

BREAKING THE HABIT: ASSESSING CHANGE AND IDENTITY IN VIRTUAL
COMMUNITIES

A Project Report

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BREAKING THE HABIT: ASSESSING CHANGE IN VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

This project is in partnership with Fandom (formerly known as Wikia), a “global entertainment media brand powered by fan passion.” Fandom as a platform is an amalgamation of various subcultures dedicated to and characterized by a camaraderie created by fans for fans. The project, a deeper investigation of the Theming Project (a past research project conducted by me and the Fandom research team in 2018 while interning at Fandom), uncovers the impact of design changes in Fandom’s user interface on user contribution, motivations, overall participation, and retention in the platform. The population for this project included participants from Fandom’s Fan Lab (a research community made up of users), designers, and people who identify as being a part of an online community, whether it be through Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, etc. The research methods used throughout this project were semi-structured ethnographic interviews with designers and users, surveys, a virtual ethnography of the Fandom platform, and a focus group with users in and out of the Fandom-verse. This mix of research methods gave me a holistic insight into current behaviors of users in and out of the Fandom platform, the importance of design in the everyday experience of the consumer, how change could affect their interaction and loyalty to the platform itself, and user input on the “ideal experience.”

The findings from this project show that users are attracted to social media sites because of the communities they build within them. Familiarity and comfortability in a space—whether it be physical or virtual—are the anchors that keep users engaged. Users form an attachment to processes and habits they’ve used to interact with others in social platforms. Updates that change the utility of a product can have disastrous effects on user attachment. This is not to say that

users hate updates; they just don't like their experiences being disrupted for changes that were requested for, don't make sense to them, or change the original motif or draw of the platform.

The deliverable for this project is a theoretical framework that validates the effect of change on user attachment in online spaces and user design guide for Fandom designers to help them navigate issues of design, identity, attachment, and social bonding in online spaces for a more inclusive design process.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	8
Background and Problem Statement.....	8
Project Significance and Deliverables	10
Project Objectives	11
Project Report Roadmap... ..	11
Chapter One – An Assessment of Change in Online Spaces.....	15
A Methodological Approach.....	15
Key Concepts and Resources.....	17
Going Forward – Directions for Using Deliverables.....	18
Chapter Two – Research Design and Methods.....	20
Preparation... ..	21
Sampling Strategy... ..	22
Data Collection... ..	24
Chapter Three – Data Analysis	26
Survey Analysis	26
Qualitative Analysis.....	28
Interviews.....	28
Designers.....	29

	Aso
Users	31
Focus Group.....	33
Participatory Design Activity.....	35
Net-Nography Analysis	37
The Fandom-verse: A Comparative Analysis.....	37
Fandom	38
Instagram.....	43
Twitter.....	46
A Comparative Analysis.....	49
Chapter Four – Results and Insights.....	51
Top Findings	51
Designing for Virtual Communities - A Treasure Map for Success.....	53
Creating the Design Pamphlet	54
Using the Design Pamphlet.....	54
Recommendations for the Future.....	54
Chapter Five – Conclusion.....	56
References.....	58
Appendix.....	63
A – Theoretical Framework	63

	Aso	
Personhood in Online Spaces.....		64
Online Identity and Bond Formation... ..		64
A Design Review of the Fandom-Verse		66
Social Capital in the Fandom-Verse		66
Design and Social Capital in Online Spaces.....		67
Designing for Users		70
Agency, Habitus, and Design.....		71
The People Behind the Design.....		72
An Organizational Review.....		75
Fandom As an Organization... ..		76
Mitigation of Needs: Users and Organization... ..		78
B – Designing for a Virtual Community.....		80
C – Glossary of Key Concepts.....		81

TABLES

1	Key concepts definitions.....	18
2	Participant sample – proposed vs. actual	22
3	Survey results – distribution of identifiers	28
4	Rainbow sheet example	29
5	Harry Potter Fandom page netnography – like/comment analysis	40
6	Narutopedia Fandom page netnography – like/comment analysis	40

FIGURES

1	Narutopedia Fandom home page	39
2	Narutopedia Fandom home page tagline	41
3	Harry Potter Fandom home page tagline	41
4	Fandom microsite pre-update	43
5	Fandom microsite post-update	43
6	User tweet on Instagram update	44
7	User tweet on Instagram update	44
8	User tweet on Instagram update	44
9	User tweet on Twitter update	46
10	User tweet on Twitter update	46
11	User tweet on Twitter update	47
12	User tweet on Twitter update	47
13	User tweet on Twitter update	48
14	User tweet on Twitter update	48
15	The Fandom organizational chart	76
16	Project deliverable – the design guide (front)	80
17	Project deliverable – the design guide (back)	80

INTRODUCTION

Background and Problem Statement

Fandom, formerly known as Wikia, was founded in 2004 and is a “global entertainment media brand powered by fan passion” dedicated to providing a space for fan-powered communities, centered around popular pop culture topics. Like Wikipedia, Fandom is an online library maintained and updated by fans to spread awareness and knowledge about similar media interests such as *The Simpsons* or *Game of Thrones*. Like many online social community platforms, Fandom is considered a trusted source that provides a home to explore, contribute to, and celebrate the world of pop culture.

Fandom and its various “communities” rely on the engagement between its members. According to *Social Media Today*, online community members maintain connections to their communities to fulfill the urge to contribute to a social space and gain something from being a part of a large group with common interests and goals. Users and the designers who create the virtual space compromise to reach a mutually beneficial accord—users create the space and contribute to it and are rewarded with access to other people with common interests in the form of community whereas designers and company stakeholders meet business objectives, maintain market relevancy, and increase profit. Users and the organization that hosts them depend on each other.

As Fandom undergoes a redesign of their platform, tensions between organization and user base are rising due to disagreements between what users want and what the organization can feasibly offer. Tensions were discovered during the Theming Project conducted in my previous internship with Fandom. This project sought to determine the impact of design change on overall user sentiments towards Fandom. We found that users felt that the organization was not

including their voices in design decisions that affected their communities; users felt that the changes to their communities without their consent were equivalent to “destroying their babies.”

Users reported that change as a problematic area in the various interviews conducted with Fandom users—specifically within the Chronicler persona—during my internship with the company in 2018. The Chronicler persona is one of the three contribution behavioral archetypes that Fandom’s design and research teams uncovered while researching usability practices among users. Chroniclers are detail-oriented users that dedicate time to researching and organizing information for others to enjoy. This persona prefers to “stay in the know” and works to create the best possible wiki experience to promote learning and community in the Fandom community. When speaking about the effort it takes to design and construct community pages during the 2018 Theming Project, Chronicler *Cyanide3* said “[Chroniclers are] simply proud of it. Once they finish a certain design which they want to keep, they think of it as a small little baby, like ‘Oh nice! This is my main page. Don’t ruin it.’” The investment of time and energy coupled with the immense pride felt at the finished content made change equivalent to disruption leaving users feeling a lack of control in their own communities.

Using the findings from the Theming project, I concluded that users felt loss and anger from the perceived lack of agency in decisions concerning their communities. This perceived lack of agency for users is the cause of strain in the relationship between company and user base that has serious implications for both parties. Organizations provide structured, reputable spaces that users need to establish relationships but also depend on their users to create a culture that attracts and maintains member participation. Users, in turn, create the content needed to garner participation but are limited in their self-expression. What should be a conducive and mutually beneficial relationship, in actuality, is not easily attainable or maintained.

We uncovered how users felt with the Theming Project, but where do we go from there? With this project, I hope to address the implications of design on the formation of social bonds and how this can be extended to evaluate Fandom's current problem. What are the organization's needs when it comes to design and how are the needs of the users in opposition to this? What is the relationship between design and the formation of identity-based bonds? How does design cement the feeling of community between users or undermine it? How can users convey their communal identity through a chosen aesthetic while remaining within the design constraints set by the organization? What does design contribute to the overall social capital shared and exchanged in online communities? I use these questions to frame this project and identify objectives to pursue.

Project Significance and Deliverables

Past academic works have considered only online communities in terms of the social interactions within the sites and the causal relationship between the rate of social interaction and overall success of the platform, defining platform success through the lens of member participation and interaction. However, in this project, I include design in this framework for online community platform success- platform design is also a factor that influences the making of a successful online community platform.

The purpose of this project is two-fold. I will validate the relationship between design, user attachment, and the formation of social bonds in online communities and then compare organizational responses post-update to inform and improve services and experiences delivered by the organization Fandom. The key to validating the relationship between design and the emotional connection to a virtual space is an assessment of the connection between design and

online social bonding. Insight from this virtual ecology is important for evaluating the complexity of identity and social bonding. Therefore, a thorough examination of the nuances of “existing”—including a thick description of the virtual environment itself—is crucial.

My interest in the Theming Project has led me back to Fandom as an independent researcher so that I may continue my work under the guidance of the company. This project seeks to gain actionable insight into that connection in order to offer written recommendations to my stakeholders at Fandom, the design and research team. Based on findings, I created the design guide for Fandom designers to help them navigate issues of design, identity, and social bonding in online spaces (see Appendix B).

Project Objectives

This project answers key questions about the connection between design and bond formation: 1) what is it about this specific virtual “space” that draws people and maintains their interest and how will changes to this “environment” affect its ability to do so? and 2) how can users maintain their rate of exchange of social capital through an embodiment of communal identity that adheres to the design constraints set by the larger organization? Overall, this project will illuminate the role of design in empowering the ability to form connections between users and its overall impact in the success of online social platforms.

Project Report Roadmap

This report includes five chapters and an appendix. In the first chapter, I provide a summation of the goals for this project and my approach for addressing the issues raised from users at Fandom. This section also covers key concepts used during this venture—such as

identity, community, and habitus—to ground readers in the theory that shaped this project. It also provides directions for utilizing the deliverables presented in the appendix and additional resources for readers and stakeholders to continue their exploration of key concepts. The deliverables for this project include the theoretical framework requested by Fandom stakeholder, a design guide proposed by me, and glossary of key terms that connects concepts in the design guide to material presented in theory.

The second chapter “Research Design and Methods” provides a walkthrough of the methods selected and utilized in this venture, as well as an in-depth look into the preparation and recruitment stages for the research.

The third chapter “Data Analysis” details the approach used to analyze the data collected from this project, quotes, and first-hand accounts from users on their user journey in their respective online communities and the quantitative data to support findings.

The fourth chapter, “Results and Insights,” provides an overview of my research findings and the patterns of behavior and feelings uncovered during interviews with users and designers, while connecting these findings to implications for Fandom, their users, and the broader user-driven communities in tech like Discord, Facebook, and Twitter. I provide recommendations for future research, changes to design processes in the organization, and a roadmap for further testing. In this section, I also introduce one of the deliverables for this project: the design pamphlet to assist designers in empathizing with users. I proposed this as a deliverable because it could provide value in helping address the miscommunication between users and organization. The guide is meant to give designers an expanded look into the user perspective—insight that the shallow capturing of a persona could disregard—by detailing what design means for user

participation and motivation and the affect that changes could have to their environment and subsequent user attachment to it. I initially planned to create the guide using feedback from stakeholders. However, by the end of this venture, company stakeholders had moved on to other opportunities, morphing this project into a broader assessment of how anthropology—and more specifically, its methods—could be of benefit to industry problems.

This was an independent venture of storytelling that I felt was missing from the user materials currently used by Fandom designers. Initially, I had planned to present a summary of the design pamphlet to Fandom stakeholders and designers during the reporting of the findings from this project, but since the change in scope, I will present deliverables to my committee and deliver artifacts to my contacts on Fandom’s design team. The pamphlet is a PDF document to be shared with the team for future use and reference. I would hope that designers can use it as reference material for handling issues of design and identity and be a resource for handling user pushback on design updates.

The fifth, and final section, “Conclusion” provides an answer to the objectives first described in the Introduction. In this section, I also reflect on the findings in this project and the broader implications for social media platforms in general, removing the issue from the Fandom-verse and placing it out into the world to be contemplated through a similar but, albeit different lens. I also show how classic anthropological methodologies such as participatory action research—and its connection to ethics—can be applied to the contemporary world and transverse academia into the tech industry.

Finally, the appendices include deliverables for the stakeholders of this project and resources to guide them through this project report: (a) theoretical framing for the effects of

change in virtual spaces, (b) the “Designing for a Virtual Community” design pamphlet, and (c) a glossary of key anthropological concepts. The theoretical framework is comprised of contextual literature needed to understand the problem at hand and is divided into three sections. Each section focuses on different elements that comprise this research: personhood in online spaces, an overview of design practices, and a review of Fandom as an organization. In the first section, I cover concepts such as identity, community, habitus, culture, social capital, and bond formation. The design guide is a treasure map to be used by designers as a model for a more inclusive design process that addresses facets of the human condition that may be lost in the pursuit of answering key organizational objectives, and the glossary provides the means for connecting the two.

CHAPTER ONE

AN ASSESSMENT OF CHANGE IN ONLINE SPACES

The 2018 Theming Project revealed negative user sentiment towards change to their communities in Fandom because of a perceived lack of autonomy and agency in creating unique spaces for users' respective communities. Users had lost trust in the organization which put users at risk leaving the platform and ultimately raised alarms in the organization because of potential loss of users and thus, profits. This project extended findings from the original Theming Project to compare with similar online community platforms to determine the effects of change on the relationship between design and bond formation on a larger scale and situated findings (from this current venture and its predecessor) in anthropological theory to showcase the value that anthropological theory and methodologies could bring to industry practices and queries and restore trust between all the stakeholders involved in this project—the organization and users.

Section One: A Methodological Approach

I used a mix of interpretive and ecological approaches to assess the human condition regarding users' reaction to change in online settings. This approach fit this project because the goal was to deeply understand users' connection to the platform—their virtual “environment”—and how changes to it affected their user experiences, their connections to the platform, and to each other.

The interpretive approach helped unveil user sentiments and the importance of online communities to users outside of the Fandom platform. If users outside of Fandom exhibited like reactions to similar updates to their platforms of choice, then we can ground this phenomenon in the broader discourse of design. The comparative, ecological approach assisted with assessing

the complex relationship between users and their online communities, viewing the communities as their own environments to validate the role of culture among users in their respective communities. An analysis of the role of culture, habitus, agency, community, and identity advised the framing of this approach and provided deeper insight into the human condition to better validate the effects of design changes on bond formation in online communities.

I compared the situation with Fandom to Twitter and Instagram because they had—at the time—incorporated new updates to their platforms that had caused an uproar among select users. During the time of the Theming Project, Fandom was considering updates that would remove functionality that, previously, had allowed users to code and modify the visual design and layout of their communities to standardize Fandom community design across the platform which upset users because the design of their community would no longer be under the communities’—and users’—control. Twitter changed its process for retweeting and quote tweeting that added an extra step to the user experience which annoyed some of its users and Instagram introduced an algorithm that removed chronological timing of posts for an algorithm that predicted which content users would prefer to see, making it more difficult for users to stay in touch with new posts from friends and their network.

This comparison helped situate the Fandom’s problem and initial inspection in the broader discourse of change in virtual spaces and its ethical implications for the tech industry moving forward. Fandom is like, but unlike these two social media sites in that Fandom is an amalgamation of defined, smaller communities dedicated to specific pop culture topics whereas Twitter and Instagram are hosts for users to connect and form ambiguous communities around popular topics for conversation based on those connections. Using this sample of social sites proved to be the best approach to defining the relationship between design and bond formation

through the lens of change to user communities across various modes of hosting for online community environments.

Comparing the experiences of users across a variety of virtual spaces can help industry professionals better contemplate how they conduct user research and users' involvement in the design process going forward. This project can serve as a guide to designers across various industries because of its relevancy to all platforms that partner with their users to determine organizational success. This project and its predecessor, the Theming Project, have shown that stakeholders can have separate and even opposite opinions on the ideal design for their needs, but by including and incorporating the voices of all the parties involved, you can reach a design that can meet everyone's needs enough and reassure stakeholders that their voice matters.

I proposed the use of surveys and qualitative interviewing to better visualize this phenomenon on a grander scale and gather meaning and motivations through open-ended questions and semi-structured interviews. The focus group and participatory design activity would gather data for addressing user needs in future iterations of designs, and a virtual ethnography of two Fandom microsites allowed insight into users "in the wild" and how interactions may be disrupted through sudden changes. These methodologies uncovered data on users who experienced—sometimes unwanted—changes to their communities and see firsthand how users interact with the platform and each other.

Section Two: Project Key Concepts and Resources

This project inquiry includes complex anthropological concepts that may be novel to most readers in industry. To help bridge this gap, this section provides succinct definitions for key concepts for potential further research. Note that while this section will provide readers a

baseline of understanding, definitions are more thoroughly explored in the glossary of key concepts provided in the appendix, along with online resources for further exploration.

Table 1 Key Concepts Definitions

Key Concepts	
Identity	The dynamic creation and definition of self in relation to society; the social fact of being who or what a person or thing is.
Community	A group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common; a feeling of fellowship with others, as a result of sharing common attitudes, interests, and goals.
Culture	The shared set of (implicit and explicit) values, ideas, concepts, and rules of behavior that allow a social group to function and perpetuate itself.
Habitus	The physical embodiment of cultural capital, to the deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that we possess due to our life experiences.
Social Capital	The networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society, enabling that society to function effectively.

Section Three: Going Forward – Resources for The Deliverables

The primary deliverable for this project is a theoretical framework for change in online communities requested by organizational stakeholders. The theory deeply explores key concepts for understanding the connection between personal identity, community, culture, and design and the effect change can have on the usual praxis of users and their commitment to the social platform overall. I suggested the secondary deliverable, a design guide, to help designers quickly navigate concepts discussed in the theoretical framework with actionable questions to

ground designers in the needs of users and guide stakeholders towards through a treasure map towards a more inclusive, community-based participatory design. Finally, a glossary of key concepts provides definitions and resources for understanding terms used in this project and deliverables, and how concepts are connected in this venture.

DIRECTIONS FOR USE:

1. Navigate the treasure map in the design guide through key concepts
2. Utilize the glossary of key terms (see Appendix C) to help define and apply theoretical terms to industry praxis, using the “How Might We” questions in the guides to center the user in design decisions
3. Use the design guide and glossary to locate key terms in the theoretical framework for a deeper understanding of the connection between theory and practice

CHAPTER TWO

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

To better evaluate the impact of design on user interaction and bond formation, I applied a primarily qualitative methodology, utilizing the quantitative survey data as support for findings. This approach is the most suitable for understanding the depth of emotional connection users feel towards their respective online communities and how this varies depending on the persona users self-identify with. And so, for this applied anthropology, I employed methods such as semi-structured qualitative interviewing, focus group analysis, participatory design activities, and a virtual ethnography. Using an interpretive and ecological approach to communicate the sentiments around the importance of online communities to users and better assess the role of culture in the community and the relationship between users and their respective virtual environments, I conducted a cross-sectional project that included users in and out of the Fandomverse with an aim to include a wide variety of individuals that have experienced some form of discomfort with a change to their online social environment.

More precisely, this research methodology is in line with what Kozinets (1997) terms as “netnography.” Netnography is an adaptation of ethnography—a traditional anthropological technique based on participant observation for the online world. It, in a sense, is the project of online cultures through the observation of online practices, behaviors, and written content. In his more recent work, Kozinets (2019) has expanded this definition to better align with the ever-evolving world of social media, operationalizing Ulrike Gretzel’s (2017) definition of social media to define social media as applications, websites, and other online technologies that empower various modes of user engagement via content creation, distribution, documentation,

and association (2019,1). Social media has evolved to encompass complex social systems that reflect personal and communal identities and reveal insight into the human condition and unique social phenomenon (Kozinets 2019, 3). Netnography, in the present day, is a means for studying social media that “maintains the complexities of its experiential and cultural qualities” (Kozinets 2019, 2) through a set of general instructions to researching the online world with a combination of specific methodologies like online observation, interviews, data scraping, and archival work.

Section One: Preparation

To begin, I met with company stakeholders several times in the summer of 2020 via Zoom to discuss priorities for this project and the personas that would be its primary focus. Company stakeholders offered suggestions for connecting with other key people within the organization who had some experience dealing with the design changes within the Fandom communities including the Global Community Lead, the Senior Director of Analytics and Business Strategy, and the then User Experience Research Intern who was instrumental in creating the personas that Fandom used during the Theming Project. The Senior Director introduced me to a new member to the Fandom team hired as the Consumer Insights Manager who was instrumental in helping me contact potential participants from the Fan Lab—a community of Fandom users who work closely with the company to ensure the voice of the user included in major platform decisions—to include in this project, however for extenuating circumstances, I was not able to gather participants from this avenue. Overall, all organizational stakeholders provided some level of input and direction for this project.

Weekly syncs with stakeholders were coordinated to discuss research materials, collaborate and iterate on project artifacts, and select methods to be used in this project.

Sampling Strategy

Company stakeholders and I agreed on a sampling strategy—a mix of snowball sampling and purposive sampling to include key personas whose input could well inform this research, with a variety in age, gender, occupation, etc. I created a twenty-six-question screener survey with Qualtrics and planned to distribute it on various social media sites including Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook to recruit non-Fandom users. Participants were offered a forty-dollar Amazon e-gift card incentive to encourage participation and as appreciation for their time.

I proposed sample size of eighteen to twenty-four total participants with three archetypes to include: designers, Fandom users, and non-Fandom users. Unfortunately, since I was not able to secure participants from The Fan Lab to include as the Fandom users for this project, I changed the scope of the project to focus more on non-Fandom and non-Fan Lab users. Out of the ten non-Fan Lab/Fandom users chosen for this project, five participants were familiar with Fandom in some capacity. Those users provided insight into their experiences as an embodied persona in the Fandom-verse.

Table 2 Participant Sample – Proposed vs. Actual

	Designers		Fan Lab Users		Non-Fan Lab/Fandom users	
Proposed Sample	2		10		6	
	1 Male	1 Female	5 Males	5 Females	3 Males	3 Females
Actual Sample	2		0		10	
	1 Male	1 Female	0 Males	0 Females	5 Males	5 Females

I used a perceived identity verification strategy (Ma and Agarwal 2007)—a modified version of the Twenty Statement Test (TST) developed by Kuhn and McPartland (1954)—in the

survey to empower self-identification of participants according to their participation level in their online communities with definitions—or identifiers—of each persona. Company stakeholders provided the list of identifiers to use for this method. Each identifier was split into two parts with each part given its own question on the survey and survey choices were randomized to eliminate potential bias.

Example 1: Identifier Statement

Explorer I am a dedicated fan who only has the time and mental space to keep up with my top 3 things I am a fan of. I prefer to follow what is popular right now and I'm not interested in diving deeper, such as learning about extended universes or character back stories. Being a fan is personal and not something that I typically discuss (online or in person) with others.

Q14: Which of the following best describes your participation in your online community?

a) I am a dedicated fan who only has the time and mental space to keep up with my top 3 things I am a fan of. I prefer to follow what is popular right now and I'm not interested in diving deeper, such as learning about extended universes or character back stories.

Q15: Which of the following best describes your participation in your online community?

a) Being a fan is personal and not something that I typically discuss (online or in person) with others.

In other words, the survey included two questions that prompted respondents to self-identify with only half of the defined identifier. This provided insight into the behavioral archetypes to which respondents related to and answered the question of whether respondents had a mix of behaviors that defined their attachment to and level of participation in their

respective communities. This insight established the connections between perceived identity and the emotions that are felt when the social environment of their online community has changed.

The survey included logic that identified potential participants for the ethnographic interviews and focus group. Out of sixty-six total survey respondents, a pool of thirty-five viable respondents were selected for recruitment. Each respondent was assigned a number—numbers were selected via an online random number generator to select project participants. Ultimately, a sample size of twelve participants were selected—two designers handpicked by Fandom stakeholders and ten users from the survey pool—with an equal distribution between genders and Fandom/non-Fandom users. Diversity was key in this research because it was imperative to obtain a well-rounded view of the emotional attachments to online spaces across the different identified personas.

Section Two: Data Collection

Data was gathered from four avenues: the survey screener shared via social media and word of mouth, interviews with designers and users, a focus group and participatory design activity involving non-Fandom users, and an ethnographic project of two top Fandom microsites: the Harry Potter Wiki and Narutopedia. The survey questions were drafted and iterated upon with the help of Fandom stakeholders then coded into Qualtrics. The Qualtrics survey link was distribute across various social media sites and shared broadly. Survey responses were tracked over time and provided me with additional quantitative data on a slightly larger scale. A total of sixty-six people responded with thirty-two partially completed surveys and thirty-five completed.

For the “netnography,” I visited and perused both microsites with my phone or laptop for one hour a day for two weeks to observe member behavior and participation within the

communities. I kept a notepad that I used for documenting member behavior—such as likes, comments and response rate—and my own experiences using the Fandom platform. In a virtual ethnography, there are aspects of the community that could not be captured or tracked (i.e., lurking behavior, post submission, and content consumption), but anticipated the ability to capture examples of a strong sense of community from users. I defined a strong sense of community as prevalent camaraderie and communication between users in the community—comments with LOLs, gifs and memes, commentary matching the topic of the community, and multiple posts from specific drivers in the community. For example, in the Harry Potter wiki community, I looked for comments, photos, or popular phrases and quotes from characters, and people self-identifying with Gryffindor or Slytherin. I looked for posts that would give feeling to what I was reading and experiencing in the communities. I documented moments around recent posts to see how much interaction posts get to assess and compare post popularity. Within posts, I tried to follow users that were contributing and/or responding the most.

CHAPTER THREE

DATA ANALYSIS

Section One: Survey Analysis

The survey contained a total of twenty-six questions divided into three question blocks: seven preliminary questions, ten questions on online communities, and nine questions focused on demographics. The survey contained skip and termination logic to ensure the identification of ideal participants for this project. A total of sixty-six people started the survey, but only fifty-three percent of respondents (thirty-five people) were able to complete the entire survey.

According to the survey, about twenty-nine percent of people were familiar with the Fandom platform, but only eleven percent of these respondents reported to have ever used the Fandom platform. However, seventy-one percent of respondents reported that they were a member of an online community of some sort—in the survey, online communities were defined as social sites that included but were not limited to Reddit threads, wiki communities, Twitter feeds, and Facebook groups. A majority of respondents also reported that they preferred to use their mobile phone over their laptop because it's "small and compact" and can be taken everywhere because of its convenient portability.

On average, about eighty-nine percent of participants reported that they spent less than four hours a day on online communities (even split between the "less than an hour a day" and "between two and four hours a day" options). Out of these respondents, thirty-seven percent of participants reported that they do not post in online communities whereas thirty-three percent reported that they post one to two times a week and twenty-two percent reported that they post

multiple times a week. A majority of participants—seventy three percent—reported being a member of their community for a long period of time (over three years); no respondent reported being a member of their community for less than six months. According to this data, being a part of online communities is a long-term commitment for people even though a portion preferred to not post original content in their communities of choice.

As stated before, a perceived identity verification strategy (Ma and Agarwal 2007) was utilized in the survey to uncover data on user participation and behavior. Participants self-identified with identifiers provided by company stakeholders and categorized according to their perceived participation level in their online communities. Each identifier was split into two statements; these statements were divided into two questions in which respondents had to complete.

According to the survey, majority of participants self-identified with the consumption personas. In terms of usual behaviors in online communities, seventy percent of respondents related with the “Educator” persona; in terms of participation in online communities, thirty-seven percent of respondents related with the “Explorer” persona.

According to the data, majority of respondents felt that being a fan was a personal experience in which they preferred to do their own research to gain the full picture of Fandom content. However, in terms of participation, a majority of participants reported that they enjoyed the experience of talking about their fan experience and showing off their knowledge of Fandom facts (participation: Educator +Devoted Enthusiast).

Table 3 Survey Results – Distribution of Identifiers

	Persona	Behavior	Participation
Consumption	Explorer	14.81%	37.04%
	Educator	70.37%	25.93%
Contribution	Devoted Enthusiast	3.70%	29.6%
	Evangelist	11.11%	3.7%
	Chronicler	0%	3.7%

Section Two: Qualitative Analysis

Interviews

I interviewed a total of twelve people- ten users and two designers. Designers interviewed for this project were chosen from Fandom’s design team by organizational stakeholders and users were selected randomly from the pool of survey respondents, evenly split in gender between the ages of twenty-six and thirty-eight. Interview notes were compiled in a rainbow spreadsheet to analyze the qualitative data gathered from the interviews and focus group. For context, a rainbow spreadsheet is an excel sheet with top research questions in the first column of the sheet and notes from interviews with participants in the following columns. This method allows me to analyze findings for a particular question for each participant horizontally, making capturing and flagging trends among participants easier.

Table 4 Rainbow Sheet Example

	“Michael”	“Damien”	“Nao”
"At home" definition	comfortable with the group participants in community; shared interests	having a sense of support, security, level of caring between members; to remind himself who he is, still feel the support he felt in college	a personal connection to everyone, doesn't see it (the platform) as a space, the space is the people
3 UI qualities	customizable (not super fancy but some modification), convenient, profiles (want to see the people, stickers, and emotes for expression versatility	simplicity, say so in the use (control of privacy), timer to show how long he's utilizing the community or platform	simplicity - not overwhelming, customizable to what you want, and speed (Arch Hero is annoyingly slow)

Designers

Fandom designers included in this assessment had worked for the organization for an average of five years and reported enjoying their work. Job duties kept designers engaged in the organization's mission, they felt a kinship to users in some ways, and they enjoyed the challenge of creating the best experience. At the onset of COVID-19, majority of Fandom's employees transitioned to a remote work setting which challenged this international team. Employees needed to compensate with overcommunication with project stakeholder and team members to meet ever-changing needs of the organization in terms of innovation and users in terms of functionality and experience. Designers were split among different teams that took charge of the design process for various products so designers could work on multiple design projects simultaneously.

Design managers collected feedback from each team on projected projects each quarter and the amount of design work needed for a specific project. With this, design support was

resourced as needed for an allotted amount of time to complete that project for the team. In this agile environment, designers collaborated with team members on project needs and timelines, attended weekly project meetings to sync, and communicated with the team on recent updates. Project teams usually comprised of one or more project managers (PMs), a designer, an engineering lead, and a development team. Each project exploration lasted from four to six weeks, depending on the project methodology. Project teams worked to maintain a certain level of understanding of project end goals and took necessary steps to achieve that.

Designers attended project kickoffs with the entire team to go over goals and objectives for projects. Project managers and leads provided information on the problems they sought to solve for—researchers then worked with designers to draft questions and a moderator script to guide conversations with users. Designers and researchers uncovered answers for top questions from PMs and team stakeholders, as well as concerns users brought up in sessions. Researchers compiled notes to analyze and delivered findings back to the team for new direction from the team and organizational leadership. With the new direction, designers made necessary changes to designs. This iterative process continued until all stakeholder questions/concerns had been answered, and after rounds of iteration, projects were moved along the project pipeline to be rolled out to users in form of updates (to existing products) or a product release (for new products).

Fandom designers understood that the space they created for users was “almost like their home.” During interviews, designers were very aware of the responsibility they had to the organization as well as the users. They stated that it was their job to find a balance between what users wanted and what the organization could feasibly offer. To gain insight into customer needs, designers utilized the growth team- also known as the community team- and personas to guide

designs and help them step away from assumptions that could influence the design process. Designers had to understand use cases for each product and feature and make decisions that would empower users to create a communal space for all fans to enjoy especially since each micro community was unique and had needs specific to that community.

Users

Surprisingly, participants reported no changes in their communication habits online since the onset of the COVID-19 epidemic. Social media was a popular mode for communicating among participants, reporting an average of four to five hours a day dedicated to communication through this medium. The most popular social media sites among participants were Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit. Instagram was the favored social platform because of the variety of available content whereas Facebook was the least favorite to use. Instagram's UI was considered cleaner and more user-friendly, with a specific focus—documenting experiences via pictures. Facebook, on the other hand, was thought of as an amalgamation of “noise” with no specific focus or purpose. Even though Facebook was a popular social site to use among participants, it was used primarily for communicating with specific people, like family and friends. Otherwise, participants found the content and the audience Facebook catered to uninteresting and random. Overall, content and user interaction with others were driving forces that users considered when talking about their favorite and least favored social site.

A majority of participants preferred their internet communities to be a reliable source of information. When asked about characteristics that made them want to join their respective communities, majority of participants stated traits such as informative and relevant content, an engaging community with a supportive and collaborative environment. Even when asked to describe their communities in words, participants used words like “fun,” “current,” “convenient,”

“inclusive,” “informative,” and “resourceful.” Contrary to this, when asked the opposite (what makes them want to leave a community), majority of participants spoke about “non-conductive environments,” no perceived value to the user, and being overwhelmed because there’s “too much going on.”

On average, participants wanted to feel “at home” in their social sites of choice and this meant feeling comfortable in the community. Participants wanted to feel a sense of security and support and wanted to feel a part of the community by having shared interests to engage with others where others value their opinion. Rate of participation in the community itself was also connected to how comfortable a user was in the community; fifty percent of participants interviewed stated that feeling at home in a social media platform was an important part of their experience. This feeling was also very important in users’ decision to engage in the community via posts, comments, likes, and shares. Familiarity and comfortability in the platform were very important to participants to the point where the lack of these elements would be detrimental to their experience because users don’t want to feel judged by other users.

Additionally, participants wanted the user interface (UI) to be organized and user-friendly, practical and efficient, and straightforward. A majority of participants wanted an experience that was clean, accessible, and easy to use with a sense of order. Images were also an expectation, especially for a themed community, to connect the social site and community back to the original content. Visuals were also important very important to the user experience because they are the embodied focus of the community and/or conversation and without them, sites feel less entertaining and less connected to the pop culture references in which the communities and conversations are based on.

Focus Group

During the focus group, I took a backseat approach in the conversation, enabling participants a chance for deeper conversations on their experiences in their respective virtual social communities. The focus group consisted of four participants and lasted roughly ninety minutes. The session was divided into four sections: an icebreaker, two sets of conversation prompts (each consisting of a pool of questions around a specific topic), and the participatory design activity participants were asked participants to complete and bring with them to the session. Insights on participant sentiment surrounding their online communities, trends in reactions, and topics and captured were documented.

The first session prompt centered around online communities: what communities are they a part of, how they define a community, and what they expect in an online community. The second covered design changes in their respective communities and how those changes affected their usual user experience. Participants were heavy social media users and utilized this form of communication to maintain friendships and access to rapid information. Participants also reported using specific channels to communicate with specific people—a sentiment that was also brought up during qualitative interviews. When describing their communities, participants used words like laughter, distraction, and informational.

To participants, online social communities are avenues that provided consistent access to information, a variety of new content, and “pure, light-headed entertainment.” Participants preferred spaces that had a focus to tie them to the community—without a focus, users are stuck in a constant loop of “unconscious scrolling.” Regarding design changes, participants, overall, had mixed feelings about updates. In some case, participants like **Nao, a twenty-nine-year-old

software engineer, didn't mind updates and even liked them if the updates introduced new features and improved the overall usability of the platform. *"[I] like the word [update] a lot...it means new features and that's like an endorphin hit."* **Robin, a twenty-eight-year-old financial analyst corroborated this opinion saying, *"[It] depends on the change...a positive change or added feature equals [me using the] platform more. If not, [then I] wouldn't use the app as much or would delete it if the change is egregious."* In other cases, like **Timothy, a thirty-year-old teacher, participants were wary about updates because of bad experiences where updates irrevocably changed their connection or effort to their community. *"Updates are annoying. They mean more work, something else to learn. I don't usually like the updates. I'm used to it being a certain way and I don't like them taking away functionality; it makes it harder to use."*

Whereas participants were split on their opinions on new features and functionalities, users shared negative sentiment on updates that specifically changed the way they interacted with their communities. *"[I don't like updates] that make [the site] harder and complicated than it was before,"* said **Damien, a 26-year-old student working as an Administrative Assistant. In some examples from participants, updates delayed the communication with the community and left users like **Tori, a 26-year-old academic advisor, feeling confused as to why the updates occurred in the first and asking, "who asked for this?" *"Um, if it's an update that just says like bug fixes, then I have like no qualms about it. If it's an update that's like, 'Oh, we change this, this and this', it's like I don't know a single user that asked about these changes or even wanted these changes before."* Participants wanted to be included in the design process at least to the point of being informed of updates beforehand. **Tori preferred to have a warning beforehand so it wouldn't come as a surprise when things changed. Damien corroborated this sentiment, saying *"Who did you ask before the change was made? [The business doesn't] provide a reason*

as to why they changed it.” And whereas, participants like **Tori, **Nao, and **Daniel feel that they’re adaptable enough to for the change to not affect their usual processes, updates and changes for others like **Timothy and **Damien, can alter their emotional attachment to the space.

Participatory Design Activity

Time was reserved in the session to talk about the participatory design activity created for participants as an activity to boost thought and conversation around online communities during the focus group. For the activity, participants were required to create their own Fandom community. Participants had to design a blank Fandom page using paste-able tiles that would represent features on their ‘website,’ then answer a set of questions to probe at the reasoning behind each of their designs. Participants could choose the elements to be represented in their designs but had to include the “ads” tile somewhere in their design, to signify a place where ads would be placed and fulfill the monetization needs of the organization. This was vital because this is the major avenue to which Fandom as an organization receives and maintains a profit. I asked participants to email their designs to me upon completion and bring them to the session to discuss as a group. Among the four participants, however, only three were able to complete and return this exercise.

After the focus group, participants’ designs and responses were compared to assess priorities in an online social community. All the focus group participants prioritized “recent episodes,” “video clips,” and “recent episodes” tiles, electing to place them closer to the top of their webpage designs. Participants reported that it was important to see connections to the show because of the site’s purpose—to connect fans of *The Simpsons*. If users are interacting with a

site based on a pop culture phenom like *The Simpsons*, participants thought it was crucial to provide context and content on the show, its characters, and the storyline. Each participant in the focus group had a different opinion on which feature was most important on the page, but, overall, participants reported that they wanted an easy, accessible user experience and chose to place feature tiles they'd use the most at the top for easy access. Ads were, unsurprisingly, placed in the far corners of their sites because this made it easier to focus on other content on the page and ignore the ads.

Participants chose to de-prioritize “trivias,” “discussions,” and “admins” because they do not regularly participate arenas like these in their respective communities. Discussions and admins tiles denote design components featured in every wiki community. The discussion component is central to user engagement and activity because it offers a space for users to post, react, and share content with others. Users deprioritized discussions because interaction with others came secondary to information consumption. This is a finding we also saw in the Theming Project—not everyone was comfortable with the idea of creating original content because of fear of embarrassment or backlash from others.

The trivia component denotes a space for communal games centered around the community topic. This space is meant to keep the community engaged and entertained, fostering an avenue for deeper interaction between users, using gamification as a means for increasing user interaction and participation. The admin component allows users a glimpse into the people behind their community. Here, users can see the usernames of the people responsible for creating and curating the space, both current and inactive. These were deprioritized because participants would not normally navigate to these components specifically—less important features and pages are moved to the bottom to make avoiding them easier.

Only one participant decided to leave some tiles out to keep true to a “cleaner” vision for her UI. Each participant had similar goals for their website: the space was meant to be a fun, engaging space for users to converse on subjects around the show—a “mix of serious and fun” where the purpose revolved around the creation and sharing of information on *The Simpsons*. Participants wanted to create a community space online where true Simpsons fans could rally and enjoy content together.

Section Three: Net-Nography Analysis

I observed behavior and participation of Fandom users in two microsites—Narutopedia and the Harry Potter Wiki—with my phone or laptop for one hour a day for two weeks. These microsites were chosen because I am a fan of both media and would be able to interpret the context of posts from users. Twitter and Instagram were used as a comparison because they had rolled out similar updates that changed the way users interacted in the site—Twitter for the positive reception of its updates and Instagram for the negative.

The Fandom-verse: A Comparative Analysis

From late July to early August 2020, I used a notepad to document my observations in the Fandom-verse while I explored the discussions and community pages. I did not engage with the users—instead, I adopted the persona of an explorer (lurker) in the community to see how users behaved and participated in the environment naturally, without interfering or spurring events of participation. I counted the number of posts per day and documented the amount of visible user interaction for each post. For Twitter and Instagram, a more targeted approach was used because of the vast amount of content being posted. I searched the word “update” and “Instagram” on Twitter and took screenshots of various users’ reaction to the new updates

Instagram and Twitter rolled out to its users to compare experiences seen in the various virtual environments.

Fandom

The discussion pages in Fandom were an inviting arena for contribution and participation. The page's main feature is its timeline—like that of Facebook or Twitter. The discussion page created avenues for both consumption and contributor personas to exist and interact within the Fandom-verse microsite. The timeline didn't seem to be organized in chronological order when I first navigated but upon further exploration, I found functionality to customize the layout view, sort, and filter down posts in the discussions page to better fit needs and make preferred content more accessible. For this netnography, I utilized the condensed view to get a broader view of user interaction and sorted posts to chronological order to see the frequency of interaction on each microsite. On occasion, I set my view to the “hot” view to target the most popular posts in the community.

The site architecture cemented user interactions in specific workflows—it was easy to see how users could become familiar with the architecture of the sites to the point where change could seem detrimental to their usual habits of engagement. Users interacted with each other via posts, polls, memes, and photos, which made up the majority of contributed content, with subpages dedicated to specific audiences. Users engaged regularly, with new content being posted at least twice in an hour. More engaged users posted multiple times in a single day, driving interaction among users with funny memes and polls to expand on fan theories of character development not explored in the series. Users discussed changes to the platform as well as theory of episodes and movies.

Users did not post as often as I expected for an online community, but this insight was in comparison to my own experiences in my communities of choice. It made sense in the context of

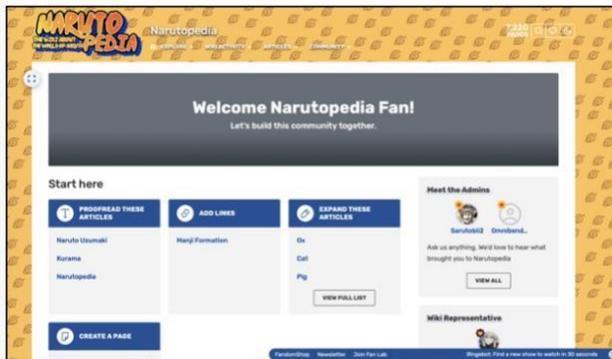


Figure 1 Narutopedia Fandom home page.

behavior and participation as consumption-based.

Fandom because according to the personas created, the majority of Fandom users primarily remain within the realm of consumption. This insight was also seen in the survey analysis – over sixty percent of survey respondents self-identified their

According to organizational personas, users who typically engaged tended to be deeply invested in the communities and were responsible for driving interaction between users. Usually referred to as “power users,” Chroniclers made up a low percentage of users in the Theming Project and in the survey responses. In my netnography, this behavior was apparent. For example, in the Narutopedia microsite, I saw an average of two to four posts from various users during my hour of observation. The posts were action-oriented and attempted to engage other users via questions, memes on the latest episodes, and fan theories on imaginary battle scenes. In an entire day, the discussions page saw an average of fifteen to twenty-five posts from users, several being from a few single users, driving the interaction. I saw a single user contribute up to four posts to the discussions page – the most from an individual observed during this netnography. It was surprising, however, to see the difference between likes and comments in the community.

As I couldn't observe lurking behavior, I had to rely on what I could see—comments outnumbered posts six to one and there was a wider array of users commenting in posts. Initially,

I had hypothesized that users would primarily react with posts via likes since that is the easiest way to interact with a post. I observed the same user behavior in the Harry Potter Wiki – there were, on average, twenty-four posts per day, with comments leading in user participation by two to one. Content did not always center around the community’s theme, however. With the onset of COVID-19, the micro communities became a place for checking in and exchanging information on social distancing and testing sites.

Table 5 Harry Potter Fandom Page Netnography – Like/Comment Analysis

Harry Potter Fandom														
Day	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Posts	19	18	33	27	15	20	25	18	24	18	27	24	28	35
	59	27	110	98	66	68	78	52	61	44	49	73	112	119
	786	445	930	3748	602	387	1312	471	286	1704	416	1191	1094	651

Table 6 Narutopedia Fandom Page Netnography – Like/Comment Analysis

Narutopedia Fandom														
Day	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Posts	19	18	33	27	15	20	25	18	24	18	27	24	28	35
	59	27	110	98	66	68	78	52	61	44	49	73	112	119
	786	445	930	3748	602	387	1312	471	286	1704	416	1191	1094	651

The community pages did not offer an avenue to participate, per se, but provided information on key personalities driving the wiki site: admins, the wiki representative, top contributors of the week, and recent contributors. Day after day, icons of the recent contributors changed but names of top contributors stayed consistent even as specific ratings altered slightly. This page allows for community involvement with provided links that empower users to proofread, add links, and expand on existing articles within the microsite. The design of the page itself “feels” like a cooperative environment, specifically with the page tagline:



Figure 2 Narutopedia Fandom home page tagline.



Figure 3 Harry Potter Fandom home page tagline.

This community page offered the space and opportunity for users to contribute knowledge equally to the site. Each microsite is a crowd-sourced resource made for and by users. However, from past research with Fandom as an intern and data from this project’s survey inquiry, we know that most individuals prefer to consume content rather than contribute original content, so I postulate that this environment was mostly used by contributor personas such as Chroniclers because of their interest in documenting and sharing their knowledge and expertise. This page also did not focus on the design element as much as the discussion page. The

community page is primarily devoid of visual content other than the themed background and title that link the page back to the community's purpose—its focus geared towards article creation rather than user engagement.

From the Theming Project, we saw that Chroniclers saw updates (specifically updates that removed their control over the design of their community page) as detrimental—akin to “destroying their babies”—which spurred this project to see the impact of design on behavior. Users would no longer have access to backend code and communities across the platform would adopt a single archetype for their design. The role of UX teams is to design experiences for the user; basically, mapping out ways in which the organization wants users to engage with each other. However, familiarity rivals innovation; once users are familiarized with a certain way of engaging with the platform and others, change can be very jarring, especially to those that do not like to learn new ways of engaging when they feel it's unneeded. Interview participants also spoke about this feeling of familiarity when defining “feeling at home.” Five out of ten interview participants defined the sense of home as feeling comfortable and safe in the space. Eight out of ten participants reported that feeling a connection to the space and the people within it was a major factor in “feeling at home” in virtual spaces. When taking these definitions into account, this validates that changes to an environment affect users' sentimental attachment to a site and more so, the way they're most comfortable interacting with the site.

When Fandom rolled out its updates, users were incensed because it not only changed the way they interacted with the site, but it also changed how much control users had in the design of their microsite. During the time of the Theming Project, users—specifically Chroniclers—were in full control of the design of their site. This functionality caused trouble for the organization because of the variability of code and aesthetics. Fandom sought create a more uniform

experience and design for all microsites, but this discounted users' feelings of wanting an environment that was unique among the various microsites.



Figure 4 Fandom microsite pre-update.



Figure 5 Fandom microsite post-update.

Updates to the Fandom-verse were not received well, and users felt that they were not included in the decision-making process. Increased user dissatisfaction from these changes led to the creation of the Fan Lab. The Fan Lab is a subset of Fandom users that you'd likely describe as super fans. These users are afforded special access and privileges in the community and can view and provide feedback on new features and updates prior to their release. With the Fan Lab, users and the organization reached a compromise that ensured that users' needs were heard and included in future design processes while addressing organizational requirements. The organization still requires user input and feedback to create the ideal environment for user interaction.

Instagram

During almost the same time, Instagram was rolling out new updates and changes to its “environment” that caused some uproar among its users. Some of the major updates to Instagram in the latter half of 2020 included the replacement of chronological posts with probability-based ordering, the introduction of stories, and the unveil of the marketplace. The introduction of

stories (a feature that allows users to post time-bound content that is only available to their broader community for twenty-four hours) was a big hit among users. During qualitative interviews, the introduction of stories to participants was a welcome update to the platform because users had already been using Snapchat for its story feature.



Figure 6 User tweet on Instagram update.

When Instagram adopted the same feature, Snapchat became almost obsolete because stories was its main function whereas on Instagram, there were plenty other features for users.

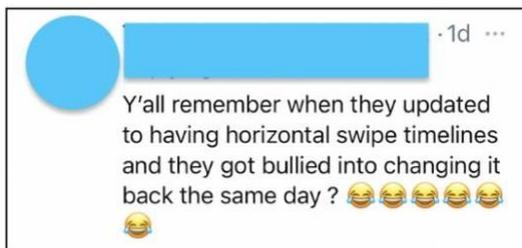


Figure 7 User tweet on Instagram update.

According to TechCrunch, the launching of Instagram's story feature slowed Snapchat's growth by eighty-two percent. Users preferred to have their favorite features within the same app than to use

separate apps for different features. However, the introduction of probability-based ordering of timelines in replacement of chronologically ordered feeds was not received well by users because it consumed content was based on an algorithm computing the probability of interest in which content.

Users did not like content being chosen on their behalf.

User feeds were essentially at the mercy of Instagram's algorithm where it decided which posts were most relevant to users, leaving users feeling a lack of control over the content they consumed. Users



Figure 8 User tweet on Instagram update.

began voicing their complaints almost immediately after this update was introduced. They were not happy with the lack of control they had in their own experiences and shared online that they were particularly unhappy with scrolling through their feeds and not seeing their friends' updates— instead ads and random pictures. Users became disenchanted with the social platform and shared stories about revolting against some of the updates—others were more inclined to stop using Instagram altogether since Twitter rolled out its story feature called Fleets. A subset of users debated whether they should ban together and force the company's hand in changing the platform back to its original experience.

Instagram was a favorite among interviews participants. However, sentiments were mixed because Instagram as we know it today is not the same experience as it was in 2015. With each update, the user experience changed—sometimes for the better, according to users, and other times for the worst. However, users' primary goal in using Instagram was to share personal photos with their community. Currently, that feature is still available, but it is overshadowed by other features vying for users' attention. The community itself has changed as new features were introduced, leaving original users of the space disillusioned with the platform as a whole and feeling misplaced in the communities they helped create and sustain. Since the community and the interaction is a partial draw for users, the changes put the platform at risk for an increase in user attrition.

Even with the waves of complaints from users, Instagram did not make changes to the updates rolled out for users. Instead, they implemented a workaround which allowed users to select the profiles that they'd like to be notified of any new posts. It's uncertain whether this placated users or if users begrudgingly stayed for their communities. However, observations uncovered aligned with sentiments expressed during interviews and during the Theming Project—users are frustrated and confused with updates and ponder the amount of power and agency they possess in the design process of the online communities they helped build.



Figure 9 User tweet on Twitter update.

Twitter

Twitter also rolled out new updates for their users in the fall of 2020. One update was the introduction of Fleets, a story function within Twitter like Instagram and Snapchat's Stories



Figure 10 User tweet on Twitter update.

feature. Users liked this update, especially since users were already incensed with the new changes in Instagram. Users felt a strong sense of community in Twitter and received more post engagement using Fleets than with Instagram's Stories. The introduction of Fleets was considered a good update—interview participants defined a good update as added functionality or change that does not disrupt or

interfere with their normal habitus within the platform. Twitter became a viable social alternative to users that were more inclined to utilize Instagram for their online community needs.

However, Twitter also updated the way in which users could interact with other users' tweets. For context, this new update required users to quote the original tweet in order to retweet it—this added an additional step in the user flow and was visually

less pleasing to users. Users did not like the fact that their retweets were automatically posted as a quoted retweet. Users expressed their dislike of the update and were curious as to why the organization felt the need to change the experience. Users offered design alternatives through tweets directed at the company or customer support.



Figure 11 User tweet on Twitter update.



Figure 12 User tweet on Twitter update.

After a series of complaints were lobbied to the company directly through tweets, Twitter changed its retweeting experience back to its normal functionality. Users were ecstatic with the fact that the company had listened to them. Users grew additional affinity with Twitter because they felt involved in the continuous reformation of the platform. From various posts surrounding this event, it seemed like being “listened to” by a corporate company was an unfamiliar phenomenon and users were in awe that they had the power to impact

changes to the products they use regularly. Users became comfortable with the idea of sharing ideas that would improve their experience in app.

The usual design process in the tech industry is fast-paced and agile to keep up with the ever-present demand for relevance and innovation. Designers, researchers, product managers, engineering and development, and sometimes even customer support are common stakeholders within the company. When issues of possible user attrition surface, teams combat negative sentiment through rapid, iterative testing of designs and experienced. In the case of Twitter, there were so many complaints directly from users that the issues started trending. It is highly probable that the amount of negative attention caught the attention of leadership at Twitter, which attempted to right what users felt was wrong.



Figure 13 User tweet on Twitter update.

share their thoughts on how to further improve their online experiences. Of course, I could only observe the users that posted or reacted to content so it's impossible how many people were affected—there's a chance that a majority of users did not care and thus chose not to tweet anything at all. However, to those that used Twitter on a regular basis, this feat was a rallying moment for the community. I pulled the top ten tweets that referenced the updates in

When Twitter reverted back to its original functionality, the tone in the tweets changed – users utilized memes and emojis to signify their elation with their victory. Some users were shocked that they could influence such change but felt empowered to continue to



Figure 14 User tweet on Twitter update.

Twitter and Instagram and the user sentiment is palpable. Twitter was revered for at least listening to the concerns of users whereas Instagram was snubbed.

Comparative Analysis

So far, we have compared user reactions to product changes of the three social media sites to gauge how each organization handled negative user reaction to change and the affect it had on users' relationship with the site. As Fandom, or any like organization, contemplates future changes to its platform that will affect the relationship users had with the environment, they can look to examples from Instagram and Twitter. These two social media platforms represent the extremes in user reaction to updates and subsequent org-user relationship. Twitter, on one hand, handled tension with users by reverting functionality to its original experience. This isn't something that Fandom can feasibly do because there would be no improvement to ensure that codes work efficiently across devices. Instagram, on the other hand, did not revert to its original functionality—instead, the platform added additional functions and a workaround to allow users the ability to continue their original experience in the app.

Companies address updates and changes to their platform differently. An organization should consider the attachment users have for their social communities. Humans are creatures of habit so disruptions to users' usual processes can leave users feeling jaded and less inclined to learn how to interact with the site again. Design updates are meant to improve or encourage certain behavior to drive organizational KPIs, but changes to the environment also affect the way its usual inhabitants move and find comfort throughout the space. To ensure that seasoned inhabitants aren't pushed out as updates attract new users, a conversation needs to be had. This

conversation would need to address the needs of original users while also balancing the need for innovation.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS AND INSIGHTS

Section One: Top Findings

In the case of Fandom, people choose their online communities just like they choose their physical ones—people choose spaces that they can connect with and engage with like-minded individuals. As evidenced in interviews with users in the Theming Project and this current venture, I can infer that users want to feel just as safe, supported, and comfortable in their virtual bodies as they do in their physical bodies. Elizabeth, a 29-year-old graduate student stressed that she needed to feel at ease and comfortable in her community and that the space “needs to be a place to find common ground with others.” Change for users in virtual communities can be a disruptive force that changes the dynamic of safety and support which can leave the users feeling confused and unhappy.

Virtual identities are constructed through interactions with others which build into a communal identity through established habits of engagement. This interaction within the community also creates the social capital to which communities continue to thrive and grow. The design of the virtual environment to which communities are housed provides the means for interaction and exchange of social capital, supporting the growth of the community by enabling the continued production of interaction and exchange of social capital; design is the vehicle that drives interaction and engagement. Designers are tasked with mapping out the desired user interaction for a space, but users take the design and morph the community around it, molding it to them as they mold to it.

Change in virtual communities should be handled with care. The virtual world and the physical world are different but the connections we make with others in a space are alike. People form communities based on common ground and interests and communities blossom to acquire their own unique cultures. Habits are formed and adhered to and—like in the physical world—they can be very hard to break.

Users are wary about change because they are unsure of how the change will affect them and their ability to stay connected to their communities. Even as users are wary, they still are interested in improvements that better their experience and empowers the communal habitus. Fandom could utilize participatory action research in conjunction with the MAYA Principle to broker a maintain its compromise with users—balancing users’ needs and organizational needs to remain relevant. The MAYA principle (‘Most Advanced Yet Acceptable’), developed by Raymond Loewy, is a principle that allows designers and users to meet in the middle by providing a mix of features or habits they already use with updates and features that are easy for them to adopt. This principle helps find a balance of innovation without unneeded shock to the users. I believe this principle with participatory action research encompasses what is needed to maintain a successful online community for users, continued innovation and participation for the organization, and establish an effective method for deeper, more diverse communication between major stakeholders.

Users want to be involved—even if it is limited to just being notified beforehand—because the communities are important to them- even more so, during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the start of this assessment, physical contact in the world was the norm but when the pandemic broke, people relied on virtual spaces to help combat the stress, anxiety, and loneliness of social distancing for months. Even now, as we enter some form of semi post-pandemic living

of limited physical interaction, virtual spaces are still important environments for social interaction. It is imperative for organizations like Fandom to communicate effectively with their users to truly understand how business requirements and objectives affect usability, user interaction and engagement, and users' overall trust in the organization itself.

Section Two: Designing for Virtual Communities- A Treasure Map for Success

The design guide provides as quick and efficient means for condensing all the information captured in this assessment. I ultimately concluded that a design guide would be the best option—a resource that would guide designers towards a more empathetic, inclusive design approach for designing for virtual communities. Project stakeholders were primarily interested in the theoretical framework developed in this project as validation for future design decisions, but I pitched the idea for this design guide to stakeholders to serve as a quicker means for digesting the information presented in this project. Company stakeholders approved free reign over the design and format of this deliverable but provided feedback on the direction up until they moved on to different roles at other companies.

This resource walks designers through identity politics that may be overlooked when updating online community platforms such as Fandom, to lead designers towards a more inclusive, user-driven product. User research in industry is usually quick hit; questions are formed based on objectives so even as important findings around users are uncovered, it may still miss other important facets of the user experience that are not connected to research objectives. This guide will work to ensure those facets of the users do not fall through the cracks.

Creating the Design Pamphlet

The design guide incorporates a treasure map design as an interactive way to frame this journey for designers, highlighting facets of user identity, social capital in online community spaces, and how design is intricately connected to that experience. I used Canva to make this guide because of their free access to customizable templates for the smoothest experiencing for creating the outlined vision. Major topics discussed in this report are arranged in the guide with a checklist of action items on a path to an inclusive, community-based participatory design. The checklist provides the means to quickly digest heavy anthropological theory with actionable insights to include within the timelines of quick and agile user research.

Using the Design Pamphlet

The guide is meant to be used at the beginning of the research process, during the recruitment stage for research projects. As research and design collaborate around research objectives, the guide will help the team consider aspects of identity and community to be sure that users aren't alienated during research.

Section Three: Recommendations for The Future

I recommend that Fandom continue conversations with users to involve them in the design process by utilizing the Fan Lab during research. Usability tests are a popular method for uncovering findings, but user participation should go deeper than usability testing. Fandom should create a systemic approach for rolling out updates that affect the user experience that involves talking with users about potential changes and notifying them beforehand. During the course of this project, the company has already made strides to include user perspectives (i.e., the creation of the Fan Lab) before implementing new updates to the platform.

Since its creation, the Fan Lab has become a popular resource among Fandom users and a great way for designers and researchers to interact with users that feel strongly about the community. This space provides more in-depth look into the opinions of users on a wider scale than solely relying on the opinions of Chroniclers and other personas in usability testing. It is important that users feel that their opinions matter in the creation and maintenance of microsite communities. As a user, just physically interacting with a product is different than knowing a product was built with their perspectives in mind.

Designers are aware of the balance they've been charged to manage and that it is not possible to make everyone a hundred percent happy. However, the biggest user grievance uncovered in this assessment was that users want to feel included in the design process that affects their experiences in their online communities. The main question for users was: who asked for these changes? Taking the time to communicate with users will make adequate strides in repairing the relationship between users and the organization—why is this update happening? How will it be rolled out? When should users expect to see these changes? And how will things change going forward. Transparency is key.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

This project began an assessment of the impact of design on user experience and interaction in Fandom online community spaces but evolved into something more universal for all online community platforms. Research in industry requires backing from major stakeholders within the company to drive interest and action on key initiatives. Stakeholders for this project, unfortunately, moved on to opportunities at other companies by the time I reached this conclusion, but the work done in this assessment is still very relevant—not just to Fandom, but to all organizations that have created community spaces in the virtual realm. From the 2018 Theming Project to this one, the findings have remained the same: users want—NEED—to be involved. Users are active entities in the creation and maintenance of their virtual communities and thus, need their agency validated. Users do not accept any change; they want change that will better their experiences.

Participatory action research has been a popular method in the field to maintain a level of trust with the community and establish an equal and equitable stake for all parties involved—the same goes for Fandom and any other tech company. The product in question is the culminative result of effort and interaction. Companies and users have separate requirements for what they need in and from the Fandom microsites, but both parties need each other to begin to address their needs at all.

Fandom, as an organization needs users to drive participation and traffic to their sites to monetize their platform for profit. Fandom users need the organization to create, maintain, and innovate the space for their interactions with fellow users. Each party has a stake in this problem

and before now, Fandom had primarily prioritized organizational needs, but going forward, the organization will need to address the ethics and power dynamic between itself and its user base. Involving multiple perspectives can ensure that everyone's voices are heard—that individual and communal agency is not ignored. There is no perfect design just as there is no ideal user. However, through involving various stakeholders with diverse needs and perspectives, Fandom can develop an experience that meets the needs of the whole for an overall experience that is good enough. Together, Fandom and its users can drive innovation in the right direction to pinpoint the ideal experience where basic needs to function and thrive are addressed.

This venture and approach go beyond Fandom, Instagram, and Twitter. As technology and the virtual world become ever-present elements in our daily lives, anthropology as a discipline is uniquely suited to transverse into industries that involve social aspects of the human experience. Designing for others requires empathy and empathy is best gained by tabling assumptions and listening intently to the stories of others to understand their journey and perspectives. Anthropology—the scientific study of humanity, centered around human behavior, biology, cultures, societies, and linguistics, in both the present and past—and its methodologies are well-suited for addressing issues in industry, but the field must be willing to continuously challenge its approach to better adapt to the dynamic cultural and functional changes in the virtual world. In terms of Fandom, Twitter, and various social media spaces, working in conjunction with users can empower a mutual evolution in both the product and user experience that adheres to the needs of all involved stakeholders.

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APPENDIX

This section contains the deliverables for this project, to be used by Fandom designers and PMs as a resource for managing change in online communities and combat potential user attrition. The theoretical framework (A) provides a deeper explanation for the connection between design, identity, and bond formation in virtual spaces. Overall, this framework validates findings seen in the Theming Project and how change impacts the overall user experience then provides potential solutions for combatting negative user reactions for a more inclusive design process. The design guide (B) provides a succinct visual for learnings in the theoretical framework with actionable steps to achieve this goal of a more inclusive process and the glossary (C) provides the means for connecting the two deliverables.

A – THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Stakeholders in this project requested a theoretical framework as their primary deliverable to further explain user attitudes concerning changes/updates to Fandom microsites. For context, it would also be beneficial to audiences to begin this assessment of the implications of design on social bonding by evaluating aspects of social being.

To evaluate aspects of social being is to first develop a definition of personhood—which I use interchangeably with “the self”—through the conceptualization of identity, community, and culture, by which I operationalize through the concept of habitus to grasp the connection between design, personhood, and community in online spaces such as Fandom. This connection determines the link between design and social capital, specifically the impact of design on the ability to establish meaningful user-to-user relationships and user-to-company bonds.

Section One: Personhood in Online Spaces

Erving Goffman (1990) states that the self develops out of reflexive performance where individuals monitor the external perceptions of their behavior, forming a public identity that is essential to the maintenance of social acceptance in routine interactions within the community (Elliot 2020, 35). We now understand that identity is a by-product of an individual's interactions with other community members and personhood is the acceptance of that constructed identity within the community.

This is supported by Anthony Giddens's (1990) take on the self's relation to the broader society: through the positive and negative experiences of being within a societal context, individuals learn to navigate their changing realities and develop new methods for doing things (Elliot 2020, 45). Charles Cooley (1902, 180), on the other hand, takes a different approach to understanding the self in relation to its environment stating that sentiment is the core of the human self and is essential to its overall development. This approach dictates that it is not the opinions of others but our imaginations of what those opinions could be that influences the development of the self. In both approaches, outside influences play a key role in the defining of a personal identity. Within the confines (or lack thereof) of a virtual community, identity becomes the solidifying factor in the way in which people connect with one another. The forming of a communal identity is, therefore, key to the success of an online community platform.

Section Two: Online Identity and Bond Formation

Using Pierre Bourdieu's and Loïc Wacquant's (1992) description of habitus, I posit that online identity is the product of similar actions and habits that bond people together to form a

community. I make a clear distinction between habitus and habits as these actions are “purposive” (Crossley 2013, 145) responses to create meaning in virtual spaces. Adopting concepts from common identity theory (Ren, Kraut, and Kiesler 2007), online communities establish their own culture through habitus. Patricia Lange (2008) confirms this ideology by examining knowledge sharing practices in online technical communities. She finds that members of technical communities have developed a method to sharing knowledge that manages instances of social vulnerability and the loss of social capital.

Community is “more than a collection of inhabitants. It is, rather, a network of interacting interconnected associates, whose actions and symbolic constructs affect each other’s lives” (LeValley 1997, 128). Habitus creates community through meaningful actions and community establishes its own cultural meaning and realities. Culture is the dynamic force that provides the means to confront and overcome instability while community members construct their social reality together through established habitus. This continuous construction and reconstruction of culture is what Susanna Hoffman (2016) calls the “obduracy of culture” (40). Hoffman provides expanded insight into theories of cultural continuity after upheaval by examining culture alteration, coping, and adaptation in areas affected by natural disasters.

In the case of Fandom, I use the metaphor of disruption to demonstrate the drastic change to the online environment through platform updates. Fandom must provide resources that will provide its communities the ability to reconstruct their culture, identity, and community before approving proposed changes to the “environment”. This idea is supported by Stephanie Rupp (2016) who examined blackouts in New York City. She viewed community as a system and argued that when one of the elements in the system is disabled, the usual habitus of being are dissolved, prompting individuals to “renegotiate *communitas*: the sense of belonging with others

in shared mutuality” (2016, 106). This disruption to usual habitus in an online community results in a common feeling of displacement within community users. A space crafted by users as a haven and interrupted through outside means can lead to issues of agency, where users no longer feel autonomy in the spaces they contribute to and the community they created.

Section Three: A Design Review of The Fandom-Verse

Now that I have established an understanding of personhood in online spaces, it is vital to validate the connection between design and social capital. Past definitions of design have placed varying priorities at the forefront, but design as a construct has always involved four elements- form, order, planning, and intention- displayed in one of two senses of design. In one sense, design refers strictly to static, aesthetic features, accentuating form and order but deprioritizing the role of the user. In another sense, it refers to the complex practice of human creativity of planning and intention for the purpose of designing something for someone (Murphy 2016, 435). For the purpose of this project, I will be prioritized the latter.

Social Capital in the Fandom-verse

Robert Putnam (2001) defined social capital as social networks and the associated norms of trust and reciprocity within a community. It is the effective operation of societal groups through interpersonal relationships, a shared identity, and communal values, habits, and cooperation. James Coleman (1988), on the other hand, defined social capital by its function in society. Many scholars have constructed their own varying definitions for social capital, but it is clear that social capital is created and distributed through an individual’s relationships with others within a common social structure. The fluidity allows for the formation of social networks

and bonds among individuals and provides social advantages for achieving one's goal within the social structure.

The existence of social capital in a social structure is dependent on the ability for individuals to relate to one another and as a result, social capital is culturally embedded within the social structure in which it was created and only exists when shared (Lee & Lee 2010 [Portes 1998]). Social capital is the by-product of the creation and solidification of communities with established norms and habits. When extending this thinking to the Fandom-verse, Fandom as a platform is the social structure for which users can exchange social capital and the social capital in which users exchange can include- but is not limited to- the exchange of thoughts, information, conversation and energy via user-user interaction and user-UI behaviors. The exchange of social capital within the Fandom-verse is contingent upon the interactions between users and thus, is dependent upon an interface design to promote an efficient means for communication and interaction.

Design and Social Capital in Online Spaces

James Coleman (1988) defined social capital as entities within a society that contain two commonalities: they consist of some aspect of social structure, and they promote certain actions of "actors" within a society. Partnered with Robert Putnam's (2001) definition of social capital, social capital is anything in a society that encourages the habitus of the collective, generated by networks of relationships, trust, reciprocity, and social norms. If social capital is anything that complements the habitus of the collective, I posit that design is an essential piece of the puzzle that is social capital in virtual spaces. However, political thought and action is ingrained within design (Amirebrahimi 2016, 75). There is an inherent power behind design as it influences and

shapes the actions of the user. Thus, designer themselves have social and ecological responsibilities to the “designed upon” communities (Murphy 2016).

Elizabeth Churchill and Elizabeth Goodman (2008) researched the role of the interface in the process of online dating and how users embodied themselves using predetermined spaces in dating platforms. They concluded that platform design can unconsciously exclude certain participants and can make it harder for users to connect with each other. In conclusion, Churchill and Goodman detail that design tools, such as user personas, are only abstractions that offer a glimpse into the user, a concept that is seen in Cohen’s (2005) examination of “the user”. The “user” in design is a central trope that focuses designers’ attention to a specific type of person to identify and meet the needs of such individual (Wasson 2000).

Anthropology can serve as a vital tool by bridging the gap between users and designers, but further work is required to establish clear communication between anthropologists and ethnographers and designers and developers on how to best convey user experience issues. Virtual communities like Fandom, and all the text and media shared within it, are cultural products and thus, anthropology is well-suited to explore these domains (Wilson and Peterson 2002). Charline Poirier (2010) addresses the communication challenges that occur between technical developers and the ethnographers tasked with being the voice of the user. She conducted an initial ethnography to understand 1) how a traditional usability report would be handled by developers and transformed into actionable results and 2) how developers defined and prioritized issues and concluded that it was important to demonstrate the differences in perspective between ethnographers and developers that result in the disconnect between findings and developer comprehension. The coordination of ethnographers and developers can create a design process that effectively puts the user first within the bounds of company resources.

Currently, online social sites have a high rate of turnover because it is difficult to attract and retain the commitment of users (Farzan et al. 2011; Fiedler and Sarstedt 2014). Farzan, Dabbish, and Kraut (2011) argue that commitment to the community drives the success of the online site and that the key to a successful site lies within the design. Rosta Farzan and colleagues (2011) present an alternative for designing online sites to increase member commitment by using both models in an effort to increase and maintain user participation, provide reasoning behind online social commitment, and demonstrate how the interaction unfolds in real time in virtual spaces.

Yuqing Ren and colleagues (2007) add to this thinking with an interdisciplinary theoretical approach to measuring the different types of member attachment in online communities which could provide key design insights (Ren, Kraut, and Kiesler 2007, 402). Thinking about online communities by utilizing a social engineering theoretical approach, they use the common in-group identity model proposed by Samuel Gaertner and colleagues (1993) and common bond theory to identify the ways design dictates how people connect with each other in virtual environments and the handling of potential community disruptions.

In other words, users increase their participation in online communities when the presence of others was salient. Meng Ma and Ritu Agarwal (2007) provide some guidance into the connection between identity and design theory with their project that examined the role that design of virtual infrastructure has in facilitating knowledge contribution and sharing in online communities. Their project sought to bridge the gap in past research by providing a link between personal identity and available technologies that leads to an increased effort to contribute knowledge to an online community. Using the concept of “perceived identity verification” (2007, 43), Ma and Agarwal establish the importance of identity in online and offline contexts.

Utilizing Susan Whitbourne and Loren Connolly's (1999) definition of identity and Erving Goffman's (1967) self-presentation theory, Ma and Agarwal show that embodied identity in online spaces generates a mutual trust between users in the space and links to findings that reveal that salient identity "helps knowledge seekers recognize source credibility" (2007, 45), bolsters communication and relationship between members of similar interests, and encourages knowledge contribution.

Assessing the role of perceived identity is vital to computer-mediated communication and design thinking should encourage effective identity expression and communication to create successful social structures with voluntary knowledge contribution. In order for individuals to continue to drive member participation, contribution, and overall online community success, the idea of social capital must bridge the way. Successful social bond formation depends on the exchange of social capital to create online environments that promote community and therefore drive community formation.

Designing for Users

Overall, a change needs to be made in how we think about the research participants to gain viable insight into the important questions being asked about products: who are we designing for (Cohen 2005; Lange 2007)? In his take, Kris Cohen (2005) argues that it is the clients that dictate who the users are by definitions that are influenced by economic means. This assumption suggests that the product should be made for a specific type of person- i.e., persona. In conclusion, human agency is missing in the creation of the ideal user and to fix this, the design process has to be made more public.

Cohen's (2005) idea of landscapes of possibility, along with Julia Gluesing's (2008) cultivation of Eric Eisenberg's (2001) theory of identity, and Ducheneaut and colleagues' (2010) methodology of a virtual ethnography toolkit provide a means for examining identity in virtual spaces. Cohen (2005) focuses on how contemporary design processes shape their ideal users which in turn guide future design process and examines how researchers define the users for their products. Ducheneaut, Bellotti, and Yee (2010), on the other hand, looks at the opportunities available for ethnography in virtual communities and methods for handling issues that occur in such a space. Gluesing (2008) and Stanton Wortham (2004), alternatively, detail how the fluidity and dynamism of identity because it is constructed and reaffirmed through the multiple resources and timescales that contribute to the identity development process. Using Dorothy Holland and Jean Lave's (2001) "history in person," Wortham (2004 [2001], 1) found that identity is made through multiple social and psychological contexts and is cemented through "trajectories of participation" in which individual choices and agency guide the identity development and identification process.

Agency, Habitus, and Design

So far, we have determined that the success of an online community depends on its ability to maintain a common identity and culture cemented through habitus. As stated previously, disruptions to the environment can have drastic impacts on the fixed, communal habitus created from interpersonal interaction within the environment. Extending this to Fandom, users would need to continuously adapt to these environmental changes in order to continue to interact, exchange, and create social capital.

The communities created by users are not static but change as individuals learn how to interact with others. The original design of the space was an integral element in the ability to form these communities; the formation and practices of each community derived from users' initial interactions with the design and UI. Changes to this space, therefore, means a change to the very core of the communities. Communities evolved around the UI; the UI determined what actions could be taken, and therefore, influenced the mannerisms and patterns of activity of the users. Users learned to use the UI for their communal needs- adapted to it and formed a set of interactions based on it.

To sum up this phenomenon, design influences users to create certain patterns of interaction with each other. These interactions over the course of time help to form the identity that users relate with forming an established community and communal identity. The established community then creates meaning and value (social capital) through continued interaction with each other and the designed environment through individual choices and agency. The culture continues because users are willing to continue to put in the time and effort needed to continue the overall functioning of their virtual society.

The People Behind the Design

At this point, we cannot continue to talk about design without talking about the people behind it: the designers. Evaluating what the role of designers in the case of Fandom is important because their work is at the intersection of user and company needs. To do so is to begin with assessing the organizational structure of Fandom. Fandom is structured through an employment hierarchy. With the CEO of the company at the head, followed by VPs in charge of major aspects of company life. Under the VP of design, the Director of UX Research manages the

research aspect of design through the testing of user experiences. Researchers work in conjunction with designers to iterate on new designs and ensure the best possible user experience under goals defined by VPs under the guidance of the CEO's vision for the company.

As of now, designers at Fandom have provided a space for users to create an embodiment of their community that also encourages user participation and interaction with fellow members of the community and broader Fandom audience—the overall goal being an increase in steady active members. However, as the needs of the users and company clash, designers at Fandom are caught in a design predicament, explored in depth in earlier chapters of this venture. This is not a new predicament—cases of user discontent with design changes and updates have been realized with other major platforms such as Reddit, Instagram, and Facebook. In virtual spaces where users find a create a home, the issue of trust between company and user base becomes essential. When the basis of that trust is breached, users can end up feeling violated and unwanted in the same space they called home (Moellenberndt 2013, 86).

The online world is a place where people create and embody themselves through chosen design aesthetics and/or the way in which they organize their online life to facilitate communication with others. Just as people take a stance on how they design their homes, either as a display of mementos from the past or an embodiment of their present self through material culture, there is a trend in their “material cosmology” (Miller 2018, 173) that links their material display to who they are as a person in the real world. People choose specific identity traces that can be used to determine who they are as a person to share with the rest of the world.

However, design—up until this point—has been a means for assessing whether the company's innovation goals have been met from the amount of positive interaction from users.

Lucy Suchman (2011, 5) posits that innovation is “embedded within a broader cultural imaginary” that defines the contemporary as being in a perpetual state of lagging or in constant need of updating; a job that has inevitably fallen on the shoulders of designers with the goal of shaping the world into a newer, better version of itself. “Good design” has technically been defined by company goals and values but as the disciplines and its inhabitants change, then the understanding of “value” in products needs to be clear, something that Maria Bezaitis and Rick Robinson (2018) argue for.

However, in order to achieve “good design” (Hayward 1998, Bezaitis and Robinson 2018), designers need to address the politics of design and their own framing as designers (Suchman 2011, Murphy 2016). Who is benefitting from this design? What value does it bring and to who? Whose needs are prioritized? Thinking of design through the lens of power allows us to conceptualize this design predicament. This is not just a questioning of ethics, but of the ethical implications of designing objects made for consumption (Miller 2014) and intervention in the lives of other human beings (Murphy 2016).

Design as a field of industry has extended its reach far beyond just the design of things to include the experiences as well and, in this way, has become one of the avenues used to change the world and the daily activities of people. Design produces the imagined solutions to problems in everyday life and designers are the officiants that bring about change through drawings that bring ideas to life. In actuality, designers can only envision “potentials – the conditions that they believe can make a result more or less likely” (Bloomberg and Darrah 2015, 47).

The use of design has gone from the purpose of making things better for people to designing products that influence the way people behave and interact. The designers’ overall

goal is to control the outcome of habits—designers are tasked with crafting solutions to current issues in services or products as well as thinking of future design solutions to make life easier for its users. The process of designing is an iterative one—as design influences human behavior, it is also influenced by it in ways that designers may not have predicted. Designers work to create products and/or services that reimagine the physical spaces and reconstruct the way people interact with the world around them but cannot always fully predict the ways in which users choose to utilize the designed space. Design, at its core, is inherently interventionist and presents an increasing risk of disrupting the social worlds that such “innovation” touches (Murphy 2016, 442).

Designers are at the forefront of this issue and are in a unique space to lead conversations of compromise in the design process. A collaborative effort between designers, users, and company management is needed to overcome issues of opposing design goals. Demonstrating the unique viewpoint of designers involved in this conundrum will provide crucial insight into possible solutions for Fandom and its users. For designers to realize the true potential of design thought, then they must also understand the reflexivity of their own design decisions and the construction of the situations that frame design practices (Margolin 2002, 241).

Section Four: An Organizational Review

Thus far, we have talked about users—and their relationship with concepts such as identity, community, habitus, and social capital—and designers. However, there is one more stakeholder that we have not yet taken an in-depth look at: Fandom as an organization. In this section, I give an overview of Fandom as an organization and the varying organizational perspectives that exist and characterize the numerous types of organizations. I then use this to

describe and understand Fandom as an organization. I believe this is important to understand the overall goals of the company, which will be beneficial in a latter section of this report.

Fandom is an incorporated business with a for profit business model dependent on advertising, merchandise, and sold content. The platform utilizes MediaWiki, an open-source wiki software developed and used by Wikipedia that allows users to capture content in a database and optimizes the handling of large content. Majority of FANDOMs OKRs (objectives and key results) centered around maintenance and scaling of user population, monetization of various features, and the internalization of its platform to reach new audiences. Like other user-dependent companies, Fandom’s goal is to maintain market relevancy and drive innovation to keep users engaged and profits margins high. As much as Fandom provides a space for community and collaboration among its users, organizational needs took priority to maintain business processes and profits.

Fandom as an Organization

Robert Merton describes organizational structures as “clearly defined patterns of activity in which, ideally, every series of actions is functionally related to the purpose of the organization” (1968, 249). Fandom as an organization is arranged like many other tech companies in Silicon Valley—they employ a hierarchical, pyramid work structure with fewer higher-level positions overseeing and guiding the

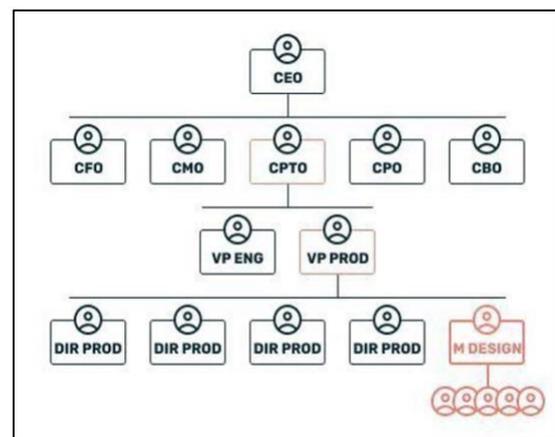


Figure 15 The Fandom organizational chart.

roadmap, company, and their subordinate employees through the assignment of directors and managers at various levels of the company.

Each level of the company is allocated a portion of the corporate responsibility to ensure a smooth workflow throughout the company. Fandom could be described as a formal organization because of the clear hierarchical boundaries, but the company strives to be as flexible, transparent, and supportive with their employees as possible. Monthly meetings between the broader organization and weekly meetings within the teams ensure that everyone is on the same page and working toward the goals outlined by the CEO.

Fandom also sports a multi-complex organizational structure: horizontal among teams such as in the design team, vertical segmentation of projects and managerial responsibilities among the various levels, and spatial with various international locations (Beresford “How are organizations structured”, September 10). The office culture sports an open floor plan that helped curtail the division between the different levels in the hierarchical structure, but overall Fandom employees understood who to report to for instruction and project direction. Like cogs in a wheel, every employee at Fandom has a role in the overall functioning and success of Fandom as an organization. With a closed system approach that prioritizes productivity within the company rather than social impact, Fandom has a little to no impact on the broader physical community in which they function.

Fandom can be categorized as a product-based business (Blau & Scott 1962), offering a social entertainment product with features that anyone can enjoy and participate in. Fandom’s priority is maintaining viable, sustainable revenue through advertisements and continuous user participation on the platform. Fandom is different from other formal, bureaucratic organizations

because it allows their employees to self-direct themselves and monitor their own work output, so employees feel a sense of autonomy in their work. Project teams are cross-functional and each team member accountable to their part of the project—if one person drops the ball, it can interfere with other team member’s timelines so personal accountability is high. Timelines and project milestones keep employees and projects on track to meet organizational deadlines. Managers conduct reviews with individual contributors to assess worker output and maintain accountability. Workers that continuously do not meet standards are eventually let go.

Mitigation of Needs: Users and Organization

Fandom as an organization and the consumers of the product (users) have different priorities when it comes to the goal and workings of the Fandom site. Yes, the organization wants to promote community and participation among users within the sites and its subsequent microsites, but they are motivated primarily by economic means. To continue to provide this product, their primary goal is to ensure a viable and continuous stream of revenue from advertisements, merchandising, and sold content which means designing their platform in the most fiscally efficient way to drive users towards ads and opportunities to purchase items.

Most users, on the other hand, are predominantly motivated by either a need for knowledge and/or content or the need to be social within the communities they have helped to create evidenced in this project. Some users identified as lurkers that preferred to take a backseat in their communities to absorb content and knowledge whereas others defined themselves as content creators or engagers, depending on their level of comfort in engaging in dialogue online.

Fandom and its users have an almost equal stake in this problem. Fandom as an organization cannot survive without its users' continued participation and interaction and users are dependent on Fandom's product to maintain access to their communities. Monetization can have negative impacts on user experiences and potentially lead to disenchanted user who'd prefer to just leave (Lange 2019, 4). So, who should be priority when it comes to design? And is there a "good design" that will be able to meet the needs of Fandom as an organization and its users? Answering this question is critical for understanding the impact of design.

B – DESIGNING FOR A VIRTUAL COMMUNITY: A TREASURE MAP FOR SUCCESS



Figure 16 Project deliverable – the design guide (front)

Overview

Organizational updates to existing online communities can cause disruptions to user experience and habits.

Designers are entrusted to:

- Create experiences that compromise between organizational needs and user needs
- Build ideal experiences that inspire user engagement

This guide provides designers with an in-depth look into the unique needs of users in virtual communities and a path towards inclusive, community-based participatory design.

RISKS	BENEFITS
Unhappy users	Happy users
Possible user attrition	Increased user engagement
Negative user perception of org	Increased trust in org

The Self, Community, and its Connection to Design

The 'Self' = an amalgamation of experiences with others and our perception of how others will perceive us (Aso 2022, 60)

Community = separate selves bonded over common interests and a shared identity (61)

Culture, Habitus, & Social Capital = Continued communal interaction, habitus, and sharing of social capital that drive user interaction and sustain the community (63-68)

Design = the practice and "environment" (69)

User Needs

According to research with users of online communities such as FANDOM, Twitter, and Instagram, users need:

- to feel included in the design process (Aso 2022, 37)
- context into updates and changes to their online community (Aso 2022, 37)
- purposeful and community-driven design (Aso 2022, 36)

damn **Twitter** actually **listened** to the feedback and reverted a change they made? if only other social media's could do this

5:15 PM · 12/16/20 · Twitter for iPhone

Twitter actually **listened** to us and gave us the regular rt back 😊

3:46 PM · 12/16/20 · Twitter for iPhone

"Villains of industry seek to deprive us of our humanity. Scientists, scholars, and designers prevail, and a new profession flourishes, turning man's submission to technology into technology's submission to man."

- Leah Buley, 2013

Figure 17 Project deliverable – the design guide (back)

C – GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

- 1 **Community** – a group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common; a feeling of fellowship with others, as a result of sharing common attitudes, interests, and goals.
 - a. “It is, rather, a network of interacting interconnected associates, whose actions and symbolic constructs affect each other’s lives” (LeValley 1997, 128).
- 2 **Culture** – the shared set of (implicit and explicit) values, ideas, concepts, and rules of behavior that allow a social group to function and perpetuate itself.
 - a. “Culture consists of socially established structures of meaning in terms of which people do such things as signal conspiracies and join them or perceive insults and answer them” (Geertz 1973, 12-13)
 - b. “Culture is an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols” (Geertz 1973, 89).
 - c. “Culture...is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Tylor 1920,1).
- 3 **Habitus** – the physical embodiment of cultural capital, to the deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that we possess due to our life experiences.
 - d. “Habitus refers to a person’s taken-for-granted, unreflected—hence largely habitual—way of thinking and acting. The habitus is a “structuring structure” shaping understandings, attitudes, behavior, and the body. It is formed through the accumulated experience of people in different fields” (Leander 2017, 1).

- 4 **Identity – The dynamic creation and definition of self in relation to society; the social fact of being who or what a person or thing is.**
- b. “The basic meaning of identity refers to here one (a person or group) belongs, and what is expressed as ‘self-image’ or/and ‘common image’, what integrate them inside self or a group existence, and what differentiate them *vis-à-vis* ‘others’” (Golubović 2010, 1).
- 5 **Social Capital – the networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society, enabling that society to function effectively.**
- e. “Social capital is the benefits derived from sociability. [It] can be described most simply as the aspects of social context that have productive benefits. [It] arises from the human capacity to consider others, to think and act generously and cooperatively. It relates to social relationships and social structures. It involves people knowing each other and having positive relationships based on trust, respect, kindness, and reciprocity” (Claridge 2022).

Resources:

- Personal Identity: Crash Course Philosophy #19
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=trqDnLNRuSc>
- Understanding the Self: The Self, Society, and Culture
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L8OWzJ4cxJw>
- Community & Society: 25 Concepts in Anthropology
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PovzNqDO-dU>
- Pierre Bourdieu: Theory of Capital (Social and Cultural Capital)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dQ5MdAjX4NU>
- Introduction to Bourdieu: Habitus https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WvzahvBpd_A