Furthermore, Richard's discourse is very interesting, when we started talking about the subject he stated that the fandom did not define him, just 'affected' his personality and character however he reasoned and spoke about examples and concluded that he believes that it did define him but he never thought about it. These accounts give meaning to the importance of fandoms to their participants and how the values and messages that the objects of interest transmit affect the people who engage with it. Furthermore, this is particularly interesting since it gives the information that fandoms are a feature of an individual's identity but since this is very complex it is not always a feature on an explicit level. This provides a further new way to conceptualize fan identity, it adds to the work of Miller and Benqwitz (2016) who stated that fan identity is dependent on social context – Richard only thought about his fan identity during the time of the interview, up until that point he "never really thought about it". It also relates to the idea that identity is fluid and non-static, some participants have mentioned that they are fans of more than one fandom, although we focused just on one during the interview, this conscious/unconscious idea of fan identity gives further indication that fan identity is non-static conforming to the work of Miller and Benqwitz (2016)

Overall, with this analysis it was possible to see how Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 2004) and PSOC (McMillan and Chavis, 1986) may provide a way to understand fans' discourses about their experiences within their fandoms. It is interesting to see that, by using qualitative research these two frameworks did not account for the whole spectrum of experiences that fans spoke about. However, it was interesting to see how for example the work of Obst et al. (2001) regarding the fifth dimension of PSOC – conscious identification to the fandom and awareness of other fans came through during the interviews, although perceptions of fan-identity were sometimes complex. Furthermore, PSOC (McMillan and Chavis, 1986) features of sense of belonging and identification and shared emotional connection, were evident across interviews, giving the information that this is indeed a theory to keep in mind when researching this topic. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 2004) became apparent when participants mentioned the negative meta stereotypes, although they challenged stereotypes within their own groups, by stating that they did not exist.

Reflexive Analysis
According to Berger (2015) when doing qualitative research, it is important to acknowledge that the researcher's position and experience regarding the topic under analysis will affect the way that the research will be carried. In this case, as an individual who belongs to media fandoms myself, I am genuinely interested and involved in similar ways to my fandoms as the participants I interviewed. Furthermore, the discourse used by the participants regarding terminology used within fandoms was clear to me since I was aware of these meanings already (e.g. lore, rookies, noobs, etc.) therefore, this came through when carrying out interviews and analysing data - because I could share a common ground with the participants they shared information in a way that might not have happened if my experience was different.

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